

©2016 BJU Press
All rights reserved.
Further reproduction prohibited without the permission of the publisher.

SET APART
THE NATURE OF
IMPORTANCE OF
BIBLICAL SEPARATION
MARK
SIDWELL



JOURNEYFORTH
ACADEMIC
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

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

life not from external authority but from within ourselves, from our own decisions and actions. Because life has no purpose or meaning, we create our own meaning by our actions. At its most extreme, existentialism holds that truth is completely subjective. There is no such thing as absolute truth; each individual develops his or her own truth.

The desire to find meaning in life apart from reason gave rise to Kierkegaard's so-called Christian existentialism. Kierkegaard agreed with Kant that reason cannot lead people to God. He believed that an individual must make a blind leap of faith and commit himself or herself to God without—or even in spite of—reason. Then and only then can a person live an authentic Christian life. Because this leap of faith is often the consequence of a major internal crisis, some refer to neo-orthodoxy as the theology of crisis.

KARL BARTH

The thinking of Karl Barth (1896–1968) was important in formulating neo-orthodox theology, and he was probably the most conservative of the major neo-orthodox leaders. If Barth cannot bear up under scriptural scrutiny, then it is unlikely that any other major leader of neo-orthodoxy can.⁴

Born in Switzerland, Barth attended seminary in Germany, where he embraced liberalism. While serving as pastor of a church in Switzerland, however, he found idealistic liberalism inadequate to

AT ITS MOST EXTREME, EXISTENTIALISM HOLDS THAT TRUTH IS COMPLETELY SUBJECTIVE.

meet the needs of his people during the troubled era of World War I. During a great inner struggle, Barth wrote a commen-

tary on the book of Romans (1919) that became the first major document of neo-orthodoxy. Later, as a university lecturer and prolific writer, Barth remained the leader of the movement.

Barth rejected many ideas of liberalism. He denied natural theology, for example, saying that God cannot be known through nature by human reason. Instead, he argued that God is “wholly other,” completely transcendent and set apart from His creation. Only as God reveals Himself can anyone know Him. Rather than having a

spark of divinity in our hearts, as liberals claimed, humans are sinful and separated from God. Only as God chooses to reveal Himself to an individual can he or she be saved from sin.

These concepts sound orthodox, but there was also a “new” side to Barth's teachings as well. The main problem is that neo-orthodoxy had an inadequate view of Scripture. The Bible was not an inerrant revelation of God. Instead, it was simply a witness to revelation, a means God could use to communicate His revelation to humans. Only as God meets with the individual as he or she reads the Bible does it become God's Word to that person. Barth's view of Scripture is revealed in a 1934 conversation he had with American evangelical Donald Grey Barnhouse:

“You say that the Bible is the only source of revelation, but do you believe that all of the Bible is God's revelation?”

Dr. Barth had a book in his hand. He divided a page with a gesture of his hand and said, “If this part of the Bible speaks to me, it is God's Word to me.” And then indicating the other part of the page, “If this part does not speak to me, it is not God's Word to me.”

That is enough to make some people's hair stand on end, but I was convinced that there was something more than appeared upon the surface of his speech, so I said, “But Doctor, suppose the part that hasn't spoken to you really speaks to me. Is it then God's Word?”

“Certainly,” he replied. “It is then God's Word for you.”

“And do you believe that the part which is God's Word to me may someday become God's Word to you?”

“Of course. Anything in the Bible may become God's Word to me.”⁵

Because he viewed the Bible as an errant, human book that only testified to God's Word, Barth accepted the idea of historical criticism of the Bible. In fact, he claimed God's power was revealed in His ability to use such an error-filled book of human origin to convey His revelation to man.

Barth and the neo-orthodox also seemed to teach two kinds of “history.” For Barth, biblical events such as Christ's resurrection took place in the realm of “super history” but not necessarily in the world

of everyday events. In other words, Barth could say Christ truly rose from the grave without meaning that the resurrection occurred in the same historical sense that Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 did.

When Barth visited the United States in 1962, evangelical theologian Carl Henry attended a question-and-answer session with Barth in Washington, DC. Henry introduced himself as editor of *Christianity Today* and asked about Barth's belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Noting the many reporters present, Henry asked whether there would have been anything to report had they been present at the resurrection. Henry asked, "Was it news in the sense that the man in the street understands news?"

