

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Liberal Christianity

written by Bob DeWaay

During the last century, many Protestant denominations have embraced religious liberalism as their guiding theology. There are numerous theological issues that separate liberals from conservatives such as belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, miracles, the virgin birth, and even the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I am convinced, however, that there is an underlying difference in perspective and purpose that causes liberalism to be what it is and people to embrace it. My own experience with liberal Christianity is exemplary of some of the problems.

During the summer of 1967 I attended a church youth camp sponsored by the large, protestant denomination in which I was raised. I had joined the church at twelve years old after being trained with the others of my age in its teachings during a series of requisite, doctrinal training sessions. We loathed these sessions because they consumed precious Saturdays during the school year. At sixteen I did not like to think about God, faith and the Bible much because my many doubts caused uneasiness and distress. The Biblical world of creation and miracles seemed so foreign to the natural world I experienced daily and was learning to understand through science and the theory of evolution.

I prayed occasionally, "God, forgive all the sins I have ever committed, Amen." Driving on an icy road would prompt such a prayer. It never hurts to cover one's bases. However, it seemed that the doubts grew stronger and the thoughts of God and religion weaker as the months and years of youth progressed. The church camp forced my mind back to the issue of my faith in God and the Bible. To say no to faith seemed too evil and risky and to say yes too insincere.

At the end of a religion class at camp, I stayed to discuss something (what I no longer remember) with the pastor who was the instructor. Something I said caused the pastor to ask, "You don't believe that the Bible is literally true do

you?" I responded, "I thought I was supposed to." He assured me, "There was no Noah, Jonah, Adam and Eve, or miracles of Jesus. These are just stories meant to inspire us to be good people." I was simultaneously embarrassed that I appeared so naive and relieved that I now had no reason to feel guilty about my doubts. I resolved to no longer concern myself with religious matters and proceeded whole heartedly with the pursuit of scientific knowledge. I later enrolled in Iowa State University to study science and joined a country club where I spent my Sunday mornings playing "skins" with my Catholic friends who attended Saturday evening "sinner's mass."

To me, liberal Christianity lacked a compelling reason for being religious. In making one feel better about his or her self by redefining the issues, liberalism leaves one without a means of resolving the problem. It narrows the gap between the sinner and God by asserting that the sinner is not so bad and that God is not so high and holy. God is not that different from nature and neither are we, according to liberalism. We can celebrate life with one another and God without all the categories of which the conservatives are so fond. The golf course seemed to me to be the perfect place for "celebration."

What is Liberal Christianity?

This denomination did not begin as a liberal movement. Its founder was a conservative, Bible preaching evangelist who emphasized the substitutionary work of Christ and our need for holiness. Liberal churches rarely were originally established by liberals. Liberal churches are often conservative churches that have lasted enough generations to become liberal. Why does this happen so often? Why are many great, "evangelical theological schools," such as Princeton, as they are today? Dr. James Bultman of Northwestern College of Iowa wrote that of three thousand five hundred higher educational institutions that began with "significant, religious commitment," only

one hundred twenty five are now truly Christ-centered.¹

Liberal Christianity is often conservative Christianity as practiced by the grandchildren of its founders. Liberalism by nature is not very evangelistic. Imagine a street preacher announcing, "There is no heaven or hell . . . The Good Lord (whoever He/She or It may be) . . . would never send anyone to Hell (which of course does not exist) . . . we must celebrate our diversities by doing whatever comes natural to us and by letting everyone else do the same . . . it matters not what we do or believe, only that we exist and feel good about ourselves." If this message is true, then whatever we already do and believe is fine and there is no reason to change. If there is no reason to change, there is no reason to become religious, attend church services, or listen to sermons that tell us what the newspaper and Time magazine are already telling us. Pagans have little reason to join a liberal church that tells them that their paganism is just fine. It takes less effort to be a non-religious pagan.

However, people who were raised in a church are often different. The music, stories, friends, social interaction, and familiarity of religious symbols and holidays become very comforting and comfortable for those who have spent most of their life with them. Many who grow up in church and leave during college years, come back after they become married to raise their children in a church so they can get religious training. This may be true even of those who would not claim to believe the Bible. Christian liberalism is often what has become of a conservative church that now exists for reasons far different from those for which it was founded.

The Key Issue

The difference between liberal and conservative Christianity is not just the subscription to certain key doctrines. At the beginning stages of liberalizing a movement, its leaders continue to claim faith in the Bible and endorse the creeds and statements of faith of the movement. The founders of the movement had rightfully created these to insure its orthodoxy. Since personal belief and practice change more easily than official documents and ordination requirements, it is only after

decades or even centuries of liberal faith and practice that even the most brazen liberal leaders suggest publicly abandoning the creeds of the church. It is much easier to keep the terminology and change its meaning.

