

Contemporary American Theologies

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A Critical Survey

Revised Edition

Deane William Ferm

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In Memory of My Mother and Father

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A Critical Survey

By Ferm, Deane W.

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Preface to Revised Edition

My purpose in writing this book has been threefold. First, I have summarized the major trends in contemporary American Christian theology. Second, I have referred to some of the significant literature representative of these new developments. I realize that each chapter could be expanded into a book. For this reason I have included a brief bibliography in the hopes that the reader will want to explore further in these areas. Third, I have suggested ways in which I believe American Christian theology can best meet the challenges of our time. I have sought above all for clarity and simplicity.

The judgments I have made regarding recent theological trends can best be understood with reference to two equally important dimensions of our lives: "inner history" and "outer history." We all have our unique inner history. My mother is not your mother. My background is not your background. Each group of people has its own inner history: blacks, women, Swedes, Catholics, and so on. This inner history is crucial for discovering one's own identity as an individual and as a member of a particular group. But we also have an outer history which we all share. We are all human beings. We are all children of God. We are all inhabitants of planet earth. We all face the threat of nuclear annihilation. We all have our hopes and frustrations, our dreams and fears. We all want to love and be loved. My chief criticism of many of the theologies of the recent past is that they have rightly been concerned with their inner histories, but have often neglected the outer history which we all share. The result has been a parochial faith.

A second criticism concerns the central theological task. I believe that the primary problem for the theologian remains the problem of God. Is God real? What is the character of ultimate reality? Is the universe friendly, antagonistic, or indifferent? Many of the theologies of recent date have correctly been concerned with God's activity but have neglected God's nature. I believe that who God is, is as important as what

God does. One without the other results in a fractured faith. Both of these criticisms I confront in the final chapter where I suggest the direction in which I think American theology should move.

In order to understand what has happened in American Christian theology since 1900, one needs to have some knowledge of theological developments prior to this period. Therefore, I have included an introductory chapter which summarizes American Protestant theology from around the beginning of this century to the 1960s. Since the early 1960s, theology has been decidedly ecumenical in character; hence, both Catholic and Protestant theologians are included. Also, I refer the reader to the companion volume *Contemporary American Theologies II: A Book of Readings*, which allows many of the theologians herein discussed to speak for themselves.

I wish to thank the editors of the following journals for permission to use copyright material already published: *Religion in Life* (Autumn 1975; Winter 1980); *Choice* (February 1980); *Scottish Journal of Theology* (Vol. 34, No. 2 April 1981). Readers of my articles which appeared in *The Christian Century* (March 1972; May 1978) will recognize here some ideas previously expressed in this journal.

I am indebted to many people too numerous to mention for helping me to shape the views I express in this book. But I must underscore the fact that my wife, Debra, is in a real sense the coauthor. Not only have her superior literary skills improved the quality of my writing, but even more important, her constant love and encouragement have been and continue to be my greatest inspiration. But I absolve her from all responsibility for my ideas!

Deane William Ferm
Smithfield, Maine
January, 1990

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Protestant Theology: 1900–1960

Protestantism in the twentieth century has faced upheavals in the intellectual, economic, and social spheres as momentous as those of the early sixteenth century. In both periods Christianity could not afford to remain indifferent to these dramatic changes if it were to continue to be a vital force in human history. In order to understand why recent American Protestant theology is in some respects so unlike its earlier forms, we must be cognizant of the shape of modern thought.

The principal cause of the new approach to theological thinking in modern times has been the scientific revolution. This movement challenged the basic affirmations of the Christian faith: the existence of a personal God, the deity of Jesus Christ, the assurance of a life to come. The world of the twentieth century has been one in which nothing could be taken for granted, a world in which the only certainty has been that there is no certainty. The bond between the old religious beliefs and the new intellectual ideas was ruptured and perhaps irreparably broken.