Rather than reply to the question, Barth replied angrily, "Did you say *Christianity Today* or *Christianity Yesterday*?" Barth then asked sarcastically if photographers could have taken pictures of the virgin birth. The risen Christ, Barth said, appeared to believers only and not to others.⁶

Evangelical Bernard Ramm staunchly defends Barth against the charge of believing in two kinds of history and cites examples from Barth's writings,⁷ but Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til argues just as strongly that Barth did make such a distinction, quoting extensively from Barth.⁸ Barth's writings are so complex that it is difficult to determine what sort of history he believed in. Reading Barth is like looking at a piece of abstract art with each viewer seeing something different in the picture. However, even if Barth did not believe in two "kinds" of history, no one denies that he was still willing to view parts of Scripture as "myth" or "saga." For example, he did not believe that Genesis 1-3 was historical. Consequently, the Fall of man was not the result of a real individual named Adam eating from a real tree in a real place called Eden. Humanity was naturally sinful because human beings are separated from God and have always been separated from God.

There are additional problems with Barth's theology. His view of the Trinity, for example, sounds a great deal like the ancient modalistic heresy, which said that the persons of the Godhead are simply three manifestations of the same being. Likewise, some of Barth's comments sound as though he believed that everyone will ultimately be saved (universalism). Here we have focused on Barth's views about which there is little debate even from his defenders. His view of

Scripture and his denial of the historicity of Adam and the Fall indicate in themselves that his "neo-orthodoxy" is unorthodox.

OTHER NEO-ORTHODOX LEADERS

Other notable neo-orthodox theologians include Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1889-1966), who emerged in the public eye about the same time Barth did. In fact, he was initially better known in America than Barth and introduced neo-orthodoxy to the United States.⁹ Brunner disagreed with Barth about the role of natural theology. Whereas Barth said that God revealed Himself only through the Bible, Brunner claimed that God could reveal Himself through other means, such as nature or history. Brunner also helped popularize the major neo-orthodox concept of revelation as "personal" rather than "propositional." In other words, God reveals Himself personally to an individual. He never reveals Himself through propositions, that is, statements of fact about Himself. Hordern illustrated Brunner's view this way: To say that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, is not revelation. It is only a proposition that points to revelation because it points to Christ.¹⁰ Concepts such as God's holiness and almighty power do not reveal God but only point to Him.

Two other influential representatives of neo-orthodoxy in the United States were the brothers Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1970) and H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962).¹¹ Their version of neo-orthodoxy is sometimes called realistic theology because it takes a more realistic view of human nature than traditional liberalism does. Ryrie suggests that Reinhold Niebuhr represented the neo-orthodox preservation of the social gospel because he was so concerned with social ethics.¹² Niebuhr's writings deeply influenced both Martin Luther King Jr. and President Jimmy Carter. Although willing to acknowledge the truth of man's sinfulness, Niebuhr denied the biblical basis for human sin, criticizing the "absurd notion" that "man's sinfulness is determined by the Biblical account of the fall of Adam." Niebuhr argued instead that the reality of sinfulness "is supported by overwhelming evidence taken both from a sober observation of human behavior and from introspective analysis."¹³ In a manner typical of neo-orthodoxy, Niebuhr redefined biblical terms, such as saying that original sin "is not so much an inherited corruption as an inevitable taint upon the spirituality of a finite creature."¹⁴

Another notable theologian sometimes associated with neo-orthodoxy is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45). A German theologian who was a student of Barth, Bonhoeffer was caught up in resistance against the Nazis and was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Because he died before his ideas were fully developed, it is difficult to know how to classify him theologically. In the 1960s, however, the “death of God” theologians claimed his writings as their inspiration.¹⁵

EVALUATION OF NEO-ORTHODOXY

Neo-orthodoxy has serious shortcomings. As is the case with liberalism, neo-orthodoxy has an inadequate view of the authority of Scripture. The truly orthodox Christian can never accept the relativistic view of revelation reflected in statements such as Horderm’s: “God’s Word never consists of black marks on the pages of a book called the Bible; God’s Word is the living Word which he speaks through the Bible and to which man must respond by saying yes

or no.”¹⁶ The authority for religion, according to neo-orthodoxy, lies within the individual as God speaks to him or her.

