

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

SAMUEL G. CRAIG, Editor

H. McALLISTER GRIFFITHS, Managing Editor

Published monthly by
THE PRESBYTERIAN AND
REFORMED PUBLISHING CO.,
501 Witherspoon Bldg., Phila., Pa.

MID-FEBRUARY, 1931
Vol. 1 No. 10

\$1.00 A YEAR
EVERYWHERE

The Supernaturalism of Christianity

THE supernatural," in the words of the late Dr. B. B. WARFIELD, "is the very breath of Christianity's nostrils and an anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere is to it the deadliest miasma."

The fact just alluded to—for fact it certainly is—goes a long way, almost the whole way, in accounting for whatever depression of fortunes Christianity is suffering today. Previous to the rise of Modernism in the eighteenth century there had been numerous individuals who had maintained that all that comes to pass, including religion and morals, could be accounted for without positing any supernatural factor; but the thinking of humanity as a whole had been supernaturalistic to the core. As that erudite Dutch scholar, HERMAN BAVINCK, has observed: "Before the eighteenth century the existence of a supernatural world, and the necessity, possibility, and reality of a special revelation, had never been seriously called in question." The last two hundred years, however, has witnessed the rise and spread of the so-called empirico-scientific life and world view which turns its back on all supernaturalism and professes to give a purely naturalistic explanation and interpretation of all that has been and is. Within the last seventy-five years the acceptance of this anti-supernaturalistic view of things has become so wide-spread, especially in academic circles, that its advocates not unnaturally look upon it as an "assured result" of modern discovery and confidently anticipate the time when culture and civilization will be built on a purely naturalistic basis.

The effect of the rise and spread of this anti-supernaturalistic conception of things on the fortunes of Christianity would not have been so serious were it not for the fact that it found wide-spread acceptance within the Christian Church itself under the name of Modernism. For what Modernism is, in effect, in its consistent forms of expression, is a de-supernaturalized version of Christianity. How far matters have gone in this respect is indicated by the fact that HENRY NELSON WIEMAN of the University of Chicago in a widely advertised book, entitled "Ventures in Belief: Christian Convictions for a Day of Uncertainty," issued under the auspices of the Student Christian Association Movement of America, and which includes among its contributors such well-known "leaders" in Christian thinking as FRANCIS J. McCONNELL, HENRY SLOANE COFFIN, KIRBY PAGE and HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, says that the sense of

futility that characterizes modern life is due to the fact that men have lost faith in the supernatural without the courage to commit themselves whole-heartedly to the natural. He writes as follows:

"This sense of futility, this refusal to believe in any cosmic destiny for man, is chiefly due to the fact that men have found it impossible to believe in the supernatural. Heretofore for several centuries men have envisaged their highest values and vocation in terms of the supernatural. But there is no supernatural and men are fast coming to see that there is not. But they are not willing to commit themselves to the naturalistic process. They stand looking wistfully off into the sky whence has vanished the delusion of the supernatural and think there is no longer anything to make human life magnificent" (p. 101-102).

Just why men holding such views should suppose that they are giving expression to "Christian convictions" we are at a loss to understand, seeing that nothing is more certain than that Christianity de-supernaturalized is Christianity extinct. We wish it could be said that such a view-point is held by only a few. Such, however, is not the case. It is, or at least threatens to become, the dominant view-point of the age in which we live: for what is or at least rapidly becoming, the outstanding characteristic of the age in which we live? Is it not its deeply rooted and wide spread naturalism of thought and sentiment? Even where the reality of the supernatural is not openly

IN THIS ISSUE:

The Prophetic Urge.....	4
Floyd E. Hamilton	
Is Westminster Seminary a Rebel Institution?—Open Letter and Reply	6
Notes on Biblical Exposition.....	10
J. Gresham Machen	
Books of Religious Significance.....	12
Questions Relative to Christian Faith and Practice.....	14
Letters to the Editor.....	16
Current Views and Voices.....	16
Ministerial Changes.....	18
News of the Church.....	19

denied, it is widely doubted; and even where it is affirmed, its affirmation is almost everywhere timid, hesitant and shame-faced. The real question seems to be even among those who recognize the supernatural as an element in Christianity, not what kind and measure of the supernatural does the Christianity of CHRIST and His apostles demand; but, how little of the supernatural may be allowed, and yet a man call himself a Christian.

