

Review of Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, & Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 333 pages, bibliography, index)

By Michael W. Kelley

*Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city. . .*

*The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.*

— *Revelation 11: 7,8 & 13: 1-7*

No book of Scripture is perhaps as important for understanding the church's predicament in the world and in history, whether for good or bad, as the book of Revelation. But for the fierce disputes that surround the interpretation of the book's content, it hardly seems possible that one could fail to understand, from a fairly casual reading, that the church is, and always has been, in a life and death struggle of unimaginable proportions. Especially significant in this respect is the undeniable truth that the church is summoned to live out its calling in space and time on the unshakable premise that the throne of heaven is now occupied by her risen and glorified Lord (see, chapter four), and that it is of no slight interest to him that his church should pass through history with a complete and undoubted devotion to serving her Lord and working for the advancement of his agenda or kingdom in the earth precisely because he now occupies the throne of creation.

This much is certainly true. The purpose of the book of Revelation is meant to confirm to the church that indeed Christ has ascended to the seat of total authority and power and that what he now possesses is at her disposal as she advances through history and throughout the world. She must go forth not looking at matters from the point of view of this world, its difficulties and hardships, but from the perspective of the throne which is the basis of her life and labors. She must see things as God sees them, not as they seem or as they might be viewed from the standpoint of her own experiences. If she does the latter she is liable to become discouraged or, worse, deceived and led astray. It is all the more important, then, that the church should equally understand that her struggle is not merely one of her own, or her Lord's, choosing: she must be aware that war is being waged *against* her, that her foe is resolved, with all that is in his power, to destroy her. "Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." (Rev. 12: 17)

Once we are clear on these matters, it is possible to make sense of the two passages we quoted at the outset. They speak of defeat for the church and conquest on the part of the great adversary. They prophesy of the church in history, but they also offer a warning. This so-called *conquest* of the church is no mere matter of course; it is due to disobedience and covenant unfaithfulness. The church is called to work for the advancement of God's purposes in the earth. She can be defeated only when she

surrenders her responsibility to that task and makes peace with the agenda of the dragon. That agenda is defined by her Lord as the "beast from the Abyss." The beast stands for all the humanistic civilizations and cultures of man in history, and the Abyss, from whence it arises, is the abode of the Lie. Even as the army of locusts-scorpions that emerges from its depths goes forth to perpetrate every false doctrine and heresy, every vile and immoral lifestyle, along with every pretense of goodness, justice and order, so the church should understand and proclaim that the manifold "doctrine of demons" is in accord with the working of Satan and that it is his primary method of destroying the true faith and subverting the work of the church. She must work, then, to oppose and confound the Lie.

Of course, the Lie will not appear as it is, but as truth and a great good for man. The beast will not appear in its true beast-like nature, but as a marvelous benefit to man, to all his life and endeavors. The nations worship and adore the beast because in it they discern justice, order and prosperity. It is the church's responsibility to bring to light what the beast truly is, as God defines it, and to pronounce God's wrath and judgment upon it. So long as she remains faithful to her calling she will "have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they [she] are prophesying ... and [power] to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they [she] want." (Rev. 11 : 6) These actions were taken in past times by God's servants against mighty and apostate civilizations, against, that is, every pretension of humanistic men with their God-disobeying and God-defying cultures. They typify what a faithful church can and will accomplish now in a similar manner against the attempts of ungodly men who wish to destroy God's kingdom purposes in the earth.

However, when we read the next verse, Rev. 11: 7, the one we quoted, things appear disturbingly otherwise. Instead of confounding and defeating the apostate purposes of the kingdom of man, just the opposite occurs. The witness of the church, her great task in calling down the powers of heaven to overturn and defeat the rebellion of man, is silenced ("killed") and nothing seems to remain of her nature as an agent of God but her external appearance ("dead bodies") which, having become devoid of life, is nothing but a corpse. Outwardly, the church carries on its institutional pretense of being the people of the enthroned Lord, but inwardly she no longer possesses what she needs in order to be a witness of life - neither Truth nor the Spirit. When this happens she has surrendered<sup>1</sup> her calling to be God's servant and has taken up friendship with the beast. Amiable relations with a deadly foe, however, is folly. The church does not gain from this. Instead, she herself is conquered and left a mere institution with no life and power.

Now why do we mention these important thoughts from the book of Revelation? Because, as Bradley Longfield's excellent book *The Presbyterian Controversy* so eloquently demonstrates, the church neglects or ignores the warning of her Lord to her own peril. It is perhaps not his intent, but it certainly does not take much reflection to see that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in this country, which had early in the nation's history offered a strong Calvinistic and Reformed witness, surrendered her

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<sup>1</sup> Some translations read, "when they have finished their testimony," thereby suggesting that what is meant is that "when the task is completed or fulfilled." But the meaning is quite otherwise: it should read, "when they have *ceased* or *surrendered* or *given up* their responsibility to bear witness on God's behalf and on behalf of his kingdom." The latter means a total covenant witness to man's sin and God's judgment on every aspect of his life that shows his self-conscious disobedience to God and to his sovereign word. The witness of the church is never to the church, it is to God in the fullness of his agenda for man. It includes a complete civilizational and cultural purpose, and wherever man resists bringing all his culture and civilization under God's authority, there the church must vigorously press His claim. But if the church itself should decide that, for whatever reason, it can no longer serve God's purpose as the instrument of his kingdom according to his word it will not be ignored, but it will come under his judgment which, as indicated, means abandonment to the world in its civilizational and cultural humanism (the beast). All that remains to any church that apostatizes is its outward form which, to all intents and purposes, is nothing more than a lifeless corpse.

