

CH506: American Church History Lecture 9

AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM, MODERNISM, AND FUNDAMENTALISM

I. European Contributions to the Rise of Liberalism

American theological liberalism was greatly influenced by developments happening in Europe (England and especially Germany).

A. Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and the theory of evolution dominated the academic world and posed serious challenges to Christian faith.

B. Herbert Spencer

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) popularized the ideas of Darwin, especially in the fields of social relations and economics. Darwin would adopt Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest" as a synonym for natural selection in later editions of *On the Origin of the Species*.

C. Julius Wellhausen

Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) was an OT scholar who lived and worked in Germany. Wellhausen's *History of Israel* (1878) presented the so-called Documentary Hypothesis and claimed, among other things, that Moses could not have been the author of the Pentateuch.

D. William James

William James (1842-1910) used many of the principles of Darwin and Wellhausen in his work on the psychology of religion and the sociology of religion.

II. The Rise of Evangelical Liberalism in the United States

A. The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Evangelical liberals such as Washington Gladden, Horace Bushnell, and Walter Rauschenbusch took the life and teachings of Jesus very seriously. The theologian William Adams Brown (1865-1943), who was influenced by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), held that Christian faith must be centered on the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, rather than on the theological formulations of the creeds.

CH506: American Church History Lecture 9

B. The Humanity of Jesus

Evangelical liberals struggled with the humanity of Jesus. Bushnell, for example, was quick to claim that Jesus was divine, but slower to declare his full humanity. His view of the Trinity bordered on modalism. Most evangelical liberals rejected the notion that Jesus was merely human.

C. Core Beliefs

Most evangelical liberals embraced:

- the historical critical method of biblical study;
- the theory of evolution;
- current psychological and sociological theories; and
- philosophical speculation.

D. Flaws

Several flaws of theological liberalism include:

- the over emphasis on God's immanence above his transcendence;
- the failure to appreciate the reality of sin and the atonement; and
- the blurring of the distinction between the church and larger society.

III. Conflict in the Presbyterian Church

A. W. Robertson Smith

In 1875 the Presbyterian professor W. Robertson Smith (1846-1894) wrote an article on the Bible which advocated the use of higher criticism. In 1878 he accepted the views of Julius Wellhausen and was expelled.

B. Charles A. Briggs (1841-1913)

Briggs was an evangelical liberal who began a journal at Union Theological Seminary called *The Presbyterian Review*. He would serve as co-editor along with Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), from Princeton. Warfield believed in verbal inspiration and inerrancy. The two carried on theological debates in print. In 1890, Briggs was awarded a chair in Biblical Theology at Union. His inaugural address was titled "The Authority of Holy Scripture" and attacked the concepts of verbal inspiration and inerrancy. As a result, Union's ties with the Presbyterian Church were severed, Briggs' ordination was terminated, and the immediate inspiration of the original autographs was affirmed.

CH506: American Church History Lecture 9

IV. Background to the Rise of Fundamentalism

A. Fundamental Assumptions of Conservative Christians:

1. Inerrancy
2. Virgin Birth
3. Deity of Christ (Miracles)
4. Substitutionary Atonement
5. Bodily Resurrection

B. Lyman and Milton Stewart published *The Fundamentals* (1910). Scholars such as Benjamin Warfield and James Orr contributed to it.

V. The Emergence of Fundamentalist-Liberal Battles

A. J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

Machen was a theologian who championed the Fundamentalist position and wrote for the *Princeton Theological Review*.

B. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

In 1922, Fosdick preached the explosive sermon: "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" The sermon called for the toleration of liberal views.

C. William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925)

Bryan went on a crusade against evolution.

D. Westminster Theological Seminary

Machen and others split from the Presbyterian Church and formed the Presbyterian Church of America and Westminster Seminary as more orthodox (i.e., conservative) alternatives. A split also occurred among the Baptists.