We know that this is possible since people with divergent concepts of deity use the word “god.” Francis Schaeffer discusses this in [The God Who is There](#). “*To the new theology, the usefulness of a symbol is in direct proportion to its obscurity.* There is connotation, as in the word *god*, but there is no definition.”² One can recite the Apostle’s Creed during liturgy every Sunday morning and enjoy the familiarity and continuity it brings, but not believe a word of it; or the words can have new meanings that are incompatible with those of the original authors and not explained publicly. It is like reciting the creed with one’s fingers crossed.

Therefore, the subscription to certain doctrines and creeds does not differentiate liberalism from conservatism in theology. The preaching and practice of evangelical movements change years and even generations before official doctrine changes. A better gauge for judging the degree in which the trend toward liberalism has “progressed” (“regression” or “digression” better describe liberalism) in a given movement is that of *perspective*. **Liberalism sees the happiness of man as the primary purpose of life and religion.** Over against this, **conservative, Biblical Christianity sees the glory of God and our obedient service to Him to that end as the primary purpose of life.** The presence or absence of one or the other of these perspectives determines much of what we will ultimately be willing to believe.

Not long ago I saw a televised, secular news report that documented the ordination service in which a Bishop of a large denomination ordained an openly practicing homosexual into the ministry. Included was video of the man’s male lover embracing him in happiness over his ordination. The secular news media was encouraged at the openness and progress shown by the church. What drives liberal Christianity to the position of endorsing homosexuality when the Bible states, “and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own per-

sons the due penalty of their error.” (**Romans 1:27**)? If the purpose of life and religion is the happiness of man, if the testimony of man is accepted as authoritative about what will make him happy, and if the homosexual testifies that homosexual behavior is necessary for his happiness and well being, then the clear teaching of Scripture on this must be ignored or redefined to accommodate the over-riding purpose of one’s happiness. On this and many other issues, this humanistic perspective drives doctrinal and ethical decisions for liberals.

The famous liberal preacher of early part of the twentieth century, Harry Emerson Fosdick, wrote:

*Jesus has immeasurably heightened man’s estimate of his own worth and possibilities . . . It was not so much by his teaching, however, as by his life that Jesus wrought this heightening of faith in humankind. In himself he carried our human nature to such heights, so unveiled in his own character what manhood was meant to be, and by his life of divine sonship so challenged men to claim their spiritual birthright as children of God, that he has created new standards of estimation about mankind’s worth and possibilities.*³

Religious liberalism often sees the purpose of Christ as heightening our awareness of human potential. That the wrath of God is directed against rebellion and sin caused by human depravity is anathema to liberals. This perspective causes a changed understanding of the purpose of the work of Christ. The New Testament teaches a substitutionary atonement that saves sinners and appeases the wrath of God: “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (**Romans 5:9**). Yet many liberals ridiculed the shedding of blood for the remission of sins as “slaughter house religion” and hymns about the blood of Christ were expunged from hymnals and replaced with ones less offensive to modern, humanistic sensibilities.

The doctrine of eternal judgment also suffers from the onslaught of liberal thinking. If the purpose of life is the happiness of man, then God would be exceedingly unjust if He eternally condemned people to hell for merely doing whatever made them happy. Many think hell not to be real, but an imaginary abode in the minds of superstitious ancients. Hell is doubtless the most talked about “place” that was ever deemed not to exist! If people do not believe in hell, why do they keep verbally wishing one another to be sent there? Liberalism says that hell cannot be because it would cause unhappiness and thus transgress the purpose of all being.

Justice to the conservative demands the punishment of sin. We do not think ourselves worthy of the boundless love of God shown when He sent His own Son to live a sinless life and die for us who deserved to die. God’s justice demanded payment for the wages of sin, but His mercy caused him to pay the price for us. Justice and mercy come together in the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. “For all have sinned and fall short

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of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (**Romans 3:23-25**). When liberals speak of justice, they rarely have in mind sinners bound for hell, saved through Christ’s blood satisfying God’s justice and revealing God’s mercy. They prefer to emphasize human fairness issues. Injustice to the liberal involves certain humans not finding happiness because of societal and environmental problems. Justice is to be administered by society or government through social engineering designed to guarantee that everyone gets their own happiness however they define it.

