

The Changing Face of Liberalism

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Liberalism is a school of theology which denies virtually everything in the Bible, especially the supernatural, and attempts to understand God and nature from what it deems to be scientific investigation (what man is able to look into and find out on his own) rather than from revelation, especially the idea that we can know only what God has chosen to make known to us.

This is why liberals were quite excited about Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species*, when it was published in 1859. They thought, quite mistakenly, that science had finally disproved the Bible, and that a new paradigm could at last be developed for understanding God and the world. Darwin's book was soon overshadowed by the growing popularity of higher criticism, a field of study which embraced the notion that the Bible is not the inspired and therefore inerrant Word of God, but simply a collection of ancient writings by human authors, and that the text itself contains vital information, which could be gleaned by careful study, about who really wrote these sixty-six books and why. Darwin's evolutionary theory, along with this higher critical perspective, became the working hypothesis for liberalism, now also called modernism, and for the way that this school would study the Bible.

One might wonder why liberals do not simply abandon the Church and declare themselves to be unbelievers, along with so many others who do not attach themselves to any particular religion, but liberals would rather see Christianity as something that can be changed, as something that changes with them, than as something unalterable, than as something that is unprepared to accommodate itself to their own spiritual journey and outlook.

Classic liberalism may be traced back to the teaching and published works of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher who lived in Germany and influenced the way that many scholars thought from the late 18th century, and well into the 19th. Their influence made a significant impact on theologians, particularly, and, largely through the seminaries, liberalism gained popularity when it was openly taught from many pulpits. Starting in Germany, it quickly spread to France, England, America, and then even to remote outposts of the foreign mission field.

The 20th Century

A large portion of liberalism re-invented itself as a movement which came to be known as neo-orthodoxy in the first half of the 20th century. Two of the biggest names of this movement were Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Many Christians were genuinely delighted when some of their earlier writings were first published right after the First World War, supposing this to be a conservative movement and a refreshing change to the open attacks on the Bible from liberals in pre-war times. The sigh of relief was short-lived, however, when the faithful discovered that, while they recognized the evangelical vocabulary used, the language itself took on a very different meaning. For instance, neo-orthodoxy does not regard the historicity of events to be important. Its leaders and proponents insist that the virgin birth of Christ, to give but one example, is still significant as an idea even though in their view it is mythological, that it is theologically relevant whether it really happened or not. Moreover, neo-orthodoxy does not believe the Bible to be the Word of God, but that it contains the Word of God, or even becomes the Word of God when and where God Himself chooses to make it so. This does not mean, however, that this new school should in any way be considered as middle ground between liberalism and genuine orthodoxy. Still rejecting the Bible, it focuses on subjective experience (what they call the mystical divine-human encounter) rather than objective truth (anything written) as a means of determining what can be known.

Another large portion of liberalism re-invented itself in the second half of the 20th century, this time as a movement (tied in with a prevailing philosophy of the world) known as postmodernism. Lesslie Newbigin and John Shelby Spong are among its best-known leaders and most prolific authors. If modernism struggles to know the truth, searching for the historical Jesus between the lines of the Bible, postmodernism endeavours to analyze why every such attempt is fundamentally flawed. Truth cannot be known, according to this view, partly because it is constantly changing (nothing is absolutely and ultimately true), and partly, too, because it is culturally determined (our understanding of anything is, at best, based on a very limited number of ideas that we have at any given time; someone else, operating out of a different set of ideas, will arrive at very different conclusions). So, nothing can really be known for sure, nor is anything that is believed even more likely to be true than anything else.

The common denominator in all these schools of thought, and what unites them despite their apparent diversity, is the denial that truth can be stated objectively, that it may be set forth propositionally, and that it is so expressed, therefore, in the Bible. If the liberal is absolutely sure of

anything it is that there are no absolute truths, except of course for this one absolute truth that there are no absolute truths! Such a view is intended to rule out the God who is described in the Westminster Shorter Catechism as “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

Regrettably, the trend continues. Those who have itching ears are not satisfied with finding and pursuing “old paths”, but, like the ancient Athenians, are anxious for hearing and telling “some new thing.” The latest chapter in the storybook of liberalism is called contextualization, and this, as all the evidence shows, is the liberalism that we will have to do battle with in our generation. Contextualization is a term that was coined by Lesslie Newbigin in 1972, and it refers to the practice of adapting the message of the Bible generally, and the gospel specifically, to culture. In reality, this is something that goes back much earlier than 1972, and yet what has been happening since then is particularly worthy of careful attention.