Matters have gone so far that it is almost an occasion for rejoicing when we find a man confessing any measure of Christian supernaturalism—so difficult is it for men immersed in an anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere to confess the full measure of the supernaturalism that Christianity demands. None the less, if we are to face the future with any well-grounded confidence that the Christian life and world view will re-assert itself and again become dominant in the culture and civilization of mankind, we cannot be supernaturalistic only here and there in our thinking and naturalistic in its substance. Only a consistent supernaturalism—by which is not meant an exclusive supernaturalism: the *supernatural* implies the reality of the natural—can successfully contend with a consistent naturalism. Here as elsewhere defeat lies along the path of half-hearted, compromising constructions. It is far easier to confess the full measure of that supernaturalism that Christianity recognizes and requires than it is to confess it only in part. We weaken, not strengthen our position when we seek to defend a pared-down supernaturalism rather than that thorough-going supernaturalism that is the very breath of the nostrils of a sturdy Christianity.

It has seemed to us, therefore, that we might render some of our readers a useful service if we indicate the kind and measure of that supernaturalism that Christianity recognizes and demands. We shall not attempt to consider all the ways in which a frank recognition of the supernatural enters into the very substance of Christianity: that would require a lengthy article, perhaps a number of articles. In the limitations of an editorial we can do little more than mention some of the more important of the points at which we must frankly recognize the supernatural in our

conception of things, if, as Christian men and women, we are to witness a good confession in the midst of an age so hostile to the supernatural.

It is beyond our purpose to attempt to vindicate the reality of that kind and measure of the supernatural that Christianity recognizes and demands, except as this may be involved in reminding our readers that the whole mass of that evidence that gives us Christianity is available to establish the reality of such supernaturalism. It will be obvious to all that the reality of such supernaturalism is given in the truth of Christianity provided such supernaturalism belongs to the substance of Christianity to such a degree that without it real Christianity simply cannot exist. Some of the considerations that indicate the place that the supernatural occupies in Christianity follow:

(1) It is fundamental to the supernaturalism of Christianity that GOD is a supernatural God. The GOD of Christianity is indeed the GOD of nature and the GOD in nature; but at the same time He is the GOD above nature. This means that while the GOD of Christianity is an immanent GOD, yet that He is above all else the transcendent GOD. It is to misconceive and profane His name to identify Him with nature or to think of Him as merely another name for the sum-total of the forces and energies of the universe. No matter how vast we conceive the universe to be, it is to belittle GOD beyond recognition to suppose that any doctrine of immanence can even remotely express the fulness of His being. As Dr. WARFIELD has put it:

“When the Christian says ‘GOD’ he means, and if he is to remain Christian must mean, a *supernatural* GOD—a GOD who is not entangled in nature, is not only another name for nature in its coordinated activities, or for that mystery which lies beneath and throbs through to All; but who is above nature and beyond, who existed, the Living GOD, before nature was, and should nature cease to be would still exist, the Everlasting GOD, and so long as this universal frame endures exists above and outside of nature as its LORD, its Lawgiver and its Almighty King.

“No Christian man may allow that the universe, material and spiritual

combined, call it infinite if you will, in all its operations, be they as myriad as you choose, sums up the being or the activities of GOD. Before this universe was, GOD was, the one eternal One, rich in infinite activities: and while this universe persists, outside and beyond it GOD is, the one infinite One, ineffably rich in innumerable activities inconceivable, it may be, to the whole universe of derived being. He is not imprisoned within His works: the laws which He has ordained for them express indeed His character, but do not compass the possibilities of His action. The Apostle PAUL has no doubt told us that ‘in Him we live and move and have our being,’ but no accredited voice has declared that in the universe He lives and moves and has His being. No, the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him; and what He has made is to what He is only as the smallest moisture-particle of the most attenuated vapor to the mighty expanse of the immeasurable sea.”

(2) It is fundamental to the supernaturalism of Christianity that GOD has frequently *acted* in a supernatural manner: for instance (a) in the creation of nature (b) in the work of redemption and (c) in the production of the Bible.

Belief in nature as a product of GOD’s creative activity is involved in what has been said of GOD as the supernatural GOD. If GOD existed before what we call nature, it must be that it owes its existence to His creative act. Many voices today oppose the notion that nature owes its existence to an act of creation, in the strict sense of the word; but it is fundamental to the Christian conception of things that “in the beginning GOD created the heavens and the earth.” Christian thinkers may differ as to how the universe became as it is; but our thinking is not Christian unless we look upon the universe as a product of GOD’s power and as such an utterly dependent thing.

We come nearer the heart of a Christian’s conviction when we make mention of the fact that GOD has acted in a supernatural manner in the redemption of sinners. It lies at the very heart of the Christian confession that the SON of GOD, the second person in the Trinity, became incarnate for us men and our salvation.

"Faithful is the saying and worthy of all acceptance that CHRIST JESUS came into the world to save sinners." When the anti-supernaturalism of the age seeks to eliminate the supernatural from the redemption that Christianity offers a lost world, it strikes it at its very heart.