The traditional western Christian world view presupposed a universe both paternalistic and dualistic in character. God stood over against humanity and Christ was the reconciler of the two. Christ was able, in a unique and final way, to bridge the gap between the divine and the human, the supernatural and the natural. The term *supernatural* points to an order of reality (God) beyond humanity which cannot be known through human initiative. The supernatural order can become known only if that reality, that is, God, is revealed through divine intervention. It is precisely this kind of dualism based on knowledge via revelation which seems alien to the world view bequeathed by the scientific revolution.

It is impossible to date precisely when people began to think differently about themselves and their world. Some historians suggest

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that the change started as early as 1451 with the invention of printing, others, in 1543 with the publication of the *Revolution of The Heavenly Bodies* by Copernicus. Some cite twelfth-century roots while others think that the change began as late as the seventeenth century. At any rate, an intellectual movement began several centuries ago which slowly and painfully swept across the western world and drastically reshaped human life in its philosophical, social, political, and economic aspects. However, not until the twentieth century did this movement seriously affect humanity's religious convictions.

The principal feature of the scientific revolution is the inductive method of inquiry. This method makes two major assumptions in the search for authentic knowledge. First, direct observation and experimentation is the most reliable way of learning about any subject matter. This does not mean that one must be able to experience everything personally before one will believe it; this would obviously be impossible. Rather, the assumption is that one will not accept any truth as valid unless either one has experienced it or one can trust the observations of someone else. In those areas such as history and anthropology where direct knowledge cannot be attained, one will put confidence in those scholars who have made a thorough study in that particular sphere of inquiry and who have constructed their theories in an orderly manner. Obviously this first principle is not perfect; no assumption is.

The second assumption is that rational analysis is the best judge of the reliability of knowledge. Not only must something be directly experienced by the observer or by someone considered trustworthy, but also it must make sense in terms of the observer's previous information. There must be a coherent pattern between what is already known and what is as yet unknown. No belief can be accepted which is inherently inconsistent with other beliefs or which eludes rational inquiry. Clear thinking is dependent on a harmonious combination of the present with the past. Naturally, with our limited knowledge, one belief does not always harmonize with another. For example, the two theories of light (wave length and corpuscular) seem irreconcilable. The underlying assumption, however, is that the conflict is on the surface. Eventually an underlying principle will be discovered to reconcile all apparent discrepancies.

The hard-fought victory achieved by the scientific method is that truth

must be found and tested by human experience and inductive thinking. One's comprehension of truth changes as one's knowledge increases. Religious faith for many modern believers has come to be understood more as a working hypothesis based on reason and experience which gives meaning to life than as a set of revealed truths about the universe which are eternal in character.

In general, Protestant theology has been characterized by three different responses to the scientific revolution: liberalism, conservatism, and neo-orthodoxy. Although advocates of these three positions may still be found today, their influence as major schools of thought was dominant earlier in this century and certainly prior to the 1960s. It is important that we give some attention to each of these movements.

LIBERALISM

The term Protestant liberalism is generally used to refer to that Protestant school of thought which believed that a reinterpretation of the Christian message in accordance with the modern scientific world view was necessary. Liberals claimed that Christianity must harmonize with the contemporary ways of thinking if it were to be relevant to the modern believer.

Perhaps the most important theological forerunner of religious liberalism was the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher reacted strongly against the intellectualism of his day which tended to view Christianity as a series of propositions rather than as a living relationship with God. He attacked the "cultured despisers" of religion who identified the Christian faith with dogmas and beliefs. He claimed that religion is the feeling of absolute dependence on God and that the goal of Christianity is to experience fully this God-consciousness as Christ himself had done. The extent of his God-consciousness distinguishes Christ from other humans who sin when they choose not to be aware of God. Redemption represents the healing of the divine-human relationship. According to Schleiermacher there is no sharp division among God, Christ, humanity, and the world; they are all dimensions of a continuous spectrum. The encounter with God is the beginning and the end of the Christian life and faith. Doctrines, he once said, must be extracted from the inward experience of Christian people. By the early part of the twentieth century the teachings of Schleiermacher and his followers had coalesced

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into a definite theological current within Protestantism. Underlying Protestant liberalism are four basic affirmations.

