

Modernism in Indianapolis

William E. Wallace

There is a phase of modernism, or maybe it's a kind or type, which is manifested in softness toward religious error. Distinguishing characteristics of old time gospel preachers, who carried to our generation the New Testament church included militancy and diligence against the innovations of the digressive wing of the Restoration Movement. Modernism among us includes a passiveness toward digression, or innovation, in place of militancy, and friendliness with modern liberal criticism of the Bible rather than a diligence against liberalism's destructive influence.

Modernism appears in varying degrees. There are different kinds. Only the extreme modernists are really winning to accept and wear the label. I doubt that any preacher associated with churches of Christ would appreciate being labeled a modernist, yet there are preachers among us who are definitely modernists. Modernism is better described than defined. This I do by reference to an Indianapolis situation.

David H. Bobo, of the Fountain Square church in Indianapolis, is a gentleman of sterling character, of personable and ethical demeanor. But as to the way the term modernist is generally used and understood among churches of Christ, brother Bobo fits the picture. Perhaps the first evidence of this appeared in Bobo's lecture on Bible discrepancies at Abilene Christian College in 1960. Faculty members challenged his positions. Professor J. D. Thomas of the college critically reviewed Bobo's positions in a number of articles that appeared in the *Gospel Advocate* and *Firm Foundation*.

When brother Bobo came to Indianapolis about fifteen years ago he was understood to be conservative in his positions regarding church support of institutions and sponsoring church arrangements. However, he never actually held the positions on these matters, which are generally identified among us as conservative, or "anti." Brethren were attributing positions to Bobo that he never held. Although he was not an enthusiast for brotherhood enterprises, and held some misgivings regarding them, he was not with conservative brethren in the fight against institutionalism and sponsoring church arrangements even though his sermons and articles led us to believe he stood with us. Those who thought him to be so inclined misunderstood him or were misinformed. This brother Bobo revealed to me in a recent conversation.

However, a sort of "middle-of-the-road" image for Bobo and Fountain Square arose. Apparently many have been attracted to Fountain Square because of this image. But brother Bobo is definitely on the liberal side with regard to current issues. Said he, "But I refuse to be identified as opposed to the present brotherhood enterprises within themselves" (*Gospel Guardian*, September 26, 1963).

Brother Bobo has a close affinity with another kind of liberalism. He has been in a close fraternal kinship with the Christian Theological Seminary of Indianapolis through fifteen years of professional theological study and activity. The seminary is operated under the auspices of the extreme liberal wing of the Restoration Movement, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Few such advance study institutions for clerics equal this school's removing of ancient landmarks. The teachers in the seminary occupy different degrees and shades of modernism, but they are definitely modernists in the sense in which that word has always been used among churches of Christ.

While brother Bobo would deny that he is a modernist, he definitely holds many modernistic views advanced by the seminary faculty members, and is in sympathy with others views, which have been traditionally rejected by representative scholars among denominations.

These are general statements and might lead some to attribute positions to brother Bobo that he does not occupy. But brother Bobo holds enough modernism to be properly classified as a modernist among us. His 1960 speech at Abilene Christian College is substantiation of this charge. The speech is in print.

As further evidence of Bobo's modernism note the following excerpt from his thesis entitled "John William McGarvey-- A Biographical and Theological Study":

" . . .in the case of Isaiah 7:14 where there are indications that the child who was to be born had to be contemporary with the existing political situation, McGarvey proposes two births and of course two children--one for contemporary fulfillment and Jesus for distant fulfillment. The flood narrative, and

many others were dealt with upon the same level. Such explanations are pious enough but hardly plausible, and certainly not critical."

Note that Bobo' is in apparent disagreement with Matthew 1: 22-23 where Isaiah 7: 14 is definitely applied to Christ. What effect does such modernism have on the church? Brother Bobo is not the kind of man to intentionally create tension with his modern views, nor is he inclined to make a deliberate effort to swing brethren into his channel of thinking on such matters. However, his modernism has created in him softness toward error and a tolerant spirit toward innovation. For example, he, in good conscience, participates in the singing of hymns to the accompaniment of instrumental music in the chapel worship services at the seminary. This he defends on the basis that the chapel services are not church assemblies! This participation in unauthorized worship is a clear-cut indication of Bobo's modernistic inclinations.

Brother Bobo cannot be depended on to maintain the distinctive characteristics of the true church of Christ that keep us separated from the digressive elements of the Restoration Movement.

I discussed these matters at length with brother Bobo, finding him to be quite receptive to discussion of his modernistic positions. His chief concern is that brethren "attack" him as a modernist, rather than deal objectively with his stated convictions on points at issue. It is likely that Bobo is not the only modernist among churches of Christ, in Indianapolis. It is time for modernists among us to be marked so that brethren can be alert to withstand their mellowing influences.

