

2-1-1933

The Modernistic Christ

Theo Graebner

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Graebner, Theo (1933) "The Modernistic Christ," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 4 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol4/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Concordia Theological Monthly

VOL. IV

FEBRUARY, 1933

No. 2

The Modernistic Christ.*

The reader of modern theological literature sometimes happens upon a title which possesses significance, not on account of any intrinsic worth as a product of scholarship, but as a typical instance of modern thought regarding the nature of Christianity. From this point of view, Tittle's *Jesus after Nineteen Centuries* is worthy of more than passing comment. What a subject — the meaning of Jesus and the manifestation of His power in the world to-day! Proceeding from the glorious truth "Jesus the same yesterday and to-day and forever," what cannot be said of the power of the Gospel as manifested in the world to-day in spite of the changes which have been brought about in the social and economic conditions of the twentieth century as compared with those of the first! Tittle correctly calls our world "startlingly different from the world of Jesus," and he vividly portrays the Galilean disciples "standing to-day in one of the canyons of New York, feeling the vibration of the subway beneath their feet, hearing the honk-honk of taxicabs going in all directions, the report also of an Army and Navy football game broadcast by radio, and, high overhead, seeing the latest and largest military airship encircling the tower of the Empire State Building! Different also," he continues, "are many of the problems with which our world is confronted. Nineteen hundred years ago 'a sower went forth to sow'; and, no doubt, he had his troubles — stones, thorns, birds, poor soil. But, generally speaking, he needed only to sow in order to reap and only to reap in order to secure for himself and his family the necessities of life. Imagine if you can that first-century sower attempting to operate a modern farm or factory, confronted with such intricate problems as are now involved in marketing and finance" (p. 29). But instead of subscribing with Tittle to Professor Case's jibe: If Jesus were living to-day,

* *Jesus after Nineteen Centuries*, by E. F. Tittle. 217 pages 5½×8¼. The Abingdon Press. Price, \$2.00.

"we should not elect Him President of the United States, or deposit our savings in a bank under His management, or employ Him as architect for a city sky-scraper, or ride in a taxicab with Him at the wheel" (p. 28); or of pointing out that the central problem to-day is, as in Jesus' day, "How may human beings live together securely, nobly, and happily?" (p. 31) and finding in the teachings of Christ light upon this basic problem, it would have been, if not a simple matter, yet an inspiring task for a Christian disciple of 1932 to point out the supreme need of our age — salvation from sin and from the pangs of an evil conscience — and the perfect cure for this fundamental ill of humanity in the Gospel of redemption and in the operations of the Holy Spirit upon the individual heart.

Of all this nothing, not a vestige nor a hint, in the lectures which Rev. Tittle of Evanston, Illinois, delivered at Yale University last year. Nothing of the Spirit's work. Nothing of the redemption or the atonement. Much about sins, nothing of sin. The way of repentance and faith not so much as mentioned. The deity of Christ not only ignored, but implicitly denied. Jesus is "a Jew" (p. 214). The Christmas Gospel "plainly legends" (p. 14). In His education Jesus was "considerably indebted to rabbinical literature" (p. 32). He erred when He cherished the illusion of an early transformation of human society. As for His death, it possessed no metaphysical meaning, nor was it in any sense substitutionary or an atonement for the world's sin. "He chose to die rather than countenance the desecration of a Temple which had been dedicated as a 'house of prayer for all nations'" (p. 82). The cross "is a symbol of the price that has ever been demanded for human progress" (p. 141). We are now able to believe in love as an ultimate reality and the greatest power in the world because Jesus, "first of all the son of man, lived and died with malice toward none, with charity to all" (p. 210). "On the love of God He gambled His life" (p. 206). In view of the fact that Tittle does not believe in the resurrection it is clear that, by a little straight thinking, the reader will deduce from Tittle's book that Christ *lost* in this "gamble," since He died as a criminal, with spikes driven through His hands and feet. Surely in all this the "offense of the Cross" — the teaching of the atoning power of Christ's death, the heart and all of Christianity — has been removed.