It is true that the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, speaks of justice as it pertains to human relationships. How one treats his fellow man (justly as opposed to unrighteously) is important. “You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place

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a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly" (**Leviticus 19:13-15**). The reason for laws like these concerns Israel's covenant relationship to God. It was in obedience to God that they were called to act justly in their relationships to one another and to the alien. God does care about us and about our welfare and the best way to achieve this welfare is through faith in God and obedience to His moral laws.

God directed these laws to the individual. The liberal perspective that says to the individual, "You are a victim of injustice, you should demand justice," expresses a different attitude. The law of God tells us to treat our neighbor with love. This attitude comes first from our relationship with God - we must love Him. Loving God is expressed in obedience, not just words (**1John 3:18**). To do any of this requires first coming to God on His terms and entering the necessary covenant relationship.

Coming to God and demanding justice is not the way to do this! How would you feel going to God and saying, "I demand justice, I want what I have coming to me."? If you would feel a little queasy about that, you are in good company. David said, "And do not enter into judgment with Thy servant, For in Thy sight no man living is righteous" (**Psalms 143:2**). We come to God primarily for mercy because strict justice would destroy us sinners. When liberalism demands justice for humans, it assumes that the temporal happiness of the person is the primary purpose of life, and that injustice is the deprivation of opportunities for happiness. Man is considered more deprived than depraved. They speak of justice but claim there is no hell. Hell is an expression of God's justice, heaven of His mercy. "God have mercy on me a sinner," (**Luke 18:13**) will always be an appropriate prayer. "I demand what I have coming," is a dangerous prayer; one we might hope God does not answer. Yet liberal Christianity continually promotes the idea of demanding one's rights. "You are not as happy as you should be and it is someone else's fault," is the essence of the message.

Conservative approaches to Christianity are not against people being happy, but claim that happiness is a by-product,

not a goal. Happiness is a by-product of the forgiveness of sins, right relationship to God, and obedience expressed through the love of God and others. To die to oneself, and one's supposed right to happiness is to find the abundant life of Christ. "Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it" (**Luke 17:33**). Justice in human relationships is how one treats the people with whom he deals. This includes neighbors, employers or employees, family, church members, and even strangers.

Because one must answer to God ("For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body" **2Corinthians 5:10a**) it does matter how he treats his fellow man. Obeying God is a means of worshipping and glorifying God. God's glory is the purpose of life and God is not glorified by neglecting the widows and the fatherless (**James 1:27**).

However, even the widow and the fatherless must love God and others. There are no exemptions from the law of God granted to some on the basis of hardship. God extends His mercy to all who call upon Him in faith. All are able to find their purpose in life - to glorify God through loving, obedient service. The story of the widow's mite (**Mark 12:42-43**) shows this. If it is more blessed to give than receive (**Acts 20:35**), this widow was blessed. If one's purpose is to find happiness in this life and finds himself in an unhappy situation, then the liberal approach creates sorrow but no real hope. The liberal can only say, "we can only try to make your ride through this life as smooth as possible, we know of no eternal redemption, resurrection of the body and future system of reward and punishment that will rectify things."

Liberalism And

These same perspectives, the happiness of man or the glory of God, drive many other issues. Liberals eventually question the authority of Scripture because there is so much in the Bible that is offensive to "modern sensibilities." Many Biblical themes do not make modern man with his humanistic value system happy. "How could a loving God do the things the Bible says He did?" they ask. The implied answer to this rhetorical question

is, "He could not." They therefore reason that the Bible cannot be the inerrant Word of God. There are other reasons given for rejecting the Bible, such as supposed historical and scientific errors. It is interesting to notice that as archeology and other sciences have recently confirmed much of the testimony of Scripture, the liberals are not flocking back to the Bible. They find another ground for rejecting it.

Liberalism and Worship

Worship songs reflect the attitude and theology of their writers. "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me" (Charles Wesley). This was not written by one who saw the temporal happiness of humans as the be all and end all of life. In American literature classes the sermon Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God is often required reading, even in public schools that allow little else that is Christian. This sermon is used to show the supposed oppressive mentality of early American preachers. It is read as an historical oddity that makes us thankful that we live now rather than then. The wrath of God is no longer an appropriate topic, since we have "grown" to a more modern, "enlightened" view of things.

We now often sing about how great we are, as opposed to how great He is. Today I heard a Christian worship service on the radio in which the worship leader was telling the congregation how blessed God was that the congregation sang to Him and how beautiful their praises made them look to God. We sing of our glory, our victory and how happy we make God when we sing these lovely songs. Slick instrumentalism and professional choreography belie the spiritual paucity of the words being sung. How far we have come from Biblical times when people feared being consumed in the presence of God (**Hebrews 12:29**). In the New Covenant we come by a new and living way (**Hebrews 10:20**); but this ought to cause sober contemplation of God's glory and our unmerited participation in His community of faith; not the pompous, self-laudatory giddiness reflected in many modern "worship" songs.