First, liberals stressed the importance of the inductive method of inquiry which was proving to be so successful for progress in other areas of human endeavor. Religious faith must make sense to one's best experience and reason. Faith in God and Christ could not be separated into a special category of revelation that avoided the usual tests of inductive inquiry and personal verification. Liberalism affirmed that questions which affect human destiny need to have modern answers and that the method that had succeeded in the sciences could work as well in the area of religion.

This meant, for example, that the scientific approach to biblical study entailed using the same tests of truth and verification necessary for any other book. Biblical criticism was not new to the twentieth century, especially "Lower Criticism," that is, textual study aimed at reconstructing as accurately as possible the form and content of the original autographs. Efforts in this area predated even the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The twentieth century witnessed the culmination of a later development, that is, "Higher Criticism," which asked the deeper questions about the character and purpose of these writings. Queries were raised about the authorship of the books of the Bible, the authenticity of these documents, the theological bias of the writers, and the meaning of the various passages. This kind of inquiry raised doubts about a whole host of assumptions concerning the Bible that had heretofore been for the most part accepted uncritically, including the authenticity of biblical writings and even the role of biblical authority.

A second feature of Protestant liberalism was its reliance upon experience, not the Bible, as the primary authority. Here experience should be understood to encompass the total spectrum of human life including, of course, the Bible as one aspect of this continuum. It encompasses both the personal and social dimensions. Liberals considered reason to be the tool for organizing and articulating experience and knowledge in a coherent and comprehensive way. The Bible attains its authority, not because of special divine sanction, but because it is a record of human witness to the living God. The Bible is a human document which contains many different ideas, practices, and customs of people who claimed to know God. This knowledge is potentially available to all people. Liberals insisted that such a view of the Bible

makes it more real and vital than ever. Morton Enslin writes of the liberal's belief in the Bible:

It is the record of centuries of achievement and pilgrimage of men and women like himself confronted with the tasks and problems of life. In the course of the years they made many discoveries, gained many insights. It is to him a priceless heritage of the past, and in it he finds much that aids him in his constant search for the gold of life. He is not in the slightest surprised to find it not infrequently self-contradictory were it to be regarded as one book. He knows that it is nothing of the sort but rather a library written by many men over the period of a thousand years. He is not surprised at differences and contradictory points of view . . . When he is challenged by the brash, "So you don't believe the Bible," he is inclined, after perhaps a moment of annoyance at what appears to him bad manners and poor taste, to answer: "I love it, and that seems to me vastly more important."

The liberals judged Christ to be God's supreme revelation. This affirmation was rooted in their experience of God, which may or may not come through reading the Bible. When they declared that religious experience is basic and universal, they were not suggesting that all religions were equal, but insisting that ultimately everyone must develop one's own faith from personal experience rather than the arbitrary testimony of others or the dogmatic acceptance of divine revelation.

A third feature of liberal thought was the stress placed on continuity between God and humanity, reason and revelation. Liberals rejected dualistic thinking which usually disqualified religious beliefs *a priori* from the usual tests of rational inquiry and personal confirmation. Liberalism insisted that truth is one. The problem of divine nature is also by analogy the problem of human nature. Truth cannot be compartmentalized. The ways human beings learn about themselves are the ways they learn about God.

Religious liberalism's advocacy of continuity can be noted in its attitude toward the doctrine of evolution. When Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species* in 1859 and the *Descent of Man* in 1871, the response from orthodox Christians was quick and denunciatory. What Darwin had suggested, among other things, was that human life had evolved from the lower animals through a process of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Although this teaching was not new, Darwin was able to amass a great amount of evidence in its favor.

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His claim was a threat to orthodox Christianity because evolution seemed to deny the unique status of the human being as a special creature of God. For liberals, however, Darwin's teaching served to underscore the continuity of humanity with other aspects of God's creation and in no way detracted from God's role as creator. *That* God created the world and everything therein is more important than *how* God created it.