Naturally, one is interested in the manner in which Modernism treats the sources from which it must draw the picture of Jesus Christ when it would discuss His meaning to the world after nineteen centuries. The rule by which Tittle established the historical nature of the Gospel record is simplicity itself. The criterion of historical truth and error is the manner in which the various statements of the Gospel record appeal to Rev. Ernest Fremont Tittle of Evanston, Illinois! He accepts the saying of Christ that a man's life does not

consist in the number of things he possesses (p. 158); he treats as-historical the reference of Jesus to Himself as a servant, Matt. 20, 25. 28 (p. 162). He "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (p. 141). But doubts are placed upon the use of a scourge in the cleansing of the Temple, because John's gospel, which alone mentions it, is "admittedly the least historical" (p. 98). By what right does Tittle say "admittedly" rather than "allegedly"? He will reply that the historical criticism has established this fact, completely ignoring the opposite view of scholars of the first rank like Zahn and Robertson. He illustrates the method of the higher criticism, however, by applying the criterion of his subjective impressions to such texts as Matt. 10, 6. Is this utterance, he asks, really "an echo of the mind of Jesus? Is it not rather an echo of that bitter conflict in the early Church which was precipitated by the bold and disturbing universalism of St. Paul?" (p. 82). As for the meeting with the Syrophenician woman, "at this distance it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to guess just what did happen in this admittedly difficult case" (p. 51), and since our Lord's harshness towards the Pharisees accords as little with the milk-and-water Christ of the critics as His words to the Syrophenician, Tittle regards it as "important to remember that the terrific 'woe chapter' of Matthew was written long after the death of Jesus (at a time when the relationship between Christianity and its parent, Judaism, was sorely strained) and that it was written by a man who, if Professor Bacon is right in his conjecture that he was a converted scribe, may have been not altogether free from that bitter bias which so often appears in an apostate" (p. 48). From all of which it is clear that Jesus in this volume is not pictured in the light of the Gospel-story, but as He appears in the distorting medium of the modernistic reflector. Even sayings which the historical criticism unanimously accepts as genuine, such as the directions of Matt. 18, 16. 17, are rejected by the Yale lecturer because Jesus in the same gospel "recognizes that a recalcitrant brother should be forgiven until seventy times seven"—a specimen of criticism which not only offends by its arbitrariness, but by its total lack of comprehension for the motives urged by our Lord for admonition and discipline. Yet this is cited by Tittle as proof that "Jesus, like the rest of us, occasionally fell short of perfection" (p. 20).

But what, in the opinion of this Modernist, *does* Jesus mean "after nineteen centuries"? "Sincere and fearless," "one who champions the principles of Jesus where the fighting is the fiercest," a man of "dauntless moral sense," are some of the characteristics applied on the jacket of the volume to E. F. Tittle. We have not discovered in the entire volume a statement or sentiment the utterance of which in our day would require courage or "virile championship." A modern audience of intellectuals does not gird at pacifism. Tittle calls upon

Christians to refuse participation in war. But does such a pronouncement require courage? Dr. Fosdick, some ten years ago, announced his refusal to participate in another war, and Dr. Tittle knows full well that such pacifist utterances have not entailed so much as twenty-four hours' imprisonment in a police hold-over. God forbid that we should soon enter another war; but if that calamity should occur, we shall see whether the pacifists of 1932 will fail to bless the arms of American soldiers and speak of their "spiritual mission" and "crusadership" as did the pacifists of 1910 when the "war for righteousness" was declared against Germany in 1917. *Nous verrons que nous verrons.*

Aside from this we are amazed by the assurance with which the lecturer attributes pacifism to Jesus. Tittle's line of thought is familiar to us from the announcements of the Federal Council of Churches. Our Lord extols meekness and peacemaking, demands love for the enemy, a non-resistance of evil, warns against selfishness and covetousness, rebukes Peter for using the sword, and requires the observance of the Golden Rule. From this is deduced the principle that government (whose functions involve the use of force, if it is to exist at all) shall never use armed force in order to defend its land and liberties. On such wretched logic is based the major contention of the book.

