**History & Theology – Church History**

**Class 12 – The Rise and Response to Theological Liberalism (1799-1929)**

**Main Point:**

* Theological liberalism is a different religion than Christianity because it is based on the shifting sand of changing human opinions rather than the unchanging character of God’s Word.

**Class Goals:**

* Show how theological liberalism emerged as a compromise between Christianity and the Enlightenment through Schleiermacher.
* Demonstrating the true nature of theological liberalism as a reformulation of Christianity adapted to changing cultural contexts.
* Illustrate the damning effects of liberalism in undermining the authority of Scripture and elevating individual experience over doctrine.
* Highlight temptations of theological liberalism today in ReVoice theology, Critical Race Theory, and attempts to legitimize LGBTQ+ ideology in the church.

# Introduction

Today we’re going to talk about theological liberalism, particularly in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. It is important that we’re not talking about political liberalism, or matters pertaining to democracy.

Theological liberalism refers to a movement that began in Europe around 1800 due to the pervasive influence of Fredrich Shcleirmacher, which had four broad characteristics. First, liberalism largely denied or watered-down the supernatural character of Scripture. Second, liberalism sought to find a middle-way or accomodation between historic Christian orthodoxy and modern scientific Deism or skepticism.[[1]](#footnote-0) Third, liberalism altered several key Christian doctrines—for example, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection—because they were viewed as incompatible with human reason. Fourth, liberalism emphasized ethics at the expense of doctrine.

The controversy over theological liberalism, sometimes referred to as the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, was one of the most consequential events in the history of the church in the United States with continuing repercussions to this day. No denomination or institution remained untouched: local churches, seminaries, missions agencies and more. (For instance, it has been argued that from the 1920s through the 1980s, the vast majority of professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary held to liberal theological views).[[2]](#footnote-1)

**[Application] - Today, theological liberalism is apparent in the impulse to elevate individual experience and autonomy over Christian doctrine. Prominent examples of this include Deconstruction, Critical Race Theory, and ReVoice Theology.**

With that, let’s begin by asking, where did theological liberalism come from?

# Rise of Theological Liberalism[[3]](#footnote-2)

 Writing in 2001 at the outset of his three-volume magnum opus tracing the history of liberal theology, the liberal theologian and historian Gary Dorrien notes:

“The idea of liberal theology is nearly three centuries old. In essence, it is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

Now, we’ve already seen in this class how the question of authority was critical to the Protestant Reformation. But both Protestants and Catholics were committed to the idea of external authority. They just disagreed regarding whether it resided with Scripture or with the Pope! Protestant liberalism is suggesting something completely different! That “Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority.”

The major and fundamental question, then is where does authority come from in matters of religion? Liberal Christianity’s answer, is the self. One’s reason, or intuition, or *experience*, is the final authority and guide in matters of faith.

It’s hard to overstate the importance and ramifications of this difference in authority (self vs. external). Just as an example, this has profound implications for biblical interpretation. Is the Bible to be interpreted by the theologian using his personal experiences and norms or the original meaning of the biblical authors? Liberalism would say that it should be governed by personal experience. This is where you get ideas like Womanist Theology or Queer Theology. Put simply: Experience doesn’t merely inform exegesis; Experience norms exegesis.

What specifically led to this diminishment of external authority?

Theological liberalism arose in the context of the European Enlightenment in conjunction with the rise of the so-called Higher Critical Method. We’ll examine both of these for their impact on theological liberalism.

### Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a major movement with lots of nuances depending upon the geographic regions and time-periods.[[5]](#footnote-4) But in general, it Began in Europe in the 1700s and placed a major emphasis on reason, individual autonomy, progress, and the innate goodness of man.

