

Faith Pulpit

Christianity and Liberalism

A century ago, a new, “modernist” liberal theology was infiltrating Protestant seminaries throughout the United States, transported primarily from Germany. J. Gresham Machen, an opponent of this new liberal theology, wrote a volume entitled *Christianity and Liberalism* in which he argued that historic Christianity and “modernist” theology were incompatible systems. To Bible-believing Christians like Machen, certain “fundamentals” were non-negotiable for authentic Christianity, such as the inspiration of Scripture, the deity and virgin birth of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the literal Second Coming. Recently, Gerd Ludemann, a professor of Early Christianity at Gottingen University in Germany, has come to the same conclusion as J. Gresham Machen—that Christianity and Liberalism are incompatible. However, although Machen and Ludemann ended with the same conclusion, they started from completely opposite viewpoints. Ludemann is a liberal theologian who has systematically denied all the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

1. The Inspiration of Scripture

Gerd Ludemann has explicitly denied the inspiration of Scripture. He declares, “The view of the Bible as the Word of God or as Holy Scripture belongs to a past time. Today it hinders understanding. The Bible is the word of human beings” (H¹, 219). He concludes that the doctrine of inspiration “has been taken off its hinges by historical criticism” (UHS², 133).

Ludemann specifically argues that Jesus did not say or do most of the things which the Bible records, and that He is not at all the one depicted by the Gospels (GD³, 1). Rather, Ludemann believes that “the early Christians tailored Jesus to their wishes and interests,” so that the Gospels are in “blatant contradiction” to what actually happened (GD, 109-110). He asserts, “The only term that can be applied to this biblical phenomenon . . . [is] deception” (GD, xxiv).

2. The Virgin Birth

Ludemann denies the virgin birth of Christ, referring instead to “the unholy, premarital, and probably violent fathering of Jesus” (VB⁴, 141). According to Ludemann, “The statement that Jesus was . . . born of a virgin is a falsification of the historical facts” (VB, 140). Instead, “Jesus had been born out of wedlock as an illegitimate child and had been conceived in fornication” (VB, 141).

3. The Substitutionary Atonement

Ludemann denies the substitutionary atonement, stating that Jesus did not purpose to die for the sins of the world (GD, 1). For Ludemann, Jesus is not a substitution, but merely an example. He states, “For me it is not the Son of God to whom I pray, but the Messiah who moves me to do the same sort of thing as he did and who in this way can become the basis of my life” (H, 212).

Ludemann argues that Jesus Christ could not have been a perfect sacrifice, because “Jesus was not sinless even by his own understanding” (H, 211). “The idea of the sinlessness of Jesus belongs to a past age,” Ludemann continues (H, 219). “He was not only not sinless, but not even ‘inerrant’” (H, 212).

4. The Bodily Resurrection

Ludemann vehemently denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus, as the following quotations demonstrate: “We can no longer take the statements about the resurrection of Jesus literally” (WRHJ⁵, 134). “Jesus decayed and did not rise bodily” (UHS, 133). “The resurrection appearances to his disciples are to be derived from visions which can be explained in purely psychological terms” (UHS, 133). Ludemann sums up his opinion of the “hoax of the resurrection” in these words: “So let us say quite specifically: the tomb of Jesus was not empty, but full, and his body did not disappear, but rotted away” (WRHJ, 135). “There is no such thing as the ‘Risen Christ’” (GD, 110).

5. The Literal Second Coming

Of course, without a bodily resurrection, there can be no literal Second Coming. Ludemann believes that Jesus Christ will not return, denying His actual resurrection and calling it only a pious wish (GD, 3).

Ludemann argues that the early Christians “elevated the restless itinerant preacher (Jesus) into the ruler of the world who one day will pass judgment on the dead and the living” (GD, 110). He asserts that no “authentic religion” can be built on projections and wishes, such as the Christian exaltation of Jesus to be the Lord of the universe and coming judge (GD, 3).

The amazing thing about Ludemann is that, over time, he has taken these beliefs to their logical conclusions. Early in 1995, after denying the resurrection, he wrote, “The question of course inexorably arises: Are we still Christians?” (WRHJ, 135). He responded, “The answer is a confident ‘Yes’” (WRHJ, 136). Ludemann reached this “yes” by re-interpreting the essence of “resurrection” in a spiritualized manner: “I believe that this Jesus was not given over to annihilation through death. . . . I believe that the unity with God experienced in faith beyond death” (WRHJ, 137).

A year later Ludemann admitted that the “historical truth” of confessional statements must be tested, and if they fail they must be “firmly dropped” (UHS, 135). This “free, scholarly theology” led him to denounce fellow liberal theologians who attempted to hold on to traditional doctrines while reinterpreting them, even as he had done. He stated, “I am compelled by the historical facts that I have cited to maintain my protest against the hypocrisy of the Protestant Church . . . [and] its confessions which are still pronounced today” (UHS, 13).

By 1999, Ludemann’s honesty reached a new verdict. He mused, “My previous faith, related to the biblical message, has become impossible, because its points of reference, above all the resurrection of Jesus, have proved invalid and because the person of Jesus himself is insufficient as a foundation of faith once most of the New Testament statements about him have proved to be later interpretations by the community” (GD, xii). “What is left . . . [after historical criticism] is indeed too little to build Christianity on” (GD, 111). He surmised, “I myself must from now on regard as illegitimate any return to the preaching of Jesus as a foundation for Christian faith” (GD, xxiv).

Having become tired of a life paralyzed by guilt and anxiety, Ludemann perilously wrote, “With the last of my strength I pushed God himself down into the mire and at last became free. . . . So I prefer from now on to develop a purely human view of religion without having to legitimate myself by a higher authority which theologians call God” (GD, 8).

In an interview in the Swiss periodical *Reformierter Pressedienst*, Ludemann recently concluded, “I don’t think Christians know what they mean when they proclaim Jesus as Lord of the world. That is a massive claim. If you took that seriously, you would probably have to be a fundamentalist. If you can’t be a fundamentalist, then you should give up Christianity for the sake of honesty.” This honesty has caused him to describe the liberal attempt to claim Christianity while reformulating its doctrines as “contemptible.” Although Ludemann hails from the opposite party, he has discovered, like J. Gresham Machen, that historic Christianity and Liberalism are indeed two separate, incompatible religions.

Works Cited

1. H=Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

2. UHS=The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).
3. GD=The Great Deception: And What Jesus Really Said and Did (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999).
4. VB=Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998).
5. WRHJ=What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

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