SET APART

THE NATURE & IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL SEPARATION

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CHAPTER SEVEN
LIBERALISM

Why do people believe what they believe? One basic reason is the authority they appeal to. In medieval Europe, the authority was the institutional church and the Bible as interpreted by the church. The church was assumed to have the answer to every problem, not only in religion but also in philosophy, politics, and the arts as well.

During the Reformation of the 1500s, leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin demonstrated that what the Roman Church declared was opposed to what God had said. They argued that the Bible, God's Word, was an authority sufficient in itself to reveal God's message. "Scripture alone" was a central theme of the Reformation. At his famous appearance at the Diet of Worms, Luther told Emperor Charles V and his court, "Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning—unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, *I cannot and I will not retract*, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. *Here I stand; I can do no other; may God help me. Amen.*"[1]

The Reformation's stress on the Bible, however, did not end the debate about religious authority. During the Age of Reason in the 1600s and 1700s, human reason began to displace the Bible as an authority, and it is in this post-Reformation era with its stress on reason that we find the roots of the many movements that are part of what is called liberalism.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF LIBERALISM

Sometimes the Age of Reason is referred to as the Enlightenment, a reexamination of all knowledge in the light of human reason. "We ought never let ourselves to be convinced," philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) wrote, "except on the evidence of our reason."[2] During the Enlightenment people looked to reason, not the church or the Bible. Leaders of the Enlightenment especially viewed science as providing the surest way of discovering truth. Some thinkers of this period claimed to be Christians looking for what God had to say, but they maintained that they would find God's Word not through revelation (the Bible) but through reason.

But how exactly does reason work? More particularly, where does knowledge come from—through mental processes or through our senses and experiences? Philosophers debated these questions. Descartes said that pure reason alone was enough. He believed, for example, that he could prove his own existence by the very fact that he thought. "I think, therefore I am" was his famous declaration. Scotsman David Hume (1711–76), on the other hand, said that only experiences received through the senses could provide knowledge.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) suggested an answer to this dilemma. He agreed with Hume that sensory experience was necessary for scientific knowledge—knowledge about things in time and space. But Kant also said that reason played a role in knowledge. The human mind combines sensory experiences with *a priori* understandings (facts perceived as true before and apart from experience) to formulate valid scientific knowledge. The mind plays a role in shaping sensory experiences into knowledge. Furthermore, Kant said there is another realm beyond time and space, a realm of ideas, or "things in themselves." Here reason cannot operate, for there is no "data" for reason to examine. Faith is the only way to understand these "things in themselves," and one cannot demonstrate the truth of faith through scientific or mathematical proof. Instead, Kant said, the realm of things in themselves is validated by what he called "the categorical imperative," roughly the conscience, a universal sense of right and wrong.

We have greatly simplified Kant's ideas here, but his views sparked a revolution in philosophical thought. Important to our discussion is how Kant's ideas spurred the growth of religious liberalism. Kant says

that the things of God (e.g., His existence and attributes) are not perceptible to the senses. They lie in the realm of things in themselves, a realm of faith where reason cannot operate. Faith, in other words, cannot be based on rational proof.

Kant's views had two important consequences for religious studies. First, he made whatever exists within the realm of the senses fair game for applying reason. We cannot know anything about God from reason, but we can apply rational methods to the study of the Bible as one of the phenomena available to our senses. In fact, according to Kant's scheme, we can thoroughly criticize the Scripture without damaging faith. Second, the appeal to the categorical imperative based religious truth on something *within* humans and their experience. Religious truth was not something revealed to humans from above but from inside humans themselves. Also, because religion is inward, it is ultimately about morality. Kant said that "true religion is to consist not in the knowing or considering of what God does or has done for our salvation but in what we must do to become worthy of it,"[3] a position exactly opposite to the Bible's teaching about grace.

Other ideas were combined with Kant's philosophy to shape modern religious liberalism. We mentioned in the previous chapter how Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution shook the intellectual world after *Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Also, German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831) popularized a scheme in which history was viewed as moving civilization along a path of inevitable progress (a view Karl Marx revamped as the basis for his theory of communism). The ideas of Darwin and Hegel led scholars to assume mankind's inevitable progress as virtually a law of science. These concepts of Kant, Darwin, and Hegel—religious truth being internal to man, evolution, and the inevitability of progress—contributed significantly to the rise of liberalism.

RATIONALISM AND HIGHER CRITICISM

At first, cautiously in the 1700s, rationalistic Bible scholars began to scrutinize Scripture with the professed goal of discovering through historical research a solid foundation for religious belief and practice. Not surprisingly, the result was not certainty but a confusing and contradictory range of human opinions.

