

## Newsletter February 2013

This newsletter on religious liberalism contains edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book III. In Chapter 18.5, *Birth of a Christian Nation*, we discuss the early rise of modernism and liberalism in the eighteenth century. In Chapter 18.7, *Radicalization of the Faith*, we discuss gains made by religious liberalism (page 349) on the American scene of the nineteenth century. In Chapter 19.2, *Age of Religious Pluralism*, we discuss the spread of religious liberalism in a form of a pseudo-orthodoxy known as neo-orthodoxy, an attempt to infiltrate true biblical orthodoxy with new forms of liberalism generally known as neo-liberalism (cf. page 403 ff.).

Even as the U.S. civil war loomed upon the horizon, there were already many problems within the Protestant movement in the nation. The first of those was the detrimental effects of free-style experiential evangelicalism (cf. page 329) on sound Christian doctrine, but more ominous still, was the rise of Unitarianism and Universalism. Unitarianism was transferred to America from France as we saw when we discussed the war for independence (cf. page 316) and later examined the faith of Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States (cf. page 324). Unitarianism denies the doctrine of the Trinity and by doing so necessarily denies that Jesus is God incarnate. Universalism insists that a God of love would not condemn anyone to an eternity of torment in Hell regardless of their sinfulness during their short stay on this earth: the unbiblical doctrine of universal salvation wherein all individuals will ultimately be saved.

In Chapter 18.5 we discuss the rise of modernism (cf. page 331), the forerunner to present day religious liberalism. Modernism insisted that all Christian doctrines needed to be updated to conform them to current scientific theories and modern thought. With doctrinal purity being set adrift by the many forms of wild evangelism so prevalent in the young nation, modernism easily gained a foothold in many denominations. By many, who were already adrift from sound biblical doctrine, it was seen to interject sanity into what had become an insane Christian movement. Soon, to support ever-changing modernist thought, literal interpretation of the Scriptures had to be denied on intellectual grounds.

The anti-philosophy of existentialism (cf. page 333) also appeared on the scene prior to the U.S. Civil War. The existentialist believes that each man creates his own reality in his mind. This notion was first proposed by men such as Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) who considered any search for Truth as a leap into the darkness of the unknown in an effort to achieve some kind of universal and concrete reality that did not actually exist. Fredrick Nietzsche (1844–1900) stated that since there is no universal reality, "God is dead," and that it is within a man's will to exercise the power of thought to create his own reality and the moral standards associated with it.

During the period between the U.S. Civil War and World War One, the reformed Protestant hold on America was seriously challenged by religious liberalism and liberal thought in general. The effects of accumulated doctrinal errors upon denominational church congregations during and after the War Between the States had been devastating (cf. Book III, Chapter 18.6). Conversely, the nearly complete neglect of sound biblical doctrine that had been carried along on a wave of unrestrained experiential evangelicalism for fifty or more years had left the American churches anxious for new spiritual experiences, but largely adrift from God's Word as a foundation upon which religious experience could be authenticated or rejected.

Unitarianism/Universalism by that time had easily entered into many of the major established denominations. Unitarianism had become quite radical as is exemplified by the teaching of men like Ralph Waldo Emerson (cf. page 350) and Theodore Parker (cf. page 351). Not only did Unitarianism deny the doctrine of the Trinity, it romanticized Scriptures until they had no basis in reality and were seen as being devoid of any real authority. In general, religious liberals believe that all religion exists only in the subconscious thoughts of men and therefore has no basis in reality.

Christianity was viewed as merely being one religion among many others that leads toward a conscious understanding of a purely intuitive “concept of God.” In the words of the American, Horace Bushnell (1802–1876), man merely “intuits the divine.” This form of “open deism” (cf. pages 351, 443) allows man to fashion God into any mental image he chooses.

As physical science developed, religious liberalism, earlier referred to as modernism, insisted that all religious thought must be made to conform to science. Embracing Charles Darwin’s ill-conceived theory in his book *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859 was one step in that direction, as was the acceptance of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* in 1832 regarding a “natural” geological evolution of the earth itself. These theoretical processes known generally as developmentalism, were envisioned as being applicable to everything as it crossed over from the physical to the spiritual sphere. That is, man had spontaneously evolved from animals, and in like manner, religion itself had evolved over time. Because man is considered to be a mere animal, it is quite natural for him to have base instincts that are in conflict with any rigid moral ethic. Sin is therefore considered to be but the heavy baggage of religious myths, which needs to be eradicated lest it impede the upward evolution of mankind toward intellectual perfection.

The Bible was under attack because if interpreted literally and authoritatively it deviated widely from basic liberal suppositions. From Germany to England and then to America came what was referred to as the discipline of “higher criticism” of the Bible. Lower criticism is a valid critique of Bible text for the purpose of assuring accuracy of translation and correct interpretation. It does not deny the source of Scripture, but by such means seeks to validate and insure its authenticity. Higher criticism, however, denies the very source of Scripture at the outset and seeks to relegate its text to various myths and legends that have no actual authority over how we should live our lives.