responsibility to the truth of God's word and in its place substituted the word of man. In other words, it became enticed and subverted by the Lie from the Abyss. The result is all too plain, for, as Longfield remarks in his Introduction, the so-called mainline churches, of which the Presbyterian Church was at one time one of the most prominent, has suffered a catastrophic loss of membership. However, far worse has been this Church's acceptance and vigorous promotion of every heresy popular with modern humanistic men, whether it be abortion-on-demand or life-styles or socialism, etc.. So far, indeed, has the Presbyterian Church become polluted by the worldly ideals of the beast that one does not exaggerate in saying that she is no longer a church of Jesus Christ in any true sense. She is, instead, nothing more than a "synagogue of Satan" (another important description in Revelation). One can see that she carries on as an institution, but so far as Scripture is concerned she is nothing but a corpse rotting in the street.

It is not, of course, Longfield's purpose to depict for us the slime into which the Presbyterian Church in recent years has descended. Rather, it is his intent, as a historian, to recount for us the time in this Church's recent past (1922-1936) when a great struggle was waged that would determine which faith would take control of the soul of this denomination -the venerable faith of her Calvinistic and Reformed forefathers, or the faith of modern, enlightenment man with his new and infallible *science* that would no longer permit him to believe in things like the virgin birth, the divinity of Christ, miracles in Scripture, the resurrection of the dead, as well as a whole host of other outdated and credulous superstitions. As to what this Church eventually *would* come to believe in, well, at this period she only wanted it made plain what she could *not* believe in, and yet, at the same time, wanted all the world to believe that she was still a *Christian* church. All this did not come about, however, without a lengthy and intense battle between those who would preserve the historic Christian and Reformed doctrine and those who would cast it aside for a *Gospel* more in tune, so they thought, with modern man and his needs.

Most readers know, of course, which faith triumphed in the Presbyterian Church. It was the faith of "modernism," of enlightenment humanism, that won the "controversy" and laid the course for the coming decades. This episode has been well recounted in numerous books and articles, and anyone who has taken a course on modern church history in seminary knows it well, or should. But what is of interest in Longfield's account is how clearly he makes the case that rather than it being the "modernists" who simply led the church in this new direction, it was more the so-called "moderates," those who professed adherence to the traditional doctrine, who were primarily responsible on account of their compromise with and willingness to tolerate the new humanistic religion in their midst, who did more to sell out the historic faith of the Church and allowed liberalism's *Gospel* to gain control. They did so, as anyone can discern from his pages, because they wished to preserve the Church as an institution more than they fought to defend the honor and truth of God's word. So far as they were concerned, liberalism's Gospel was something they were willing to accommodate if it meant preventing a split in the Church. On the other hand, the "fundamentalists" were seen as disturbers of the Church's peace and prosperity, and the moderates would rather remove them from influence, if not from membership, if it were the only way to save the institution. In other words, "surrender" was their agenda. The results are plain for all to see.

What makes Longfield's book so interesting is that he presents the *dramatis personae* of the controversy in a much fuller light than is usually done in works on this subject. Each chapter discusses in fairly lengthy detail the upbringing and cultural, as well as theological, background that undoubtedly helped to shape the thinking of those who were the leading voices of the three positions described in

the subtitle. This enables the reader to see the differences more clearly and to understand better why the Presbyterian Church was not well served by those who claimed to be its chief spokesmen.

It is usually thought that the controversy was merely one between J. Gresham Machen, the voice of orthodoxy, and Henry Sloane Coffin, the mouthpiece of liberalism. In fact, the issues were more complex, as his inclusion of men like Clarence Macartney, William Jennings Bryan, Charles Erdman and Robert Speer attest. These latter, while some appeared to represent the concerns of orthodoxy as others that of moderation, were clearly incapable, for whatever reason, of seeing the clear choice that existed between the Biblical orthodoxy of Machen or the new humanism of Coffin. Macartney and Jennings appeared to stand closer to Machen on some points, but in fact would not or could not see that the Biblical faith he fought for required a total doctrinal commitment and could not be compromised at any point even if it meant the death of the Church. They would not go that far. Erdman and Speer, on the other hand, while protesting their agreement with Machen on all points of doctrine, in fact were nothing more than evangelicals who despised doctrine and proclaimed a simple "love of Jesus" message which, they imagined, the liberals held to as well. They loved the prestige of the institution more and would rather save it than the system of truth handed down by their Reformed and Calvinistic forefathers. Their theology was, in this respect, closer to liberalism with which they made common cause, than with orthodoxy.

What shows this book to be important is the fact that it portrays, in readable prose, not merely what happened to an historic Christian Church as an event merely of academic interest, but what in fact has been happening in Christian churches, including Presbyterian and Reformed churches, over the last century and is still happening today. It is that a lack of serious commitment to sound doctrine is paving the way for apostasy because the forces of mushy evangelical moderation show a great willingness to compromise with the forces of humanism that emanate from the beast and that the church as an institution in the estimation of most churchmen takes priority over the truth of doctrine and the integrity of God's covenant word. What happened to the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is but one example of what is still taking place in many churches today. Reformed churchmen need to reexamine the controversy of that earlier period in order to reconsider the relevancy of the issues to our own day. Longfield's book is a event merely of academic interest, but good place to start.