Scholarly study of the Bible is often called criticism.[4] Lower criticism, also called textual criticism, is the study of the surviving manuscripts of the Bible. Textual critics endeavor to determine the exact wording of Scripture by a careful study of all available manuscripts. Higher criticism is the study of the content of the Bible and deals with questions of authorship, date, and literary structure. Despite its name, biblical criticism is not necessarily critical in the sense of being disparaging. A Bible-believing scholar who studies the manuscripts of the Bible or carefully studies the content and structure of a book of the Bible also engages in biblical criticism in the sense of being analytical about the text. A believing scholar, for example, might conduct an intensive study of the epistle to the Hebrews to argue that the apostle Paul was or was not its author. Nevertheless, liberal higher critics approach the Bible with human assumptions that undermine its authority. On this point R. A. Torrey wrote, "It is often said that we should study the Bible just as we study any other book. That principle contains a truth, but it also contains a great error. The Bible it is true is a book as other books are books; the same laws of grammatical and literary construction and interpretation hold here as hold in other books. But the Bible is an entirely unique book. It is what no other book is—the Word of God."[5]

Nineteenth-century higher criticism took different forms. For instance, borrowing ideas from Hegel, Ferdinand Christian Baur suggested that Christianity had an evolutionary development. Baur said that originally Christianity was a kind of reformed Judaism, represented by Peter. This system clashed with Greek philosophy, represented by the teachings of Paul. The resulting synthesis became early Christianity. Another popular investigation was the "search for the historical Jesus." Critics assumed that the New Testament accounts of Christ were encrusted with legends. Therefore, they sought to rediscover the "true" Jesus of history. "Unreasonable" teachings about Christ's miracles, virgin birth, and deity were eliminated until critics had created a first-century philosopher/teacher who had little similarity to the Christ of the Gospels.

The Old Testament received similar treatment. Critics particularly sought to uncover the various sources allegedly used in compiling the books of the Old Testament. The most famous example is the critical treatment of the Pentateuch. Building on the work of earlier scholars, Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) theorized that the books credited to

Moses (even by Jesus Himself) were actually written over a period of centuries by combining different sources. The two oldest sources, although still not going back to the time of Moses, each used a different name for God: *Jehovah* and *Elohim*. These sources were called "J" and "E." A later source from the era of King Josiah added the legal requirements, such as those found in Deuteronomy, so it was called "D." Finally, after the Babylonian captivity, a team of priestly editors brought all these sources together into the five books we know today. This priestly work represented the "P" document. Underlying all of this study—Old Testament and New—was an evolutionary view of history. Critics argued that Judaism and later Christianity had developed from simple, crude systems of belief into more complex forms. They did not believe God gave a complete revelation to His people.

Nineteenth-century liberalism put a strong emphasis on morality and good works. For example, Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89), following Kant, said we cannot really know or prove the "facts" (or doctrines) of Christianity. All we can know are the value judgments we make about those facts. For example, we cannot know that Jesus Christ made an atonement for our sin to the Father. All we can know is that Jesus' death moves us to love as He loved and to serve others. Ritschl therefore also represented the liberal tendency to stress building the kingdom of God on earth.

The climax of nineteenth-century liberalism came in Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack believed that Christianity had a kernel of truth covered by a husk of legend, and he saw his task as removing the husk. Harnack reduced Christ's teaching to three main principles: the need to proclaim and establish the kingdom of God, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all men, and an ethic of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.[6]

Even this brief survey of liberalism reveals many ways it deviated from the Christian faith. The authority of the Bible was first discarded and then everything else that was "unreasonable"—the miracles recorded in Scripture, for example. Liberals assaulted the biblical presentation of the person and work of Christ. Jesus was no longer God incarnate but simply a man who was "divine" in the sense that He had a superior conception of God and God's will. His death was not a payment for sin but an example of sacrificial love. Liberals believed that God dwelt in all His creation in some fashion. Therefore, in every

person there existed a "spark of divinity." To become a child of God only required fanning that spark into a flame.[7]

LIBERALISM IN AMERICA

Religious liberalism was far advanced in Europe before it came to America. Before the Civil War, the only important form of liberalism in the United States was Unitarianism. The Unitarians denied the deity of Christ, His atonement, and other essential doctrines, but their views were largely confined to their own denomination. After the Civil War, liberalism began to invade the major evangelical Protestant denominations.[8]

Liberalism in America appeared first in the schools of higher education. Baptist William Newton Clarke (1841–1912) is often said to have written the first liberal systematic theology in America, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (1898). Even more influential was William Rainey Harper (1856–1906). As president of the University of Chicago, he made that university and its divinity school a major center of liberalism in the United States. Even before the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, conservatives criticized the liberalism of the University of Chicago and founded conservative seminaries to counteract its effects.[9]

LIBERALISM IS NOT TRUE CHRISTIANITY, AND WE SHOULD TREAT IT AS WE WOULD ANY FALSE TEACHING.

