
LIBERALISM, NEO ORTHODOXY & EVANGELICALISM

A. LIBERALISM

1. BACKGROUND

It would be helpful if we had both some philosophical background as well as theological background.

Philosophically, as you probably know, the age of the enlightenment was a mega-shift in the way intellectuals viewed the whole process of acquiring and analyzing knowledge. Rene Descartes lived from 1596-1650 and was a very important figure in reshaping the way people conceived of the certainty of knowledge that we have. Descartes, in an attempt to arrive at certainty, proposed this procedure of utilizing methodological doubt. Doubt anything that can be doubted. He used examples of why we should do this. When you put a stick into water, it has the appearance of being bent, so you take the stick out and you realize it is not bent; it is straight. You can't trust your senses. You can't trust authority. You all have had experiences, I am sure, in which you have been told something you thought was reliable, and you've come to find out that what you learned was not true. It is possible that people are wrong when they tell you things; it is possible that your senses deceive you. Descartes took this very seriously and took it as far as he could, all the way to the point of doubting everything except the fact that there was something doubting. There was something there that was doubting. So he came up with his famous phrase, "Cogito ergo sum", I think therefore I am. That is the one thing he said we can have certainty on. Descartes' purpose was to break down to the bare minimum of what is certain so that he could build up a whole lot of knowledge based upon that.

The problem with his method is that nobody followed him in terms of the building up part of it. They followed him on the tearing down part, that is, the uncertainty of everything that we thought was so sure. People were not confident that you could build from the mere ego, the "I" or that you could know anything for certain in life. Descartes based his building up on this notion that God wouldn't deceive us, and people recognized that. Descartes, rather than leaving a legacy of certainty, which he was trying to do, left a legacy of doubt. This is one of the great legacies of the early enlightenment period.

David Hume (1711-1776) followed a very different track. Descartes was a *rationalist*. All of this was approached through reason, as he is thinking about these things. David Hume was a radical empiricist. As an empiricist, David Hume followed the notion that we should only accept as true what we could know with certainty from our senses, from empirical observation. That led David Hume to say that there is nothing we can know with certainty from empirical observation. Not even something like a pool table, with a ball hitting another ball that goes into the pocket. That looks clear cut; the pool stick hits the cue ball, and it hits the eight ball into the pocket. It looks like it is clear that we know the cause of the ball going into the pocket. David Hume says, what does a cause look like? How big is it? What color is it? How much does it weigh? Show me a cause. So how can we know the cause of something? It is not empirically verifiable. All we can know is a certain sequence of events. We can't say that one ball caused the other to go into the pocket of the pool table. We can just say this happened, and then this happened. This was the sequencing. David Hume was a radical skeptic as it came to knowing things in life and left a legacy of skepticism through empirical observation. So here we have these two great traditions in the enlightenment, of *Rationalism* and *Empiricism*, and both have the effect of bringing about tremendous skepticism in the culture where there used to be confidence that there could be certain knowledge

The philosopher who brought all of this together, who brought a synthesis of this rationalist and empiricist tradition, was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Immanuel Kant rejected both a strict rationalist and a strict empiricist approach. In his "Critique of Pure Reason", he's arguing that there have to be certain categories in the mind in order for sense data to be understood. Here I am, looking at this room and I see various persons, at least I think I see people here; I see colors, shapes and hear sounds. Kant asks the question, how is it that an individual perceiver can perceive what he or she sees; why these shapes; why these colors; why these sounds; what is happening?

Kant argues that there are categories in the mind that take the sense data and shape it into the perceived picture that I have in mind's eye as I look out here. That doesn't mean that the data out there are this way; how could I know that? How could I know that there really are people in this room? All I can know is my sense experience of it as it is shaped by the categories of my mind. Kant also talked about certain mechanisms of the mind. He called them "intuitions," like cause and effect; time and space. For Kant there is no time and space outside the mind. There is no temporal succession of moments. Causation is one of the categories of the mind that would account for how we understand the pool table example. It is categories of the mind that do that. He has an explanation for Hume and he has an explanation for Descartes on these things; they get shaped by the mind on these. What Kant did was separate two realms; there is a *phenomenological* and the *noumenonal* realm. The *phenomenological* realm is the realm of what appears to be the case, things as they appear, and the *noumenonal* realm is the thing as it is in itself. According to Kant, these are two totally different realms divided so that we cannot know the thing in itself; that is the *noumenonal* realm. What we know is our phenomenological experience. What we know is what we see and hear. When asked the question, if my mind shaped these things into the actual picture that I see, why is it two people or three people or ten people or a hundred people can look at something and agree on what they are seeing? Kant's answer to that is the uniformity of the human mind. Because we are human, we have the same categories. These categories work in the same ways among human beings. We can know that we have all had the same experience of that and that is accounted for because of the commonality of the human mind.

