"The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology"

For the last few years we have heard a great deal of talk about liberal theology. Ever since the turn of the century this system of theology has been gaining great recognition. This theology grew out of an attempt to wed theology to the dominant thought pattern of the day, which is science. It insists that the real theologian must be as open-minded, as unbiased, and as disinterested as the scientist. Therefore, he can never speak in terms of the absolute. Moreover, liberal theology insists that truth is not a one-act drama that appeared once and for all on the Biblical stage, but it is a drama of many acts continually appearing as the curtain of history continues to open. The liberal believes that the light of God is forever shining through history as the blossom shines through the bud. Therefore, there can be no set theology. Liberal theology can never be static. It must forever adjust itself to the changing conditions of history.

Personally I think this is the best, or at least the most logical system of theology in existence. But at the same time I must admit that there are certain weaknesses found in liberal theology which are well worth our attention. In this paper I will only discuss one of the weaknesses found in liberal theology; others will be discussed next week.

One of the great weaknesses of liberal theology is that it often loses itself in "higher criticism." In other words, the liberal theologian, in many instances,
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senses and attention which the modern world makes. Coleridge's ancient mariner felt the competition of distracting noise:

The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
For he heard the loud bassoon.

The bassoon has been particularly loud in recent years. Often it has been a literal, physical bassoon, swing music, calling youth like the flute of the Pied Piper. Always it has been a figurative bassoon, whose notes beat on the ears and minds of an audience which a speaker is trying to hold with a story of great matters.

The preacher must be baptized into a new conviction of the importance of preaching in a world increasingly distracted. He needs Paul's overpowering sense, expressed in the passage just quoted, of being the trustee of a word of salvation in a world increasingly damped. The relationship of that word to our world was strikingly drawn in blazing letters over a hundred years ago by a German Jew who saw with a penetrating eye, Heinrich Heine. He wrote in 1834: "Should that subduing talisman, the cross, ever break, then the old stone gods will rise from the long-forgotten ruins and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes, and Thor, leaping to life with his giant hammer, will crush the Gothic cathedrals." Was ever a prophecy more literally and tragically fulfilled? The cross did break for multitudes in Europe, and Thor crushed the Gothic cathedrals. That sentence of Heine's might well be carved on a plaque to be set in the rebuilt cathedrals of Coventry and Cologne. For it affirms the basic moral and spiritual reality of the world. It affirms that the proclaimer of "the talisman of the cross" is not maimed on one side but is in the very center of all the world's conflict and traffic. But if there is no inescapable compulsion to proclaim God's imperishable word, there will just be a rear-end action in a defeatist mood.

Every great movement in history has been prepared for and partly carried out through preaching," and "If preaching is to have any depth, height and breadth, it must be theological preaching" (pp. 38-39).
becomes so involved in "higher criticism that he unconsciously stops there." This is certainly a weakness that the liberal theologian should attempt to avoid. After the Bible has been stripped of all of its mythological and non-historical content, the liberal theologian must be able to answer the question—what then? It is certainly justifiable to be as scientific as possible in proving that the Pentateuch was written by more than one author, that the whale did not swallow Jonah, that Jesus was not born a virgin, or that Jesus never met John the Baptist. But after all of this, what relevance do these scriptures have? What moral implications do we find growing out of the Bible? What relevance does Jesus have in 1948 A.D.? These are question which the liberal theologian must of necessity answer if he expects to influence the average mind. To often do we find many of the liberals dodging these vital questions. This is the first great weakness of liberal theology.

[signed] M. L. King


"The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology" II

[1948]
[Chester, Pa.]

Last week we concluded that one of the great weaknesses of liberal theology is that it becomes so involved in higher criticism, in many instances, that it fails to answer certain vital questions. Today we will discuss another weakness of liberal theology which is equally pernicious. This weakness lies in its failure to contact the masses. Liberal theology seems to be lost in a vocabulary. Moreover, it seems to be too divorced from life.

This tendency to move out of the market-place of everyday life has led liberal theology to become so theoretical that it forgets the practical. This is certainly a danger to any system of theology, for it presupposes that all life is theory, when in reality theory is not effective until it can be reproduced in the realm of the practical. This is certainly a point of warning, for it is the danger that faced the scholastics when they lost their heads to logic. Liberal theology

6. Davis added a quotation mark after the word "criticism."
7. Davis crossed out the second "of" in this sentence.
8. The Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Davis added the word "of" between the words "born" and "a."
9. Davis crossed out the word "of." 
10. Davis indicated that "A.D." should have come before "1948."
11. Davis added an "s" to the word "question."
12. Davis added another "to" to the word "To."
13. King folded this assignment lengthwise and signed his name on the verso of the last page.
14. Davis drew a star between the words "market" and "place" to indicate one word, not two.