David H. Bobo is representative of the modernism that exists among us in Indianapolis. Brother Bobo's modernism is seen primarily in his attitude toward the Bible. He ridicules the preacher who would say from the pulpit, "If anyone can show one contradiction within this old book, from Genesis to Revelation, which I cannot satisfactorily reconcile, I will throw it into the fire and have no more to do with it" (Abilene Christian College Lectures, 1960). I have heard brother Bobo caricature such preachers at least twice. Yet, while decrying such an overly confident attitude on the one hand, he reflects on the other a similar spirit in asserting that he can show discrepancies in the Bible that have never been reconciled, and his spirit indicates that he doesn't believe they can be reconciled.

One of the "discrepancies" Bobo has in mind which he mentioned in the 1960 Abilene speech, and which he used in a recent conversation with me' is the reference to David as Saul's armour-bearer in I Samuel 16:21. In chapter 17: 56, after David's slaying of Goliath, Saul asks, "Whose son the stripling is?" Bobo considers this a major, real, discrepancy and asks, "How could David 'be a mighty man of valor,' and a man of war; Saul's Armour bearer whom he loved greatly in chapter sixteen, and yet be only a stripling and inexperienced youth unknown to Saul and Abner in chapter seventeen? . . . How could both accounts be accurate and yet be reconciled? . . . This is one of the discrepancies for which no satisfactory answer has as yet been found, so far as I am concerned" (ACC Lectures, 1960).

The answer to "discrepancy" is simple: "The description of David as a man of valor, a man of war (I Samuel 16:17) is obviously an exaggeration by a friend at court. David became Saul's Armour bearer, or squire, which was the position of a young inexperienced lad, not of a grown and tried warrior" (*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 2, page 949). "The Armour-bearer corresponds to the medieval squire, and would be a youth in his military apprenticeship" (Ibid. page 949). The Hebrew text of I Samuel 16:21 would allow the reading, " . . . and he became an Armour-bearer." It is quite reasonable to understand that the pressures of the events had caused Saul and Abner to forget about David's former introduction as an apprentice among many in Saul's court. I believe Bobo would not be so sure of himself on this "discrepancy" and all the others if he had availed himself of conservative scholarship as freely as he has exposed himself to liberal criticism of the Bible.

As to further evidence that there is no discrepancy between I Samuel 16 and chapter 17 that says that David "stood before" Saul. This doesn't mean that he remained before him. In chapter 17 "David is now brought before Saul. The shepherd youth, who previously was merely one of the vast numbers of similar youths entrusted with the carrying of supplies to the camp, now suddenly emerges as a national hero, and his identity, before a matter of indifference, must now be established. This is the obvious explanation for Saul's inquiry about his parentage. As a secondary motive, there was the fact that Saul now viewed him as a future son-in-law" (*The Biblical Expositor*, Carl H. F. Henry 284, Vol. I).

Other supposed discrepancies played up by Bobo, like the difficulty between passages in Genesis where "Jehovah" appears and Exodus 6:3, as to the use of the name "Jehovah," have been satisfactorily reconciled by conservative

critics and theologians. One gets the impression that Bobo has not availed himself of these sources of fundamental scholarship. In Exodus 6:3 God reveals His name, Jehovah (YAHWEH), in its redemptive or "Covenant Fulfiler" aspects. The passage simply means that the patriarchs before Moses did not know God in these aspects.

In *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1965, Samuel Turner, Jr. tells about his struggle with liberalism in a seminary, how it adversely affected his views, and then how he was able to finally shake it off and return to his previous faith. He describes the teaching of a liberal seminary as follows:

"The creation accounts in Genesis were neatly discredited as being the work of two authors who were labeled 'J and P.' . . . The account of Noah and the flood was shrewdly undermined by pointing to the fact that the Babylonians also had a flood story. The Red Seas' opening for the children of Israel to escape from the Egyptians was said to be merely a legendary explanation of Israel's escape from Egyptian Bondage. The account of the sun's standing still for Joshua was said to be an error on the part of the author of the Book of Joshua. Jonah in the belly of a whale was relegated to ancient mythology. The three Hebrews in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lion's den were labeled Maccabean propaganda. The virgin birth of Jesus was laid to early Christian piety. The miracles Jesus did were either called outright lies or charged to Jesus' psychological power. The crucifixion of Jesus was said to be only Roman execution and not the atonement for the sins of the world. Jesus was said to be not the Lamb of God but just a moral teacher. And His resurrection was termed a hallucination of the disciples or a carry over from mystery religions."