As Immanuel Kant, the leading philosopher of the Enlightenment wrote in the opening paragraph of his famous essay from 1784, *What is Enlightenment?*, “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred in this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.” Hence, “Have courage to use your own reason,” Kant explains, is the motto of the enlightenment.[[6]](#footnote-5) Reason, in turn, is rooted in an autonomous understanding of the self. Autonomous literally means self-law or self-rule (“αυτος (auto)=”self”; νομος (nomos)=“law”). Kant, like others in the Enlightenment movement, believed in the inevitability of human progress—that man will only improve through education and civilization. Man was capable of infinite moral improvement through education because of his innate goodness.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Those Christians who believed that Christianity needed to change in order to accomodate the Enlightenment became known as theological liberals. Chief among them was a German theologian named Friedrich Schleiermacher. In 1799, Schleiermacher published a series of essays entitled, “On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers.”[[8]](#footnote-7) In them, he sought to save Christianity by emphasizing its compatibility with Kant’s Enlightenment worldview.[[9]](#footnote-8) As Schleiermacher famously declared, “Piety is the feeling of absolute dependence.”[[10]](#footnote-9) Notice the shift from the objective to the subjective in that statement. For Schleiermacher, the individual experience of God—whether in Scripture or in nature—was the ultimate authority and guide for faith.

### Higher Criticism or Historical Critical Method

Second, the rise of higher criticism or the historical critical method challenged Christians to downgrade their trust in Scripture in order to accommodate modern philosophical and scientific claims. The historical critical method sought to distinguish between the historical and literary aspects of Scripture.[[11]](#footnote-10) This method treated Scripture as an literary text and sought to distinguish between “Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith.”[[12]](#footnote-11) Jesus of history referred to Jesus as he actually was. The Christ of faith was supposed to be the de-divinized picture of Jesus as the ideal human being.

In his 1898 essay, On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology, Ernst Troeltsch explained three aspects of the historical-critical method: criticism, correlation, and analogy.[[13]](#footnote-12) Criticism (or “Methodological Doubt”) means that all historical judgments are statements of probability, and that statements of universal or absolute religious dogma are not possible (e.g., every word of Scripture is true). Correlation means that all historical events exist in a chain of cause and effect. There is no effect without an adequate cause. Analogy refers to the belief that all historical events are similar in quality and therefore we should understand them with reference to our experience (e.g., if a loaf of bread does not multiply today, it did not yesterday). According to theological liberalism, these were the philosophical presuppositions with which one had to read the Scriptures.

These ideas wreaked havoc on European Christianity reaching critical mass around 1900. The effects were devastating.[[14]](#footnote-13) Here is how Dutch Reformed Theologian Herman Bavinck described the effect of higher criticism:

“Holy Scripture is being robbed of its divine authority by historical criticism and even the warrant for and value of religion is being seriously disputed. Consequently, religious life today is dramatically less vigorous than before.”[[15]](#footnote-14)

So how did these ideas spill over to North America?

### Reformulate Christianity to for the Modern Area

As in Europe, many American Protestants from the 1850s onward saw their project as reforming and reformulating Christianity for a modern area.[[16]](#footnote-15) They looked at the challenges facing Christianity—including the rise of Darwinism, questions about the historical veracity of Scriptures, and the rise of religious pluralism, and sought to make Christianity compatible. And that same germ of accommodating Christianity to culture is still present in liberalism today.

**[Application to Today] - We still hear the mantra that “Christianity needs to change to survive.” But here’s the problem. Who decides what changes? Of course there are cultural expressions to Christianity that will change, but its core doctrines and social truths do not change because God does not change and God is our authority.**

# Effects of Theological Liberalism

 We’ve examined the origins of theological liberalism in the Enlightenment, but what are the effects of theological liberalism? Here we’ll examine four damning effects.

### Undermining the Bible

 First, theological liberalism undermines the Bible by elevating reason over revelation. See, if the self is autonomous and authoritative, then human reason is the final arbiter of truth and not the Scriptures. You see this today in the writings of German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, whose “de-mythologizing” approach to Scripture elevates man as the authority over the Scriptures.[[17]](#footnote-16) In his 1941 book entitled New Testament and Mythology, liberal theologian Rudolf Bultmann reflected this sentiment:

“We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.”[[18]](#footnote-17)

**[Application for Today] - This mindset that it is impossible to believe in the supernatural when we have modern science wrongly assumes: (1) that modern science is somehow settled and therefore completely reliable. (2) that God is unable to work through natural means and that if there is a naturalistic explanation of an event, God is not involved in that event.[[19]](#footnote-18)**

### Downgrading Major Christian Doctrines

 Second, the liberal approach to theology leads to a downgrading of major Christian doctrines. In the early twentieth century, you see this especially in the doctrines of the Virgin birth of Christ, the divinity of Jesus, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the sinlessness of Christ, and the historical reality of Adam and Eve.