Again it is fundamental to Christian conviction that GOD acted in a supernatural manner in the production of the Bible in order that men might know what He would have them believe concerning Himself and the duty which He requires of them. It was not enough that GOD should have intervened in the processes of this world for the salvation of sinners, there was also need that GOD should make known to men the meaning of His mighty acts of redemption. Hence GOD has given us a two-fold revelation—a revelation by deed and a revelation by word. The revelation by word came through His supernatural activity as truly as did the revelation by deed—a fact that should be unhesitatingly acknowledged by the Christian man. The Bible is not merely one of the world's religious masterpieces, it is at the same time "the Word of GOD, the only infallible rule of faith and practice" in a sense that would have been impossible apart from both a revelation and an inspiration of a supernatural sort. In a word it is fundamental to Christian conviction that the Bible is a supernatural book.

(3) It is fundamental to the supernaturalism of Christianity that GOD *acts* in a supernatural manner, especially in what we call regeneration and sanctification. It would profit us nothing that GOD acted supernaturally in the past were it not also true that He acts supernaturally in the present. Here too we cannot do better than avail ourselves of Dr. WARFIELD's eloquent words:

"It is not enough to believe that GOD has intervened in this natural world of ours and wrought a supernatural redemption: and that He has Himself made known to men His mighty acts and unveiled to them the significance of His working. It is upon the field of the dead that the Sun of righteousness has risen, and the shouts that announce His advent fall on deaf ears: yea, even though the morning stars should again sing for joy

and the air be palpitant with the echo of the great proclamation, their voice could not penetrate the ears of the dead. As we sweep our eyes over the world lying in wickedness, it is the prophet's vision which we see before us: a valley that is filled with bones, and lo! they are very dry. What benefit is there in proclaiming to dry bones even the greatest of redemptions? How shall we stand and cry, 'O ye dry bones, hear ye the word of the LORD!' In vain the redemption, in vain its proclamation, unless there come a breath from heaven to breathe upon these slain that they live. The redemption of CHRIST is therefore no more central to the Christian hope than the creative operations of the Holy Spirit upon the heart: and the supernatural redemption itself would remain a mere name outside and beyond our reach, were it not realized in the subjective life by an equally supernatural application."

(4) It is fundamental to the supernaturalism of Christianity that GOD will act in an extraordinarily supernatural manner in the future previous to the ushering in of the eternal state. We do not think that either the A-millennial or the Pre-millennial or the Post-millennial view of the second coming of JESUS CHRIST is fundamental to the supernaturalism of Christianity; but that He will return in as distinctly a supernatural manner as He came some two thousand years ago is a belief that is clearly included in that measure of supernaturalism that Christianity requires. Things are not always to continue as they now are. A great catastrophe, a mighty cataclysm awaits this earth. Whatever may be the precise order of events, there is to be a return of CHRIST, a resurrection of the dead, a judgment based on the deeds done in the body, and an eternal separation between the good and the evil.

We do not pretend to have indicated anything like the full measure of that supernaturalism that enters into the very substance of Christianity. All we have done is to indicate some of the principal points at which there must be a frank recognition of the supernatural as a factor having significance for human life if as Christian men and women we are to witness a good confession in the age in

which our lot has been cast. It is not surprising, in view of the wide-spread extent to which the supernatural as a factor in human life is denied or even scouted, that there should be many attempts to give us a non-supernatural Christianity on the assumption that we can yield the supernatural and yet retain the main values of Christianity. Let us, however, not be deceived thereby. Christianity denuded of the supernatural is just no Christianity at all, to such an extent does the supernatural enter into the very essence of the Christian religion. The universal adoption of a non-supernatural Christianity would mean the death not the triumph of real Christianity. Moreover it is the supernatural element in Christianity, and that element alone, that enables us to speak of it as a redemptive religion in the New Testament meaning of the word. Eliminate the supernatural and we have no message for sinners. Recognize that kind and measure of the supernatural that historic Christianity recognizes and we have a message that can be proclaimed joyfully and confidently even to the worst of sinners. We repeat that our choice is not between a supernatural and a non-supernatural Christianity but between a supernatural Christianity and no Christianity at all.

The Proposed Union of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches

OUR December issue contained the "partial report" adopted by the representatives appointed by the Presbyterian Church (North), the Presbyterian Church (South), the United Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in America, and the Reformed Church in the United States to prepare a plan for the organic union of these churches. Though put forth as a "partial report" it indicates, we suppose, the substance of the plan for organic union that will be submitted to the next General Assemblies of said churches, and, if approved by these bodies, transmitted to the presbyteries for action during the year following. It would seem, therefore, that this report is deserving of much more discussion than it has yet received. Doubtless this finds explanation in large part to a general disposition to withhold judgment

(Continued on page 17)