Turner observes "After six years of this kind of liberal Christian education, I received two degrees and was turned loose on a church. The Lord have mercy on those Faithful Christians in that first church where I was pastor!" Such a warning needs to be echoed to the Fountain Square church where David H. Bobo preaches. I do not ascribe to Bobo all the modernistic positions that Turner mentioned, but Bobo's Abilene Christian College lecture, his thesis on John W. McGarvey, and his teaching and conversations reveal that he is indeed a modernist. How wonderful it would be if he, like Turner, could experience a "re-enlightenment" and openly reject those modernistic views that he definitely holds! While I hold no brief for Turner's denominationalism, his experience, first of accepting and then rejecting modernism, is a telling illustration.

In Bobo's thesis entitled "John William McGarvey--A Biographical and Theological Study," he makes some conclusions and assessments in which he reflects his personal sympathy for what we commonly refer to as modernism and digression.

Bobo does not hold high regard for McGarvey's work in the field of Higher Criticism. Of McGarvey's work in combating modernism Bobo summarizes;

"In summary it may be said that he was not prepared, either educationally or temperamentally to enter into the field of objective criticism, and could hardly be properly called a critic. It would be more correct to say that the effect of his later life at least was to oppose all forms of enlightened criticism, and that with a bitterness that did him more discredit than honor. This does not detract, of course, from his greatness in other respects, but seems to this writer to be borne out by both the evidences he left behind, and the opinions of qualified associates."

Bobo observes further,

"To many of his brethren, and in his own estimation, he adequately met and defeated the world-renowned Biblical critics, and furnished all honest Bible students with the final answers to higher criticism. And herein, to them, lies his greatness. The findings of this study do not sustain this view."

Of course brother Bobo is entitled to his opinion about McGarvey's work of combating what McGarvey called "destructive criticism" of the Bible. But it appears that Bobo's criticism of McGarvey on this point is due to Bobo's sympathy with, or his embracing of the positions that were the targets of McGarvey's pen. Prominent and representative men among churches of Christ hold high esteem for McGarvey's work against "destructive criticism." For example note the following by Foy E. Wallace, Jr.:

"It seems rather presumptuous for some lesser lights today, who think they are scholars but who really are not, to cast reflections on scholars of J. W. McGarvey's calibre . . . the scholarly and careful McGarvey replied to the loose and liberal Errett, in defense of Verbal Inspiration, who withstood in the field of

Biblical Criticism the phalanx of Higher Critics who sought in his day to destroy the integrity of the Word of God, and became known and recognized by scholars throughout the whole world for his contributions in the field of Evidences" (Torch, Vol. I, No. I, pages 12,15).

McGarvey's works against "destructive criticism" continue to be highly regarded in institutions of higher learning operated by our brethren' and Bobo's detachment from this regard for McGarvey's work in this field reflects Bobo's sympathy with modernism.

Regarding the honor given to McGarvey by Abilene Christian College in establishing a J. W. McGarvey award, Bobo observes;

"The fact again that McGarvey alone has received this honor bears witness to a feeling that he belongs in some unique way to the Churches of Christ. These actions seem to this writer to amount to a tacit adoption of McGarvey into their membership and party alignment."

Does Bobo regard churches of Christ as a party alignment? Bobo contends in this thesis that McGarvey would not have aligned himself with churches of Christ today. He points out how McGarvey disapproved of severance of fellowship between missionary society and non-missionary society brethren, and how McGarvey settled himself in the fellowship of "instrumental music brethren." He also observes, "This writer feels that there are numerous evidences of a general softening of McGarvey's attitude toward all fundamentalist believers, even though he disagreed with them in matters of doctrine." I am convinced that Bobo holds these sentiments that he attributes to McGarvey.

As to McGarvey's position on the verba inspiration of the Bible, Bobo observes,

"This seems to point to the simple fact that McGarvey's doctrine has become the orthodox view of the churches of Christ. The common answer among them to Biblical discrepancies is that we may be sure that no such problems existed in the original writings where inspiration was active, and that such discrepancies as exist now may be dismissed as irrelevant so far as the validity of the Bible is concerned. The underlying assumption is that where inspiration is active it is uniform and absolute and no discrepancy, however small and insignificant, could occur . . . It is the opinion therefore, of this writer that McGarvey's *theory of inspiration* of the Bible, and its concomitant conclusions and deductions, have been followed by the Churches of Christ, and have therefore dominated their theology."

In these statements Bobo seems to detach himself from the generally accepted understanding of inspiration among churches of Christ, and his terminology associates him more closely with modernism than with the fundamental faith in the integrity of the Bible upon which our Lord's church is built in all generations.

Foy E. Wallace, Jr. once said, "One of the first indications is a general looseness in attitude toward conformity, a non-strictness in regard to essentials. Modernism has definite and unmistakable marks." I believe David H. Bobo fits the picture, and if he chooses to speak out in response to this article his natural honesty will force him to admit his modernistic inclinations. (References from John W. McGarvey--A Biographical and Theological Study" appear in pages 319, 320, 376, 39D, 396, 397, 438-451 of that work on file at Christian Theological Seminary.)

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