Kant, in particular, is very important to the background of theological liberalism because Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is considered the father of modern liberalism, was very influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Schleiermacher applied this distinction, this *phenomenological* and *noumenonal* distinction to religion.

The cultural and intellectual climate of the enlightenment had major influences on biblical and theological studies as well. There was no longer a respect for the authority of the church or the authority of the Bible. The legacy of the enlightenment is a legacy of skepticism regarding anything that had been accepted in the past as true. Something like the Copernican revolution, insofar as we used to think back in the "good old days" that the sun rose and went around the earth, but now we know better; we know that we can't trust what we see. Even though the sun rises in the east and sets in the west; it isn't really. It looks that way, but it isn't really what is happening. The earth is rotating on its axis, and as it rotates it gives the perception that the sun is moving across the sky. We can't trust what have been told in the past. We can't trust what we see. We can't trust Church authority We can't trust Bible. The only thing that we can trust is our own perceptions.

There is a sense in which we move from an age of revelation, whether through the Church or through Bible, to an age of reason. This reason is a chastened (humbled?) reason, according to these enlightenment figures, particularly Kant. A chastened reason, is a reason that should realize its own confines in doing what it does. We move from revelation to reason as the source of authority. Therefore, when we come to the study of the Bible there is no longer the right to assume that the Bible is historical, truthful, or revelatory. Instead we treat it like any other book or set of books. We treat it like any other set of historical documents and subject it to critical scrutiny. The whole rise of higher criticism as it relates to the Bible came out of this enlightenment skepticism.

2. SOME KEY FIGURES

A. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768-1834)

Almost anyone writing on the history of liberalism will credit this individual as Liberalism's father or the one who began the Liberal tradition. Schleiermacher rejected what he viewed as speculative natural theology; we can reason from this empirical world to a God who created. Schleiermacher viewed all that natural theology as speculative and totally inappropriate for enlightened individuals to conduct. He also had a critical view of Scripture. His own view that he adopted of the Bible was following the line of critical scholarship that rejected it as authoritative revelation. Instead, the Bible is "*dear and precious*" religious writings from a particular religious history which happened to be Jewish and Christian. The big move that Schleiermacher made was evoking of cause distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realm in saying that this applies to religion as well. We cannot know the thing itself. We cannot know the noumenal realm; we can't know God in himself. It is impossible. All we can know is God as he appears to us; God as we experience him. Do we understand the knowledge of God as fundamentally a matter of acquiring objective information via revelation or is it subjective understanding that is simply a part of our experience? Is knowledge of God objective fundamentally or subjective fundamentally? The whole classical tradition in theology has said we know God in himself because he has revealed himself; whether it is in nature or in the Bible, God has revealed himself so there is objective revelation of God by which we know God. Schleiermacher rejects revelation, has a higher critical view of the Bible, and more importantly, has this Kantian distinction. All we can know is the phenomenological experience of God. Schleiermacher defines religion, then, as "*our feeling of absolute dependence*". This is what true religion is. It what we feel; what we experience about God not some kind of supposed objective truth claims about God.

B. ALBRECHT RITSCHL (1822-1889)

For Ritschl, Jesus was the supreme embodiment of God's consciousness and dependence. Right away you can see how he takes from Schleiermacher this notion of *feeling of absolute dependence*. What marks Jesus as being particularly significant, noteworthy, an example to follow? In Jesus Christ of Nazareth, you see the greatest example that has been lived of this God consciousness. He did it better than anyone else. Jesus, while being threatened by hostile forces, trusted God's power and love in his life. As such, Jesus is the archetypal man; he is the epitome of what humanity is meant to be. In terms of studying the life of Jesus, there was a need, then, to discover or to get at this archetypal person, to get at exactly who he was. When that was done we would find in the end that he was this archetypal man. Claims to deity, and claims to the miraculous were stripped away.

When you got to the archetypal man, Ritschl argued that what you find most prominently at the center is the moral Jesus, the ethical Jesus, the Jesus who loved others, cared for the poor, and reached out to the needy. This moral Jesus is the archetypal man who we are to follow.

C. ADOLF VON HARNACK (1851-1930)

Harnack was raised in the home of an orthodox Lutheran scholar and was himself greatly influenced by Ritschlian liberalism. Von Harnack came to see orthodox doctrine as wrongly preoccupied with specific doctrinal teachings and standards of belief, rather than getting at the thrust of what Scripture was trying to get at: to teach us a way of life. We have a moral responsibility to live out the ethic of the kingdom, according to von Harnack. He argued that as we read the Bible we have to separate out the husk. If you think of a grain of wheat, we need to separate the chaff or the husk and blow it away to keep the kernel. For him, the kernel was the ethical core of the Bible's teachings. He said that if we understand that, then we will see much more clearly.