Liberalism and Relevance

Liberals often accuse theological conservatives of being irrelevant. They assume that conservatism is driven by a naive, "obscurantist," desire to make things simpler than they really are. Because liberally oriented denominations have been around a long time and have more theologians with advanced degrees and more institutions of higher learning, it is assumed that learning and sophistication of necessity lead to liberalism because it is a more compelling description of reality. Supposedly this intellectual sophistication is necessary to make religion relevant to today's worldly citizens. Liberalism by definition seeks "liberation" from the way things have been. Liberalism "liberates" and conservatism "conserves." Since the world has become more complex and the amount of available information more massive, supposedly sophisticated, liberal thinkers are more relevant to people today.

The irony of this is that to most people nothing could be more **irrelevant** than the writings of sophisticated theologians such as Paul Tillich. Tillich is famous for his "method of co-relation" that tailors theology to the questions people are asking. The problem is that only a tiny minority of people can read Tillich. I recently had a systematic theology course in which we had to read something from Tillich. It caused moans and groans from the students who considered it the most obscure and confusing of the many required readings. If students doing graduate studies in theology cannot understand this liberal who strives for relevance, then to whom is he relevant? Evidently to a few highly sophisticated American and German theologians who comprise far less than one percent of all Christians.

In comparison Billy Graham, who is considered a simplistic fundamentalist by technical, theological standards, speaks to crowds of thousands. They hear him speak of sin, redemption, and the expectation of Christ's bodily return and many respond in faith. Who is relevant? Theological liberalism is irrelevant because it mostly "converts" Christians from a previous generation of evangelicalism. The sons and daughters of "naive fundamentalists" seek a higher level of sophistication as do their offspring until the "evangelical" church of a previous generation has become the liberal church of today. My

childhood denomination has lost thousands (now into the millions) of members in the last thirty years.

Meanwhile new, conservative, Bible believing groups have grown by reaching people with that hated message of God's wrath averted through faith in the offensive gospel of a crucified Messiah. The conservative message will always be relevant because it speaks to man's greatest need (sin leading to eternal death) and God's provision (salvation and eternal life). Humanity has not changed in its basic moral and spiritual essence throughout the centuries. Nothing stored in the data banks of modern learning can make the truths of scripture obsolete or irrelevant.

Evangelicalism and Liberalism

What evangelicals today need to realize is that their movements are now in the process of becoming tomorrow's liberal denominations. This happens through a change of perspective and purpose. For example, the word "wretch" has been removed from the version of *Amazing Grace* played on evangelical radio stations so that the "self-worth" of the listeners will not be damaged. Many popular preachers and authors write books promoting "self-esteem" (defined as "pride" in any dictionary published before 1975) as the basic need of mankind. If my basic, essential need is to feel good about myself and have a high opinion of my self, then I do not need Biblical Christianity. I had both of those attitudes when I quit the church and joined the country club.

It was the supernatural intervention of God that showed me that my positive estimation of my self was based on self-delusion and not on the truth. It is troubling to hear evangelical teaching that would indicate that I was closer to God on the back nine on Sunday morning feeling great that I shot a couple strokes above par than I am in church singing of my wretchedness and need for the unmerited grace of God revealed through Christ crucified. I need to hear sermons that convict me and drive me to repentance and faith. This causes the purpose of glorifying God through obedient service to get back on to the front burner from where it is so easily pushed.

The answer to the liberalizing trend is the message of the cross. The cross shows the judgment and mercy of God. It shows

the seriousness of our problem, and condemns sin in the flesh. It shows that God's glory must be manifest and our personal happiness put to death. It shows that we are so wretched that only death (Christ's substitutionary death for us and our death through faith to our old selfish way of life) can remedy our problem. It also shows the power of God through the Holy Spirit to raise the dead unto newness of life. It is impossible for this to become irrelevant to humans of any century.

End Notes

1. The Classic, Northwestern College of Iowa's quarterly publication, Spring of 1993. Editorial by Dr. James Bultman, president.
2. Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who is There, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968) page 58.
3. Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Modern Use of the Bible, (New York: Macmillan, 1924) as cited in Readings in Christian Theology, Vol 2 Man's Need and God's Gift, Millard J. Erickson editor, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) page 268.

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