Finally, liberals stressed human potential to overcome personal inadequacies and the shortcomings of the social order. They believed that to some extent one can learn about God as one can learn about oneself. One can know the truth to a degree. One can change the world for the better. To be sure, human beings are not infallible nor without sin; they will always be limited in their knowledge and will often use information for selfish purposes. But people do not solve their problems by simply confessing their ignorance nor by making a fetish out of their selfishness. Rather, they should acknowledge their finitude honestly and humbly and then proceed with the task of inquiry and social reform. Liberalism stressed human potential for good rather than an innate tendency toward evil. It understood the essence of Christianity to be the love of God and humanity. Liberals believed that God and humanity are partners and emphasized the joyous and healthy-minded dimensions of human life. To quote Floyd Ross:

It is one of the tragedies of Christian history that the men who determined the theological pattern or mood for the majority of Christians were men who through a certain combination of endowment and environment lived in the sense that they had quarreled with God. A Socrates or an Eckhart would have appreciated the comment of Thoreau who, when asked on his deathbed whether he had made peace with God, replied: 'I was not aware that we had quarreled.' Neither Paul, Augustine, nor Luther would have comprehended.²

The confidence liberals placed in human potential became evident when they espoused the social gospel. Environment came to be seen as the source of much of humanity's difficulties and imperfections. If the social and physical environment were to be improved, liberals argued, the human situation would likewise improve and the social order would then move closer to reflecting God's will. Human beings as God's children should be able to eliminate many of the injustices and inequalities which exist in society. The strength of the social gospel

movement in the early part of the century is a tribute to the confidence liberalism placed in the individual.

The father of the social gospel was Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), for many years professor of church history at Rochester Theological Seminary. Rauschenbusch combined all the major features of the liberal tradition. He stressed the continuity between God and humanity and thereby saw the working of God in and through the labors of humanity. He believed human imperfections to be essentially environmental; one generation corrupted the next. His major writing, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, provided a rationale for social action which found the purpose of Christianity to be the remaking of society in the image of God:

We love and serve God when we love and serve our fellows, whom he loves and in whom he lives . . . The new social purpose, which has laid its masterful grip on modern life and thought, is enlarging and transforming our whole conception of the meaning of Christianity.³

These features of Protestant liberalism—the scientific spirit, the authority and universality of religious experience, the importance of continuity, and confidence in human nature—represent ways in which liberals attempted to come to terms with the modern world. Although Protestant liberalism as a major theological force began to wane in the 1930s, it retains a following in all the major Protestant denominations.

One of the most significant advocates for Protestant liberalism was Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969). For more than forty years Fosdick was at the forefront of theological and social thinking in America as he brought to this country a prophetic voice of reasoned faith and enlightened hope. Fosdick epitomized Protestant liberalism in three ways. First, he consistently attempted to express the abiding truths of the Christian faith in the changing categories appropriate to the modern world. He knew that no theology could be expressed in final form. As he put it:

If the day ever comes when men care so little for the basic Christian experiences and revelations of truth that they cease trying to rethink them in more adequate terms, see them in the light of freshly acquired knowledge, and interpret them anew for new days, then Christianity will be finished.⁴

For this reason Fosdick waged a lifelong battle against the fundamentalists and proponents of a static orthodoxy. On the other hand, he also

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opposed the radicals who threw out the abiding truths of the Christian faith. Without faith in God, his sermons testify, the whole climate of human life would be pointless and the best in one's ethical life would not be possible. Fosdick declared that if God were not personal, then God would have no concern for human life, and "a God of no concern is a God of no consequence." In one of his most moving sermons he declared:

If we are to have a profound religion we may indeed throw away our old, childish, anthropomorphic ideas of God, but we may not throw away God and leave ourselves caught like rats in the trap of an aimless, meaningless, purposeless universe.⁵

Second, Fosdick stressed the importance of reason in faith. He lived through a period of violent theological upheaval when the winds of doctrine shifted unpredictably, often leaving the individual believer in confusion and turmoil. Fosdick valued reason not because of a naive optimism, but because he himself had struggled with fundamentalism and obscurantism. As he once put it:

What present-day critics of liberalism often fail to see is its absolute necessity to multitudes of us who would not have been Christians at all unless we could thus have escaped the bondage of the then reigning orthodoxy.⁶

The Christian faith must speak to our deepest insights into our own humanity; otherwise, faith becomes an arbitrary exercise. "Faith and reason," Fosdick insisted, "are not antithetical opposites. They need each other. All the tragic superstitions which have cursed religion throughout its history have been due to faith divorced from reason."⁷

Finally, Fosdick grounded his faith in personal and social experience, in the tragedies and failures, the hopes and dreams of individuals. The most vital thing in religion, he said again and again, is firsthand personal experience. Fosdick was greatly influenced by Walter Rauschenbusch and the social gospel movement, and his intense social concerns are reflected in his writing and preaching. One of humankind's most insistent needs, he wrote in *The Meaning of Service*, is the interpretation of religion in terms of service and the attachment of religion's enormous driving power to the tasks of service. Fosdick believed that both the social and personal dimensions of the Christian

faith were essential. But how do we decide which faith? Fosdick answered:

To take the best insights of them all, to see the incompleteness and falsity in them all, to trust none of them as a whole, to see always that the Reality to be explained is infinitely greater than our tentative, conditioned explanations—that seems to me wisdom.⁸

Harry Emerson Fosdick represented the best in Protestant liberalism.

CONSERVATISM

Liberalism was not the only reaction of Protestant theology to the scientific revolution. The so-called conservatives responded in a totally different way. They proclaimed a set of propositions about the gospel of Jesus Christ which in both form and content remained unchanged despite the shifting human attitudes and world views. This response to the modern world contains much diversity, but for the sake of contrast we shall call it conservatism. Many interpreters have labeled this point of view fundamentalism, but this latter term has been caricatured so badly by liberals as to make it virtually worthless. The term fundamentalism should be reserved for those believers who insisted on a literal interpretation of the words of the Bible. The beginnings of fundamentalism as a self-conscious movement can be dated at 1910 with the publication of a series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. Fundamentalism later came to be identified with five basic affirmations of the Christian faith:

1. The verbal inspiration of the Bible;
2. The virgin birth of Christ;
3. The substitutionary atonement of Christ for the sins of the world;
4. Christ's bodily resurrection;
5. Christ's second coming.

Although fundamentalism has been and still is a major factor in American religion, its chief advocates have never been leading, well-known theologians. To be sure, fundamentalists and conservatives share many convictions including most of the ones just stated; nevertheless, the leading conservative theologians were not biblical literalists.

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Conservatism can be identified as that movement in Protestantism which upheld the inspired content of the entire Bible. Although conservatism had always been present in the history of Protestantism, it emerged as a self-conscious movement early in the twentieth century. Reformation Protestantism had insisted that the Bible was the prime authority for Christian belief and practice, but just what this implied had never been precisely defined. For example, Luther had made distinctions among parts of the Bible in terms of their relative value without in any way denying the primary authority of scripture. Conservatives were reluctant to make such distinctions, preferring to state that God is the author of the entire Bible. Whereas Luther stressed the spirit of the words of the Bible—the Bible is the “cradle of Christ”—as his basis for biblical authority, conservatives stressed the doctrinal content of biblical authority. While they admitted the possibility of textual errors inserted during the copying and translation of the Bible, conservatives reaffirmed the divine authorship and the objectivity of revelation. They rejected Higher Criticism which might question some of the basic divinely revealed propositions. For the conservatives, criticism of scripture in such a fashion is to apply human standards to divine authorship. It is significant that the conservatives accused the liberals of anti-intellectualism when the latter minimized the objective nature of the Christian revelation and gave priority to human experience.