Liberalism, among other things, was very optimistic about human well-being. There is very strong optimism that this liberal gospel message of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man would have the effect of bringing in the kingdom, that is, a utopian society on earth.

B. NEO-ORTHODOXY

1. BACKGROUND

Neo-Orthodoxy stands as a deliberate rejection of 19th century and early 20th century liberalism, in the religious and moral crisis associated with World War I. Liberalism rejects sin, and rejects depravity. There was this tremendous optimism. Then suddenly World War I hit and people realized with greater technology comes even more devastating cruelty and harm and devastation that could happen to human well-being. World War I provided a tremendous reason for reevaluating the optimism of liberalism.

2. SOME KEY FIGURES

A. KARL BARTH (1886-1968)

Karl Barth was trained in classical liberalism. He studied under von Harnack. For Barth, as he began to write his Romans commentary he came to terms with the bankruptcy of liberalism and the truth of God's word in Romans that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). He came to terms with this and he talks about publishing his Romans commentary, rejecting liberalism, and upholding this new orthodoxy, hence Neo-Orthodoxy. He said it was "*as though he was groping for a rope to hang onto*" as he was writing the commentary on Romans. When he found the rope and pulled on it he didn't realize that at the top of the rope was a bell that sounded and a whole countryside was awakened. Barth's commentary on Romans was, in fact, an awakening to a whole community of liberals who were dissatisfied with liberalism and shifted over to Neo-Orthodoxy. Barth himself rejected that we could not know God. He reinvested theology with the concept of revelation. He has this very high view of God, a lofty view of a self-existent, self-sufficient, all perfect, supreme holy God who creates a world and reveals himself to this world. This revelation is most prominently in the person of Jesus. Christ is the revelation of God, and the Bible is a witness to that revelation. (This is where his view begins to break down in terms of what evangelicals would accept. The Bible is a witness to revelation. Not that the Bible is itself revelation.)

B. EMIL BRUNNER (1889-1966)

Like Barth, Brunner affirms the self-disclosure of God as the only basis for theology. In the self-disclosure or self-revelation of God, God makes himself known. Brunner's distinctive emphasis, as it relates to revelation, differed from Barth on the notion that revelation ought to be understood as a personal encounter. He is sometimes called "the crisis theologian" of the Neo-Orthodox movement. Revelation must be a personal encounter. As we read the Bible, God may bring us to the point of crisis in experiencing something of God through the witness of Scripture. Brunner rejected a literal portrayal of Jesus as strictly a human being and insisted that Jesus was at once true God and true man. Barth and Brunner both rejected the *critical view* of Jesus. They rejected the notion that Jesus, rightly understood, is just a man and not God. They held, rather, that he is both God and man. Brunner argued for natural theology, that you could come to know God through looking at nature. Barth was very opposed to the notion of natural theology, believing that only as one entered into faith could one then perceive the world correctly. According to him, one could not argue to an unbeliever, one outside of faith, from the world to God. That is impossible; you have to be in the faith in order to believe in God.

C. REINHOLD NIEBUHR (1892-1971)

Niebuhr was strongly influenced in his early years by social gospel liberalism: do good to others. This is what the gospel is: go and share the good of the kingdom, and they too will share in kind. Throughout his life he was intensely interested with the application of the Christian faith. He wanted to see how this worked in practice. He became convinced that the liberal gospel was a sham because it was founded upon an altogether false anthropology. It was founded upon a false view of the fundamental goodness of human beings. He came to see with orthodoxy the reality of people as sinners, as desperately wicked people who needed to be changed by God. Humanity is in this paradoxical state as created good by God but desperately wicked as sinners. Or believers are in this paradoxical state desperately wicked as sinners but now as saints called into the kingdom of God. He argued that there had to be this paradoxical understanding of human beings and not a uniform understanding. Humans are not all bad and not all good. Neither one of those would do full justice to who we are.

C. EVANGELICALISM

1. BACKGROUND

20th century evangelicalism or the evangelical movement is marked by perhaps the founding of Fuller Seminary or Christianity Today or Carl Henry's little book, "The Uneasy Conscious of Modern Fundamentalism", which is from the late forties. Evangelicalism as we know it is a second half of the 20th century movement.