It requires no "fearless" dealing with "the challenges of the times" to preach the square deal for the workmen, an altruistic spirit for the capitalist, and a refusal of both to hire gangsters for the safeguarding of their interests. Who is there in this country that would have courage to defend the *opposite*? Yet such superficial and academic pronouncements on the rights of labor and the duties of capital are the climaxes of this book towards which in each section the author works up with a really splendid management of literary and emotional factors. "The mountains go pregnant and give birth to a mouse."

All the interests of the book are centered upon this present life. The other world never comes into view except to be shooed away with a gesture of impatience. How may human beings live together securely, nobly, and happily? So far as the principles of Jesus Christ can aid in the achievement of this purpose, they have a value for our century. The other world does not enter into the discussion. The idea of a new heaven and a new earth is "opposed both to the discoveries of science and to the revelations of history" (p. 140). The kingdom of God is not joy and peace in the Holy Ghost, but cometh with eating and drinking. When Great Britain abolished the corn laws, which were a burden upon the poor (p. 189), and when Gandhi agitates for the uplift of outcastes, Tittle recognizes the onward march of God's kingdom. The League of Nations is an outstanding example

of what Tittle considers the growing influence of Jesus Christ. Referring to the protests lodged against Japan for its attack upon China, he says: "For the first time in history a major power is being brought to the bar of world judgment" (p. 115). (David Lloyd George, one of the founders of the League, in October, 1932, with reference to the ravishing of Manchuria, calls the League's reaction "not only a failure, but a ridiculous failure.") Modernism in the volume before us declaims against high protective tariffs (p. 84) and against British domination of India (p. 86), and we are expected to applaud such gestures not only as a "trenchant dealing with the challenges of the times," but as a profound interpretation of Christ's message and the apostolic commission!

If we are to define Modernism on the showing made in this volume, it is that misinterpretation of the Christian Gospel which rules out its entire doctrinal element and which, after arbitrarily selecting from the gospels as genuine some sayings of our Lord and rejecting others, crudely mixes the provinces of Church and State in a stressing of certain general ethical principles, with a careful avoidance of any pronouncement that is out of harmony with a philosophy that centers its interests entirely upon the present life or that would bring the writer or lecturer into conflict with the *Zeitgeist*.

THEO. GRAEBNER.

Die Stellung der Frau in der christlichen Kirche.

Kurz nach Schluß der Delegatensynode im Jahre 1929 brachte das englische Blatt unserer Synode unter der Überschrift „Frauen auf Synodalversammlungen“ einen Artikel, dessen erster Satz in der Übersetzung lautet: „Die Stellung der Frau in der Kirche wurde auf der Synodalversammlung nicht einmal besprochen.“ Dieser Satz ist vielsagend. Gottes Wort hat schon längst entschieden, welche Stellung die Frau in der Kirche einnehmen soll. Dieses Wort Gottes können und wollen wir nicht beiseitesetzen. Darum — so will obiger Satz gleichsam sagen — war eine Erörterung der Sache überhaupt nicht nötig.

Die Stellung der Frau in der christlichen Kirche hat aber schon vielen Kirchengemeinschaften großes Kopfzerbrechen verursacht und ist nur zu oft falsch und schriftwidrig definiert worden. Das kommt daher, daß man das klare Schriftwort nicht achtet und versucht, dem Zeitgeist Rechnung zu tragen. Es ist darum wohl angebracht, daß wir uns mit dieser Sache etwas befassen und die genaue Stellung der Schrift kennenlernen und festhalten, um desto besser gerüstet zu sein, den schriftwidrigen Ansichten, die sich in der modernen Christenheit zeigen, mit aller Macht entgegenzutreten.