What are some of these propositions which conservatives thought essential to the biblical proclamation and which the liberals had relegated to secondary importance? The major doctrines of early Protestantism—the sovereignty of God, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the priesthood of all believers—were reaffirmed by the conservatives. Like the fundamentalists, conservatives retained certain propositions about Christ himself, including belief in the deity of Christ and the virgin birth. Liberals, while continuing to focus on Christ, chose to stress his ethical teachings and considered him to be different only in degree from other prophets and human beings. To the conservatives this represented a denial of the uniqueness of the Christian faith. For them, God was revealed in Christ in a way in which God has never been revealed in any other person. Jesus is “very God of very God,” the second person of the Trinity. This is the whole point of the incarnation, that is, God in the flesh. For the conservatives the proposition of the deity of Christ was indispensable.

One way of assuring this uniqueness was to assert the virgin birth of Christ as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Christ was born of the Virgin Mary with the Holy Spirit as his father, and to deny this historical fact was to deny the authority of the Bible. Liberals tended to minimize the importance of the virgin birth; Schleiermacher said that it was superfluous. But for the conservatives this doctrine was crucial for it preserved the gulf between God and humanity. To deny the virgin birth, that is, to make Christ corrupt, would be as unthinkable as it would be to accept the doctrine of evolution and thereby reject the sharp difference between humanity and the rest of God's creation.

The conservatives also affirmed the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ while liberals chose to emphasize the teachings of Jesus rather than his resurrection. Liberals maintained that the modern world view cast doubt upon a resurrection from the dead, while conservatives argued from biblical testimony that it is an historical fact that Jesus appeared to his disciples and to others after his death and was recognized by them.

Also central to the conservative position was the belief in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus for the sins of the world, that is, that Christ died for the sins of humanity. He substituted his life for the human race, thus was sin forgiven and the reconciliation of creator and creature, lost with original sin, reestablished. Christ is not only a moral example for believers to imitate, He is God making the supreme sacrifice in order that humanity might be redeemed. Most conservatives also believe in a second coming of Jesus Christ in bodily form to judge the human race. Christ who had died and was raised from the dead shall reappear, as the Bible prophesied. Conservatives believed that the return of Christ would right the wrongs of an evil world and reward the faithful.

One of the leading conservative theologians was J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), for many years a professor of Greek New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was often accused by the liberals of being a fundamentalist, but he rejected this designation, and in fairness to him, it must be said that he was not a biblical literalist. He subsequently withdrew from Princeton Seminary to establish Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. In his most notable book, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, he defended the major doctrines of conservatism and concluded:

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The New Testament presentation of Jesus is not an agglomeration, but an organism; and of that organism the virgin birth is an integral part. Remove the part, and the whole becomes harder and not easier to accept; the New Testament account of Jesus is not convincing when it is not taken as a whole. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost.⁹

Although conservatism continued to be a vigorous intellectual force in the life of Protestantism, it mellowed over the years as it confronted continuously the demands of an alien secular world. It grudgingly accepted some of the basic conclusions of Higher Criticism. While there were conservatives who refused to compromise the major tenets, most of their leading theologians modified their views without departing from the fundamental insistence on the authority of the Bible. This conviction has remained the core affirmation of conservative Protestantism.

Liberalism also changed its original emphasis, especially its rather optimistic view of human nature. World War I and the chaos that it caused in the social order had a devastating effect on the liberalism of the earlier period. Although this movement never believed in inevitable human progress onward and upward, it did place confidence in human nature's ability to tame the natural world and solve the problems of the environment. World War I shattered that hope. It was no longer possible to affirm that human nature was good and rational, without also acknowledging that it was evil and irrational. The social disorder of the 1920s created an atmosphere of pessimism about human possibilities that bordered on helplessness and despair—an atmosphere which was ideally suited to existentialism and especially the views of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1853). From the human point of view, history no longer seemed to have meaning or purpose. World War I did not make the world safe for democracy, but rather made it receptive to totalitarian regimes.

The chief fault of liberalism had been its desire to harmonize the Christian faith with the scientific world view and all its prejudices without questioning whether that world view was defective. Fosdick sensed this weakness in the 1930s when he declared that what Christ does to modern culture is to challenge it. However, his protest was too mild and too late in the rising chorus of voices in Protestant theological circles then beginning to assert that the claims of Christ were radically