Neo-orthodoxy finds

“truth” in the Bible

without allowing Scripture itself to be true. For instance, the neo-orthodox may agree that the story of Noah reflects the truth that God hates sin but they do so without believing that the ark, the animals, and the worldwide Flood were actually true. Such word games lead Charles Ryrie to conclude, “Neo-orthodoxy is a theological hoax. It attempts to preserve the message of the Bible while denying the facts of the Bible.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, neo-orthodoxy often sounds good. Consider, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr’s blunt and accurate critique of liberalism, quoted in the previous chapter. Many evangelicals likewise quote Bonhoeffer’s indictment of “cheap grace”: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without

church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹⁸ Can this perhaps be a pointed way of stating the principle that Paul enunciated: “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace?” (Rom. 6:15).

But as Cornelius Van Til notes, “Final alliances and final hostilities depend upon the content rather than the sound of words.”¹⁹ Revelation is not simply personal but is also propositional. Propositions do not save, but they describe the Person who does. One writer observes that

orthodox theology has always recognized the necessity of a personal encounter with God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Mere knowledge about God cannot save the soul. A saving revelation of God must be such a personal revelation of Him and by Him to the heart as will impart new life and yield faith in Christ. But this personal revelation must have an objective and verifiable basis.²⁰

Neo-orthodoxy is subjective. It does not provide believers anything outside of themselves on which to base their faith. To the neo-orthodox it is thoughts, feelings, and convictions that provide the source of faith, but this reliance on internal emotions is unscriptural. Peter says that although he and the other apostles had seen and heard Jesus Christ, they and other believers “have also a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19). Scripture, which “came not in old time by the will of man” but was the result when “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (1:21), is more certain than any experience, even that of an eyewitness.

Likewise Luke, in the opening of his Gospel, mentions that many had attempted to write an account “of those things which are most surely believed among us” (Luke 1:1). Far from arguing that a written account cannot communicate the revelation of God, Luke tells Theophilus, “It seemed good to me to write unto thee in order [literally, to write out in order for you] . . . that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (1:3–4). The idea of faith being a leap in the dark, as Kierkegaard maintained, is completely unbiblical. “In Bible Christianity faith is not a leap in the dark. It is a step into the light.”²¹

Although you are probably more likely to meet an outright liberal than an adherent of neo-orthodoxy, there are good reasons for being aware of the dangers of this movement. First, neo-orthodoxy is an example of subtle error. (Indeed, the reason you think you have never met anyone who is neo-orthodox may be that it is so hard to tell.) Jesus warned against wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). The fact that someone uses correct terminology and criticizes other false teachers does not necessarily mean that he or she believes the truths of the Bible.

Furthermore, some supposedly conservative evangelical Christians have embraced neo-orthodoxy. We have mentioned already how noted evangelical writer Bernard Ramm staunchly defended Karl Barth in his book *After Fundamentalism*. Ramm says that Christians should adopt Barth's methodology though not necessarily his conclusions.

Some evangelicals have followed a form of the neo-orthodox teaching about Scripture. For instance, John Woodbridge says Jack Rogers and Donald McKim in their study of inerrancy take a neo-orthodox view of the history of doctrine. He does not accuse Rogers and McKim of being neo-orthodox but of using the neo-orthodox approach to describe inerrancy as a newly invented doctrine.²² Some evangelicals go further. Theologian Donald Bloesch, although critical of some aspects of neo-orthodoxy, writes, "It can be shown that I stand partly in both neo-evangelicalism and neo-orthodoxy, even though I belong mostly to catholic evangelicalism."²³ Neo-orthodoxy

THE FACT THAT SOMEONE USES

CORRECT TERMINOLOGY AND

CRITICIZES FALSE TEACHERS DOES NOT

NECESSARILY MEAN THAT HE OR SHE

BELIEVES THE TRUTHS OF THE BIBLE.

continues to affect
the teachers and
preachers that
Christians hear and
read and thereby
affects church life in
often subtle ways.²⁴

It is not fair to

assume that every-

one who says, "The

Bible contains the Word of God," is neo-orthodox. Some who hold this view believe there is objective revelation from God in the Bible mixed with historical and scientific error. Nevertheless, to discern what in the Bible is really the Word of God, such an individual must

rely on human reason (the traditional liberal method) or on intuition (the neo-orthodox approach). In either case, the human mind is permitted to determine what revelation is, rather than allowing revelation to be the authority in their lives.

Even to call neo-orthodoxy a deeply flawed system would probably be too generous, and evangelicals—not to mention fundamentalists—should be wary of it. Perhaps some orthodox believers have been attracted to neo-orthodoxy because of its reputation for scholarly orthodoxy. But the neo-orthodox system, as we concluded about liberalism in the previous chapter, is not biblical Christianity. As one critic put it, neo-orthodoxy is the new modernism.