The Old Testament was not considered by the religious liberal to be the Word of God in truth but was alleged to be a scrambled historical account of Hebrew History interspersed with various legends and poetry. It was further alleged that Moses had not written the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as is commonly accepted. Rather, it was considered to be a collection of various texts obtained from multiple manuscripts written in assorted periods by various authors all edited together to appear to represent a cohesive origin of the earth and mankind. The then accepted dates of many of the prophetic books were questioned on the basis of chronological order. Since supernatural knowledge was judged to be impossible by the religious liberal, the prophets could not have predicted future events. Thus, they asserted that the books must have been written after the events had already taken place, and that they were merely assembled later in an order such that they only appeared to predict future events.

As far as the New Testament accounts are concerned, the religious liberal conceded that there was most probably a man named Jesus, who was believed to be the Messiah by some in the past, but he was not actually God incarnate. Jesus was merely a man who died as a martyr for his revolutionary teaching. Therefore, they declared, Jesus’ death could not have atoned in any way for the “natural shortcomings” of mankind. Jesus could not have been born of a virgin, nor could He have been physically raised from the dead because both are in conflict with accepted medical science and natural experience. The epistles of the Apostle Paul were especially singled out for attack because he clearly demonstrated the Christology of the Hebrew Old Testament as well as firmly attesting to the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave.

Although denying the foundational truths of Christianity, the religious liberal nevertheless sees religion as a useful psychological tool to lead men to accept various societal goals. Christianity could be considered useful in a symbolic way to satisfy the religious needs of man, while not in any way being accepted as factual. That leads us to consider the process by which various liberal progressive political goals may be attained through the application of religion — a process that is commonly referred to as liberation theology (cf. page 354). The focus of liberation theology is

derived from various oppressions that men commonly suffer whether real or imagined. Many have found themselves under political oppression, abject poverty, debilitating disease, imprisonment (just or unjust), or in servitude to another whether directly as a servant or slave or merely as a devalued employee. Not surprisingly, then, there is a long history of liberation theology wherein religion is not being looked to for a release from the bondage of sin and its eternal consequences, but merely from any tangible consequences of it here and now on earth. Liberal-minded Jews in Jesus' day were interpreting Old Testament texts in such a way that their deliverer was to be one who would free them from the political yoke of Rome. Many nationalists during the Reformation Movement often interpreted Scripture in such a way as to liberate themselves from Roman political domination and oppression. In South America, the native populations redesigned Roman Churchianity, which had been forced upon them, to free themselves from their European captors through a coming deliverer in the likeness of Christ named Santidade who was fashioned out of their painful need (cf. page 211).

In Chapter 18.6 we discussed the birth of black liberation theology (cf. page 336) that had its origin in the slavery of the southern United States. While being held as slaves, black men and women were often introduced to Christianity through forced conversions into a faith that they barely understood. In the light of their physical oppression, the Gospel message was misinterpreted to promise their release from the physical bondage of the white man, rather than receiving redemption from the eternal consequences of personal sin. Jesus was increasingly being looked upon by the black slave populations of the south as a coming deliverer who would someday free them out of the physical bondage of their white captors much as Moses had delivered the Hebrews out of the bondage of slave labor in Egypt.

Another example of liberation theology is to be found in the social gospel (cf. page 360) found within various churches of the past as well as today as the prosperity doctrine and the doctrine of perpetual health, both of which override the true Gospel message. The Gospel of Christ's death for the spiritual redemption of the human race from sin is replaced with a temporal physical redemption from human poverty and physical and mental pain. This social gospel is particularly attractive to the poorer classes of society who must live with scant property, goods, and money thus finding themselves lacking proper healthcare. The lack of healthcare makes them susceptible to the delusion of ritual healing (cf. Book II, Chapter 14.3).

Liberation theology, then, can be defined as any attempt to interpret Scripture based solely upon a foundation of humanistic thought, which is in turn motivated by a perceived human need, want, or greed totally apart from considering the sovereign will of a supreme being or God. Liberation theology seeks to liberate men from governmental subjugation and even from all forms of religious oppression — whether real or imagined. It purports to liberate man from all authority — especially the authority of a Sovereign God — allowing him to live (i.e. sin) as he desires with impunity, as he makes up his own rules of personal conduct.

Moreover, this humanistic misinterpretation does not remain fixed but can be altered over time to fit any particular crisis or oppression at hand. Current human experience alone determines how its proponents go about interpreting all religious thought in general, and humanism demands that man himself must be the one to deliver physical redemption through socio-political efforts. Those efforts commonly manifest themselves in an unrestrained move toward humanistic socialism, as we discussed in our Newsletter of January 2013. Unfortunately, various elements of liberation theology persist even in many of our more conservative bible churches today, but it has already overcome many liberal congregations of Christendom as the temporal church continues on its compulsive march toward a state of total apostasy of the faith (cf. page 533).

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