What was before that? Before that it was Fundamentalism. In Fundamentalism we have a movement of orthodox theologians who share in common, with later evangelicals, all of the fundamentals of the faith. The virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the doctrine of the trinity, the depravity of human beings, the necessity of faith in Christ and these fundamentals of the faith are held in common between fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

What marks them as fundamentalist and us over here as evangelicals? One is the early fundamentalists in the early 20th century were standing against modernists. The controversy was fundamentalist with modernists, or liberals if you want to think of them as liberals, standing against them. The cultural forces were favoring modernism. This was at a time when Darwinian evolution, for example, had become not totally accepted by the culture at large, but the intellectual elite had accepted Darwinian evolution as a fact. So here are these fundamentalists over here arguing for six-day creation. And the intellectuals, among the modernists in the culture, are demonstrating the folly of this ridiculous, naïve, old view that is archaic and ought to be discarded.

One of the pivotal events is the Scopes trial. William Jennings Bryan was the defender of the state of Tennessee. Clarence Darrell came down from Chicago to defend this teacher, Scope, who had been teaching evolution. They took this to trial and William Jennings Bryan won the trial, but he lost the culture war. When Clarence Darrell put William Jennings Bryan on the witness stand he not only didn't know much about contemporary evolutionary theory but then he started asking him questions about the Bible and he didn't know much about the Bible either. It looked to most people that William Jennings Bryan, who had run for President and was a highly respected individual, was not the intellectual icon they thought he was. In the eyes of the culture, fundamentalism took an enormous beating at the Scopes trial.

How did fundamentalists respond to being looked down upon by society? They say, "you know we are probably not going to win this culture war with modernism, so what we are going to do is separate from them". We are going to set up our own schools, and train our own kids so they don't go off to those modernist schools and get infected with liberalism. The Bible school movement flourished in the late 20's, the 30's, 40's and 50's. Furthermore, we are going to insulate ourselves as much as possible from this liberal culture that we are a part of.

2. SOME KEY FIGURES

A. EDWARD JOHN CARNELL (1919-1967)

Carnell is most noted for his strong intellectual critique of modernism and liberalism as an evangelical. He believed post 1925 fundamentalists made a huge mistake by leaving the marketplace of ideas, leaving the universities, and leaving the intellectual climate of the culture. He insisted on entering it again. He did two doctorates; the first he got at Harvard University where he did his dissertation on Reinhold Niebuhr. He did a second doctorate at Boston University under E. S. Brightman. He wanted to show that he could master everything liberalism had to offer and answer it.

B. CARL F. H. HENRY (1913- 2003)

Carl Henry could be called the dean of contemporary American Evangelicalism that began at the very end of the first half of the 20th century. In 1947 he wrote a little book, 75 pages, called "The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism". In this book he argued two things primarily. Number one was that fundamentalism was wrong to abandon the intellectual fight with liberalism, and he wanted to re-engage the fundamentalist movement and make a case for the claims of the gospel and the truths of the Bible. He encouraged people, like Carnell had done, to learn what liberals had to teach and then show them what is wrong with it. He had a very strong apologetic and evangelistic interest in this. Re-engage with the intellectual culture.

The second thing that he said fundamentalism erred on horribly was to distinguish spiritual well-being (preach the gospel and "save souls") from physical social well-being. In fact, God calls us to minister to whole people, and we can't do this by not being involved in social work. He was also very clear that social work cannot be the gospel. He agreed with Jesus; what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? (Mark 8:36). Social work had to be coupled with spiritual teaching and conviction of heart for people to receive the full ministry of God's grace in their lives.

That book had an enormous impact. Billy Graham, among others, read it and encouraged Carl Henry to become the founding editor of "Christianity Today" magazine, which he did. It was founded by Billy Graham and H. Nelson Bell who was his father-in-law. So Ruth Graham Bell's dad and Billy Graham founded Christianity Today and Carl Henry was the first editor. Carl Henry has also been very involved with World Vision, a relief organization, because of his interest in bringing together social work combined with gospel proclamation.

C. BILLY GRAHAM (1918-)

Billy Graham went to Wheaton College and after his ordination as a Southern Baptist he became the first evangelist of this newly founded organization, Youth For Christ. His 1948 Los Angeles crusade is what brought him national fame. From that point the Lord has blessed his ministry enormously. He has been an evangelist preaching the gospel, but he has also been very involved in holistic ministry to people. You probably know of all the ways he has been involved in relief work and social work, as well as the crusades that they do, the gospel proclamation. There is a sense in which if you put Henry and Graham together you get the heart of evangelicalism. Because what you have is an aggressive interest in the truth of the gospel, defending the truth, and knowing the truth; and you have an aggressive interest in sharing the gospel with others.