### Emphasizing Ethics Over Doctrine

 Third, theological liberalism leads to bifurcation of ethics and doctrine, and an elevation of ethics, over and against doctrine. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878 - 1969) was a major popularizer of theological liberalism. Ordained as a Presbyterian, he pastored Riverside Baptist Church in Manhattan and Park Avenue Church in New York City. On May 21, 1922, he delivered his famous sermon *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*[[20]](#footnote-19) In it, he criticized historic, orthodox Christianity and called for the promulgation of a theologically liberal Christianity. This sermon appeared in at least 3,000 journals and was distributed widely. (Note: Fosdick also promoted his theologically liberal views at Union Theological Seminary from 1908-1946[[21]](#footnote-20), which served as one of the major institutional hubs of liberal theology[[22]](#footnote-21)).

Fosdick and theological liberalism became especially popular among social and intellectual elites, which contributed to the rise of the Social Gospel.[[23]](#footnote-22)

### Social Gospel

The Social Gospel taught that Christianity includes the ‘regeneration’ of social wrongs such as economic injustices, poverty, etc, and not just the conversion of individuals.[[24]](#footnote-23) One of the most famous proponents of the social gospel was Baptist pastor and professor Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). In Rauschenbusch’s seminal 1913 work entitled *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, he wrote:

“The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstructing them in accordance with the will of God... the Christian Church has never undertaken to carry out this fundamental purpose of its existence.[[25]](#footnote-24)

For advocates of the Social Gospel, the church exists primarily to transform society, especially at a systemic and institutional level. They saw the church’s mission as primarily horizontal rather than vertical in nature. Of course, adherents of the Social Gospel would not explicitly deny the vertical element, but they downplayed it in practice.

**[Application for Today] - Injustice is real. Part of the Great Commandment (c.f., Matthew 22:35–40; Mark 12:28–34) will require working to love our neighbors and address injustice facing our neighbor. Caring for the poor, protecting children working to improve society is a wonderful and very Christian thing to do. But we must not lose sight of the church’s most basic mission which is the supernatural work of proclaiming the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of sinners. To the extent that the Social Gospel redefines the mission of the church, it ought to be rejected.**

### Redefining Missions

 A fifth and final effect of theological liberalism is the redefinition of missions as moral improvement.[[26]](#footnote-25) This redefinition equated the kingdom of God with Western civilization and identified the expansion of Christianity around the world with material and moral progress.

For example, William Owen Carver (1868 -1954), a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, espoused a liberal view of missions, arguing in his 1910 book Missions and Modern Thought (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910) that the traditional motive for missions is no longer valid,[[27]](#footnote-26) that God will not judge sinners in hell,[[28]](#footnote-27) and that instead of paying the penalty for sin, the Cross is about our moral and social development. Here is a quote from Carver:

“Who would have guessed, before Christ revealed it, that the cross is to be the greatest principle in the rescue and development of human personality and of the race.... the cross has come to be recognized as the mightiest principle in the evolution of character.[[29]](#footnote-28)

While Carver’s work does talk about sin and the uniqueness of Jesus, the thrust of the work of Jesus is seen in dimensions of social and ethical transformation.

Summarizing Protestant liberal theology, H. Richard Niebuhr (1894 - 1962) famously wrote,

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”[[30]](#footnote-29)

That quote captures the essence of liberal theology: a religion without supernatural power.

So, how did the orthodox, conservative Christians respond? Let’s look at two key figures.