The 21st Century

So far in the first half of the 21st century, and arising largely out of Newbigin’s postmodernist writings, contextualization (the driving force behind the Missional Movement) has been deployed on two main fronts. The first is to be seen in the emergent churches, as they are called, which front in broad brush compares to the radical and bold manoeuvring of classic liberalism some 150 years ago; the second is to be seen in the somewhat more conservative evangelical churches, which front bears greater resemblance than one would immediately suspect to the subtle approach of neo-orthodoxy some years later.

Quite a bit has been written on the subject of contextualization, either defining or defending it, but much of that is rather unhelpful because it is not always well understood. Nevertheless, contextualization is one of the main tools of today’s liberals to convey their message and to use the Bible against itself.

For instance, contextualization is often the vehicle for blatant eisegesis, the art of manipulating a text of scripture in order to impose one’s own ideas upon it, ideas which are not only different from, but diametrically opposed to, what the text actually says. These ideas, however, are represented as coming from the Bible, and are purported to be what the Bible does in fact teach. This is what makes it so dangerous, and a gullible, biblically-illiterate

generation such as ours is often only too willing to believe it. This takes us from “leaving out” and “watering down” to a shameless and deliberate corruption of the biblical text itself. This has long been practised by the cults, particularly, but most recently we find it in the writings of advocates in mainline churches for homosexuality, a relatively new wing which has been added to theological liberalism.

Some years ago, Joe Dallas wrote a book that he called *The Gay Gospel? How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible*. In it he wrote, “It’s not kosher to directly attack Jesus Christ or the Bible... Instead, modern attacks on the person of Christ and Scripture come in the form of revisions, rather than direct thrusts... The pro-gay theology’s scriptural arguments are, therefore, basic revisions of the biblical texts traditionally understood to forbid homosexuality.” I am not certain that it is considered not kosher any longer to attack Christ and the Bible directly – I think now it is – but revisionist accounts of the Bible abound, and Dallas makes an important point that is still valid today. Several times the Bible speaks in clear and very direct opposition to the sinful and perverse practice of homosexuality, and on one such occasion (1 Cor. 6:9-11) it says, “Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites ... will inherit the kingdom of God.” It seems, though, that the pro-gay advocates within the liberal camp have managed to deceive a great many people by their carefully worded and very persuasive revisionist accounts of this biblical teaching, and so have provided us with an extreme but not uncommon form of contextualization.

Conclusion

If we were to do away with current attempts of contextualizing the gospel, what would be left to reach people with the greatest news that the world has ever heard? Men would still have everything they need, by the grace of God, to be made wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and be thoroughly equipped unto every good work.

(1) They would have the Bible, which in its simpler passages is plain enough to be understood on its own. If everyone had his own Bible, and in his own language, he could study and interpret it for himself. This is a better method of learning the Word of God than having to receive it only from “experts” who in too many cases have their own agenda. This latter method was used by the Roman Catholic Church before and after the Reformation, relying on the dubious interpretations of priests, and we have seen enough church history to know that that simply does not work. Let us not go back to

it.

(2) They would have the Holy Spirit who testifies to and with the Bible in men's hearts as they read it. No one can stop this sovereign work of the Spirit, or thwart His holy and gracious purpose. This is the reason that the Word of God does not return to Him void, but accomplishes all that He sends it out to do. Pray for this work of the Holy Spirit.

(3) They would have the faithful, exegetical preaching of the cross, preaching which explains even the more difficult passages and is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe. And, like the Bereans of old, those who sit under such preaching can know whether it is faithful by comparing what they hear to what they have already learned in reading God's Word for themselves, even if it is but the simpler passages that they know.

(4) They would have the testimony of changed lives, of Christians who are animated and driven out to the ends of the earth by the joy of the Lord; "and there can be little doubt that the exuberant joy of the early Christians was one of the most potent factors in the spread of Christianity" (*Spiritual Depression*, D.M. Lloyd-Jones). 1 Pet. 3:15, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts (i.e. be completely devoted to Him) and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." Are not these joyful Christians the very people who are asked concerning the reason for the hope that is in them? We may be sure that anyone without that joy will not be asked.