From the schools, liberalism went into the pulpits. Some early liberals began accommodating evolution in their sermons. Henry Ward Beecher (1813–87) was one of the first to try to cross evolution with Christianity. The great pulpit representative of liberalism, however, was Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969), an eloquent and learned defender of liberal theology. His *Guide to Understanding the Bible* was a leading—and readable—introduction to liberal views, and his popular radio program carried liberalism into homes across America. Although a Baptist, Fosdick was serving at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1922, where he preached the sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" and thereby touched off the

Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy within the Presbyterian Church. Fosdick eventually became the founding pastor of Riverside Church in New York, a bastion of liberalism in America.

Another expression of liberalism was the social gospel. The Father of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), taught that the gospel needed to be applied to social institutions. Accepting the teachings of liberal higher criticism, Rauschenbusch redefined the gospel. He denied the importance of the Fall of Adam and Eve (thus ignoring the root of all human sin) and made little of man's need for grace. He acknowledged the need for individual redemption from sin, but he did not refer to the biblical conception of salvation. Instead, he saw sin more as an offense against other people than an offense against God and defined salvation as a process characterized by a life of love and service. Therefore, Rauschenbusch could speak of the "salvation" of social institutions. By this, he meant bringing all social organizations under the law of Christ. The goal of the social gospel was to build the kingdom of God on earth by human effort. Unsurprisingly, the phrase "social gospel" ultimately came to mean a system of social reform that had little or nothing to do with the redemption of souls through the atonement of Jesus Christ.[10]

THE GOAL OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL WAS TO BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH BY HUMAN EFFORT.

The result of the growth of liberalism in the United States was the distortion of biblical Christianity. Neo-orthodox writer H. Richard Niebuhr satirized this liberal message as teaching that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."[11]

EVOLVING LIBERALISM

Considering its evolutionary foundation, it is not surprising that liberalism continued to develop. The first major revision in American liberalism came in the 1930s after the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. Neo-liberalism, as it was called, reacted to changing circumstances. Worsening world conditions—such as worldwide

war, the rise of dictatorships, and the Great Depression—undercut the rosy optimism of the liberals. Further discoveries in archeology and biblical manuscripts likewise undermined some of the "assured results" of nineteenth-century higher criticism. Fosdick symbolized this transition to neo-liberalism in 1935 when he preached a sermon titled "The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism." Neo-liberalism was more realistic, not naively optimistic, and addressed the concerns of the common man but not that common man's need of salvation.

One of the most important expressions of liberalism since World War II has been the ecumenical movement. *Ecumenical* means "universal" or "worldwide." The ecumenical movement attempted to unite all churches on a liberal basis through organizations such as the World Council of Churches and (in the United States) the National Council of Churches. Ecumenists (those who support the movement) downplay doctrine and call for tolerance of many viewpoints. One organization promoting the movement, for example, took as its motto "Doctrine divides, but service unites." In recent years, liberal ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches have even welcomed non-Christian religions.

Each new variety of liberalism seemed more radical than the last. Terms such as "theology of hope," "process theology," and "secular theology" were bantered about in scholarly circles. The depths or radicalism seemed to be reached in the 1960s with the short-lived "death of God" theology, an extreme form of secular theology that argued that the concept of God has no relevance for modern man and should be abandoned.[12]

In the 1960s, liberal theologians mixed religious and political radicalism in attempts to make their theology more relevant. Liberation theology is an example of such a political theology. Borrowing heavily from Marxism, liberation theologians argued that God was on the side of the poor and oppressed. Therefore, Christians must devote themselves to relieving oppression, even to the point of supporting violent revolutions. Liberation theology had great appeal among Roman Catholic theologians in Latin America and black theologians in the United States. Feminist theology combined liberation theology with a growing interest in gender-related views of history. Feminist theologians argued that history was the story of female oppression and that theology was a tool for ending that oppression. Feminist

theologians rejected traditional Christianity as being the product of a biased, male-dominated, patriarchal society.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, liberalism faced a challenge from postmodernism that denied the liberal ideological basis altogether. Postmodernism rejected the rationalist basis of the Enlightenment that has characterized much of Western thought since the 1700s. Contending that human reason does not lead to a unified view of reality and that scientific study is not a sure means to truth, postmodernism took Kant's ideas about how the individual perceives reality and made "truth" a matter for the individual: "There are no facts, only interpretations." Postmodernism therefore denied the validity of liberalism's supporting structure but proved no friend to orthodox Christianity either. Liberalism looked to the collective knowledge of humanity as an authority whereas postmodernism preferred the interpretations of the individual as the authority. Many spin-offs of classic liberal theology, such as feminist theology and black theology, relied on postmodernist ideas.[13]

POSTMODERNISM DENIED THE VALIDITY OF LIBERALISM'S SUPPORTING STRUCTURE BUT PROVED NO FRIEND TO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY EITHER.