# Response to Theological Liberalism

### Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851 - 1921)

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was born in 1851 near Lexington, KY.[[31]](#footnote-30) He attended Princeton Seminary (1873-1876) when it was still a bastion for Reformed Protestant Orthodoxy.[[32]](#footnote-31) And in his numerous writings, Warfield laid out a detailed historic Protestant doctrine of Scripture.[[33]](#footnote-32) Warfield emphasized that: (1) The Bible itself claims to be true and from God (2) Jesus and the Apostles understood the Bible to be true and from God.Here is quote from Warfield:

“Our Lord and his apostles looked upon the entire truthfulness and utter trustworthiness of that body of writings which they called ‘Scripture’, as so fully guaranteed by the inspiration of God, that they could appeal to them confidently in all their statements of whatever kind as absolutely true; ... [they treated the Scriptures] generally in a manner which clearly exhibits that in their view ‘Scripture says’ was equivalent to ‘God says’.”[[34]](#footnote-33)

Warfield showed that Jesus clearly understood the Scriptures to be entirely true and from God. Jesus could be wrong, but then He would be a deceiver and not worth followingIf Jesus rose from the dead, His claims are much more trustworthy than those of any fading professor. At the end of the day after all the detailed arguments have been made, Warfield summarized the fundamental question as one of following Christ:

“We believe this doctrine of the plenary [full] inspiration of the Scriptures primarily because it is the doctrine which Christ and his apostles believed, and which they have taught us.”[[35]](#footnote-34)

You might object to saying that Warfield’s argumentation rests on circular reasoning. He relies on the testimony of Scripture to prove that Scripture is true. More specifically, he assumes that the New Testament provides a reliable account of the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles and then seeks to prove from the New Testament that we ought to follow the views of Jesus and the Apostles. In sum, he appeals to Scripture to prove Scripture.

**[Discussion Question] - What are good responses to such an objection that Christians can’t prove the truthfulness of Scripture without using circular reasoning?**

The best answer that I have encountered is that every truth ultimately requires a self-attesting authority to validate its veracity. In other words, for the skeptics of Christianity, there is a first principle by which they measure the truth of Christianity. There is a standard, whether it's science, enlightenment philosophy, human reason, that every person has. There is no system of thought that has no first principle. It's just a matter of which one.

Another staunch proponent of Christian Orthodoxy was J. Gresham Machen.

### J. Gresham Machen (1881 - 1937)

Machen grew up in a privileged family in Baltimore at the end of the nineteenth century.[[36]](#footnote-35) He studied at Johns Hopkins University as an undergraduate and earned two graduate degrees at Princeton. During the First World War, Machen served as a YMCA Worker, before becoming Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary. In 1923, Machen published a monumental book based on a series of essays he had written, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).[[37]](#footnote-36)

In it, Machen identified—correctly—that historic Christianity and theological liberalism were not two varieties of the same religion (e.g., Baptist and Presbyterian) but rather two totally separate religions:

“Modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.”[[38]](#footnote-37)

Machen identified that this difference between Christianity and theological liberalism stemmed from a difference in the root issue: their view of the Bible

“It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful man.”[[39]](#footnote-38)

Machen also understood that Jesus is not merely an example, but most fundamentally one we believe in who forgives our sins. The truth is that if Jesus be merely an example, He is not a worthy example; for He claimed to be far more.[[40]](#footnote-39) Where liberalism saw Jesus as an example to be followed (emphasizing our *own* works), Machen saw Jesus as a savior to be trusted (putting the emphasis on Jesus’ work).

Machen was also significant in the founding of two institutions that are still around to this day: Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (“OPC”) in 1936.[[41]](#footnote-40)

# Conclusion

 I hope it is clear by now that the fundamental difference between conservative and liberal Christianity comes down to the question of authority. Who has final authority? Us, or Jesus? Do we trust what Jesus said is true or do we need to sit in judgment on the Scriptures to discern what is true in the Scriptures and what is not?

 Doctrine—especially the doctrine of Scripture—is essential to biblical Christianity. As congregationalists, we take seriously the charge of Galatians 1:6 to guard the truth against error.

**[Application for Today] - If your pastors veer from historic core Christian truths— inerrancy, divinity of Jesus, original sin, penal substitution, physical resurrection, reality of hell—it is incumbent upon you to act. So, understand your rights as a member of this church as laid out in the church constitution.**

Secondly, it is no longer sufficient today to affirm the Apostles Creed or Nicence Creed to be orthodox. The battleground for Christianity has moved on from the theological and Scriptural (as in the days of Machen and Warfield) to the anthropological: what it means to be a man and a woman. The proxy fight for orthodoxy is no longer the nature of the relationship of the Son to the Father, but the relationship of man to the created order.

