




*Christianity and Liberalism*  
and Hermeneutical  
Presuppositions

VERN S. POYTHRESS

“In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology.”<sup>1</sup>



At the time that J. Gresham Machen wrote his groundbreaking book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, many people had foggy ideas about the nature of Christianity. On the surface, it seemed that liberalism offered merely one more variation on the general theme of Christianity. And indeed, that was how liberals considered themselves. They thought they were working within the framework of Christian faith in order to bring it up to date. They tried to display more clearly and accurately its essential features, while discarding doctrines that modern thinking had shown to be obsolete.

Machen’s examination dug down to the religious root. At the root, said Machen, we have two different religions: Christianity and liberalism. The one contradicts the other at many crucial points.

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Machen did not focus his examination primarily on hermeneutics, but his book has implications for the subject. The two religions produce two distinct sets of hermeneutical presuppositions; this difference in turn produces widespread differences in interpreting the individual texts of the Bible, and in shaping overall thinking on any given topic. These differences remain with us today, which is why Machen's book still has relevance, specifically for our study of hermeneutics, God, and history.

Christianity, as unfolded in the Bible, is a religion that believes in a God who is continually involved in the world, even to its minutest detail—including the number of hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:30). He works in ordinary ways (providence) and extraordinary ways (miracles), as he chooses. Liberalism, by contrast, denies miracles—or is at least deeply skeptical of them. So, before the liberal even opens the Bible to see what it says, he is committed in principle to explaining away its miracles—either as misunderstandings of natural events, or as exaggerated or mythic representations built upon fluid human traditions.

The differences affect what we think about the Bible. What kind of book is it? What kind of communication does it contain? Christianity claims it is the Word of God, written through human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, hermeneutically, Christian interpretation treats the Bible as different from all other books—it is the infallible Word of God. Liberalism, on the other hand, believes in a kind of “inspiration,” but that inspiration is redefined as a mere heightening of human energies directed toward the divine. Therefore, liberalism views the Bible as fundamentally equal to all other human endeavors.

The differences affect what we think about divine communication and language as well. Christianity believes that God gives the gift of language to human beings, and that therefore language is a suitable instrument through which God effectively communicates truth. Liberalism believes that language is a purely human product, and that religious language reaches out toward a God who, in the end, escapes linguistic particulars.

Furthermore, the differences affect what we think about Jesus Christ. Is he the divine Son of God? Or is that a dispensable viewpoint theorized by fallible human interpreters? If he is the divine Son of God, we positively expect miracles to come as part of the comprehensive work of salvation that he descended from heaven to accomplish. If he is merely the greatest human teacher of religion and morality, the miracles are dispensable, as are the accounts of his death, resurrection, and ascension.

The differences between Christianity and liberalism continue to propagate in biblical studies, and are, if anything, more pervasively influential than in Machen's day. The hermeneutical presuppositions of liberalism are the presuppositions of modernity and secularity—a vision of a world that consists of matter and human beings without the presence and activity of God. Among the elite thinkers of the West, these presuppositions dominate the hermeneutical project of interpreting the world. Christians who are unaware of these presuppositions may unwittingly swallow corrupting bits of their teaching. While these Christians may try to retain the divine authority of the Bible and its content, their *hermeneutics* gradually become modernist. Over and against this temptation, Machen's antithesis is a useful reminder.



**REV. DR. VERN S. POYTHRESS** (PhD, Harvard; DTh, Stellenbosch) is distinguished professor of New Testament and biblical interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has taught for 42 years. He is an ordained teaching elder in the PCA, and the author of several books, including *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* and *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*.