EVALUATION OF LIBERALISM

Liberalism is certainly more diverse than fundamentalism, but all forms of liberalism place human authority above biblical authority. Even postmodernist systems that reject the Enlightenment's belief in science and reason still base authority on the individual's reason and perceptions.

The question is, "What is our starting point—divine authority or human reason?" As Christians, we believe that the revelation of God is superior to human reason. Is the Bible the revelation of God? If you argue this point by reason (as some conservative theologians have tried to do) to show the reasonableness or authoritativeness of Scripture, you are claiming that human reason must prove that the Bible is God's revelation.

Roman Catholics appeal to the authority of the church to establish the Bible's authority, but Bible-believing Protestants look to the self-authenticating Scripture itself. The mind and the ways of God are beyond human comprehension (Rom. 11:33–34). On this point Immanuel Kant was right. The basis on which a person accepts God's Word as true is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Paul explained this matter when he wrote, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). For the Christian, reason must presuppose faith. In the words of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I know—that unless I believed, I should not understand."[14]

The denial of biblical authority is at the root of liberal errors. Liberals saw their rational conclusions about religion as authoritative, or they looked to the Bible as it inspired religious experiences, which were then authoritative. Either way, the authority lay within man and not in God's revealed Word. Liberalism therefore discarded teachings that did not accord with reason or were not validated by the liberals' own religious experiences. As a result, they discarded the cardinal doctrines of the faith.[15]

Jesus said of false teachers, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). The moral bankruptcy of liberalism is an example of such fruit. The early liberals were often very moral. Some modernists supported prohibition in America with as much fervor as the fundamentalists. But liberalism has grown more immoral through the years. Acceptance of sexual relations outside of marriage, the ordination of homosexuals to the ministry—these and other fruits reveal the true nature of liberalism. Jude aptly summarized the moral character of such false teachers: "Clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 1:12–13). As Jude says, they "walk after their own ungodly lusts" (1:18).

Liberalism is, in short, "another gospel." When Machen wrote his great defense of orthodoxy, he did not title it *Fundamentalism and Liberalism* but *Christianity and Liberalism*. When Clarence Macartney preached a sermon in response to Fosdick's "Shall the

Fundamentalists Win?" in 1922, he did not title his message "Shall the Modernists Win?" but "Shall Unbelief Win?"[16] Liberalism is not true Christianity, and we should treat it as we would any false teaching.

Though it may seem presumptuous to judge the eternal destiny of professing Christians, the seriousness of such false teaching should not be underestimated. If, as the Bible says, doctrines such as the incarnation of Christ (2 John 1:7–9) and His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12–19) are essential to the Christian faith, then individual liberals are, to say the least, in a precarious position. As Machen wrote, "We are not presuming to say whether such and such an individual man is a Christian or not. God only can decide such questions; no man can say with assurance whether the attitude of certain individual 'liberals' toward Christ is saving faith or not. But one thing is perfectly plain—whether or not liberals are Christians, it is at any rate perfectly clear that liberalism is not Christianity."[17]

CHAPTER EIGHT
NEO-ORTHODOXY

As fundamentalists and modernists battled for control of the major denominations in the 1920s, another system of theology was beginning to criticize liberalism. Neo-orthodoxy ("new orthodoxy") claimed to reconcile orthodox Christianity with the revolution in thought brought about by the Enlightenment. "The fundamentalist has something to say to his world," said one neo-orthodox writer, "but he has lost the ability to say it. The modernist knows how to speak to his age, but he has nothing to say."[1] Although neo-orthodoxy was not orthodox, it did have a significant effect on American religion, including conservative Christianity.

BACKGROUND OF NEO-ORTHODOXY

Neo-orthodoxy described itself as "orthodoxy rethought and reinterpreted for our times."[2] The neo-orthodox did not question scientific theories such as evolution, and they accepted the results of rationalistic higher criticism. Nevertheless, they argued that liberalism had abandoned the essential truths of Christianity, such as a notion of sin, the transcendence of God, and the need for redemption. Neo-orthodoxy revived the language of orthodoxy, but its critics charged that it changed its meaning in the process.[3]

The forerunner of neo-orthodoxy was Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). Called the Father of Christian Existentialism, Kierkegaard, like Kant, had a belief system that is complex and difficult to summarize. In brief, according to existentialism, existence is the basic truth of life. We find meaning in