The impulse to accommodate sin and unbiblical notions of anthropology are the most pressing threats of infidelity today. As Christians we must compare what is said in the media, in your workplaces, on social media to the inerrant and unchanging Scriptures.

The final point I want to drive home is that there will always be cultural headwinds against the truth of biblical Christianity, whether that be the prevailing scientific census or the current sentiments around sexuality and gender.

So have hope. The opinions of sinful men will change, but the “Word of the Lord is fixed above the heavens and will never change” (Psalm 119:89).

Let’s pray.

1. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xiv. Dorrien writes that the goal of liberal theology was “to create a modernist Christian third way between a regnant orthodoxy and an ascending ‘infidelism.’... All of them conceived of religion as a civilizing--and thus personally and socially saving--power of spirit over the bestial forces of nature. As modernists of a distinctive kind, the founders of American theological liberalism were always concerned to find a progressive Christian way between the religious conservatism that they discarded and the rationalistic radicalism they dreaded” (xiv). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See especially chapters four through twelve of Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. For a good overview of the history of theological liberalism with regard to Scripture, see Matthew Barrett, *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 76-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Dorrien, xiii. Dorrien goes on to say: “Since the eighteenth century, liberal Christian thinkers have argued that religion should be modern and progressive and that the meaning of Christianity should be interpreted from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience” (xiii). The roots of this rejection of external authority are clear in the enlightenment as *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* contains the following in its entry on the enlightenment: “It was assumed that through a critical exercise of reason man could arrive at a reasonable and thereby natural understanding of himself, of law, of religion, and of philosophy. At the same time, extraneous authority was rejected and uncritical perpetuation of past forms opposed.” (299). See “Enlightenment” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* ed. Jerald C. Brauer (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Strauss writes: “many of the negative conclusions concerning the historical Jesus can be traced back to the rationalistic worldview of the Enlightenment” (Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007], 456). Famed 20th century theologian Langdon Brown Gilkey, who did not accept traditional Christian thought, wrote: “The causal nexus in space and time which the Enlightenment science and philosophy introduced into the Western mind...is also assumed by modern theologians and scholars; since they participate in the modern world of science both intellectually and existentially, they can scarcely do anything else” (Quoted in Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011], 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “What is Enlightenment” (1784) in Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals: And What Is Enlightenment?* (Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Barrett, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Or as one author recently put it, Schleiermacher situated himself “Between Enlightenment and Romanticism.” See Richard Crouter, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. As quoted in Cory Brock, *Orthodox, yet Modern: Herman Bavinck’s Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* Studies in Historical & Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 87, [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Strauss, 348-349. Strauss writes that Reimarus “challenged the traditional understanding of Jesus and his mission. He claimed that Jesus had no grand aspirations to establish a new religion but considered himself a human messiah who would free his people from the Romans and establish a political kingdom on earth. When Jesus’ hopes were dashed at his arrest and crucifixion, his disciples stole his body and began proclaiming his resurrection” (349). C.f., Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to “The Passion of the Christ”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 9. Matthew Barrett notes that Reimarus wrote “I will examine the persons, deeds, teachings and writings of the Old and of the New Testament, indicating what and why each appears to contradict the pretense that through just such means a supernatural, divine revelation has been given us for our eternal bliss” and called the Old Testament “a weaving of sheer stupidities” (Barrett, 88). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Strauss, 350. Alvin Plantinga helpfully points out that historical criticism is based upon an assumed methodological naturalism and therefore it is not surprising that this method reaches conclusions denying the miracles in the Bible. See Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 97-106. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155-161, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christianity: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 560. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Herman Bavinck, *RD* 1:106, as quoted in Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox, yet Modern*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. E.g., Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* very much frames liberalism as seeking unity and a Christianity for the modern man. Another example showing how liberals understood themselves to be preserving Christianity for the modern world comes in the statements of liberals at Southern Seminary from 1950-1990. Cf. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, especially chapters 9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. See Daniel J. Treier, “Scripture and Hermeneutics” in *Mapping Modern Theology* ed. Kelly M. Kapic & Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012). Treier writes: “Historical science, according to Bultmann, must translate biblical texts, mired in mythological assertions, into their real content. Myth objectifies authentic human reality (which Bultmann understood in terms of his colleague Heidegger’s existential philosophy) and dramatizes it in otherworldly terms. Thus ‘demythologization’ is required to peel off the mythological husk of biblical material to get to the kernel of *kerygma* underneath--God’s gospel message proclaiming to humans their need for authentic existence” (83). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings* ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 4. In another instance, Bultmann asserted that “The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. [This continuum, furthermore,] cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers” (Quoted in Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011], 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Michael Horton helpfully summarizes how Luther readily taught that God works through means. Horton writes: “When we pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ Luther says, God answers it ‘not directly as when he gives manna to the Israelites, but through the work of farmers and bakers.’ They are God’s ‘masks.’ He writes, ‘God who pours out his generosity on the just and the unjust, believer and unbeliever alike, hides himself in the ordinary social functions and stations of life, even the most humble. God himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.’” Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture,* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. One poignant example of the liberalizing influence Fosdick and Union Theological Seminary is the Chinese national John Sung. Between Union Seminary and Fosdick, Sung abandoned his historic Christianity and became convinced of liberalism. Sung wrote, “I had reached the conclusion that the various religions are the different paths to the same destination.” Eventually, Sung rejected theological liberalism, burned his theology books as “books of the demons” and confronted Fosdick saying, “You are of the Devil. You made me lose my faith.” See Lian Xi, *Redeemed By Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 139-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. For example, in a December 15, 1915 address at the Federal Council of Churches, American President Woodrow Wilson said: “Christianity is not important to us because it is a valid body of conceptions regarding God and man, but because it is a vital body of conceptions which can be translated into life for us—life in this world and a life still greater in the next Except as Christianity changes and inspires life, it has failed of its mission.” See Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. While some parts of the Social Gospel were compatible with the historic Christian gospel, Rauschenbusch recognized the radical remaking of the Christian gospel his project entailed: “The adjustment of the Christian message to the regeneration of the social order is plainly one of the most difficult tasks ever laid on the intellect of religious leaders. The pioneers of the social gospel have had a hard time trying to consolidate their old faith and their new aim. Some have lost their faith; others have come out of the struggle with crippled formulations of truth. Does not our traditional theology deserve some of the blame for this spiritual wastage because it left these men without spiritual support and allowed them to become the vicarious victims of our theological inefficiency? If our theology is silent on social salvation, we compel college men and women, workingmen, and theological students, to choose between an unsocial system of theology and an irreligious system of social salvation. It is not hard to predict the outcome. If we seek to keep Christian doctrine unchanged, we shall ensure its abandonment. Instead of being an aid in the development of the social gospel, systematic theology has often been a real clog.” See Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1917), 7. B.B. Warfield, writing against German protestant theologian Otto Pfleiderer, famously wrote: “Thus, we perceive, Pfleiderer, as he reduces Christianity to mere altruism, has no need of any Jesus at all in this impersonal Christianity. He can get alone with any conception of Christ men chose to form for themselves. It is indifferent to him what we think of Christ, in a word, simply because the Christianity he offers us is a Christless Christianity” (B.B. Warfield, Review of “The Early Christian Conception of Christ” in *Princeton Theological Review, Volume 4* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1906], 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1913), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. In 1932, William Ernest Hocking of Harvard Divinity School released a report entitled *Re-Thinking Missions*, which denied the validity of every aspect of traditional Protestant missions and called for a social gospel engagement. See Rodney Stark, *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. William O, Carver, *Missions and Modern Thought* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. See Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, 257-263. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. William O, Carver, *Missions and Modern Thought* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper & Row, 1937; repr.: Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Zaspel, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. For a detailed summary of Warfield’s views, see Zaspel, 111-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. *Selected Shorter Writings of BB Warfield*, 2:580. Cited in Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. Cited in Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. Machen’s writings made such a profound impact even outside theologically conservative circles that George Eldon Ladd recalled Machen being the only conservative whose writings were still read at Harvard by the 1940s. See John A. D’Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133. Another example is Yale professor and famed literary critic Harold Bloom, who wrote of Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*: “I have just read my way through this, with distaste and discomfort but with reluctant and growing admiration for Machen’s mind. I have never seen a stronger case made for the argument that institutional Christianity must regard cultural liberalism as an enemy to faith” (Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* [New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992], 228). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Machen, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. Machen, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Hart, 128, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)