VI. The Scopes Trial and Its Impact on Fundamentalism

This trial was also called the "Monkey Trial" and pitted William Jennings Bryan, author of *The Menace of Darwinism* (1922), against Clarence Darrow. After the trial, John T. Scopes, a biology teacher, was convicted of teaching evolution in Tennessee and fined \$100. Bryan died five days after the trial and Fundamentals were largely seen as narrow-minded bigots.

NEO-ORTHODOXY

I. The Failure of Liberalism

Neo-orthodox theologians called for the recovery of divine transcendence and a realistic doctrine of sin, which had been missing in theological liberalism.

II. Definition of Neo-orthodoxy

Neo-orthodoxy was a reaction against Protestant liberalism. Thinkers such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr pushed for a return to the basic theological principles of the early church and the Reformation (especially the primacy of Scripture, human depravity, and God's work in Christ) as central to the Christian proclamation of the gospel.

III. Karl Barth (1886-1968)

Barth became disillusioned with liberalism after the war. He wrote his famed *Epistle to the Romans* (1919), which stressed the discontinuity between the message of the Word of God and the reality one finds in the world. In 1930, Barth became a professor of systematic theology at the University of Bonn. There he began to write his multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* (1932-1967).

Barth developed a dialectical theology. He often criticized contemporary religious philosophy as being too anthropocentric (i.e., human-centered). He stressed that God was "wholly other," that humankind was sinful and totally dependent on God, and that humankind needed to encounter God's transforming power.

IV. Emil Brunner (1889-1966)

Like Barth, Brunner was horrified by the atrocities of World War I and the rise of Nazism in Germany. He acknowledged that liberalism had failed to address real issues and called for a return to many of the themes of the Protestant Reformation.

Several of Brunner's works include: *Experience, Knowledge and Faith* (1921), *Die Mystik und das Wort* (1924), *The Mediator* (1927), and *Nature and Grace* (1934). This last work embraced the notion of natural revelation and was criticized by Karl Barth. Brunner later clarified that God's revelation in Christ is quite different from the type of revelation acquired through normal scientific processes. Two additional works by Brunner are *The Divine-Human Encounter* (1937) and his three-volume *Dogmatic Theology* (1946-1960).

CH506: American Church History Lecture 9

V. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962)

Reinhold Niebuhr was a neo-orthodox American theologian and Christian ethicist. His *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man* addressed the issues of individual sin and corporate evil. Richard Niebuhr wrote on the church's role in society. His key books were *Christ and Culture* (1951) and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960).

VI. The Continuance of Liberalism

A new generation of neoliberals criticized previously watered-down notions of God. Liberalism continued on in biblical scholarship, especially through the demythologization program of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and others. Humanistic optimism decreased, but the liberals gave no ground on the non-literal interpretation of the Bible.

THE NEW EVANGELICALS

I. Introduction

Many conservatives of the 1940s wanted a kinder, gentler evangelicalism. The moderately fundamentalist Harold John Ockenga (1904-85), pastor of Park Street Congregational Church in Boston, MA, and several others formed the New England Fellowship, out of which emerged the National Association of Evangelicals (1942).

II. Ockenga, Fuller Seminary, and *Christianity Today*

The guiding principal of the NAE was: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity [love]." Belief in the authority of Scripture was required, but not inerrancy or pre-millennialism. Membership has been diverse and has included Calvinistic, Arminian, Adventist, and Pentecostal groups. Billy Graham (b.1918) emerged as the movement's figurehead. Fuller Theological Seminary (established 1947 by Ockenga) became its seminary and *Christianity Today* (1956) its publication.

THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

I. Introduction

The term *oikoumene* is derived from the Greek word *oikos* meaning, “house.” The term has come to mean something that is related to a single household.

II. The Emergence of the World Council of Churches

After the stimulus of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, there was a great concern among Protestants to confront divisive issues of church doctrine, practice, and polity. A number of missionary conferences were organized and councils developed in subsequent years. Formal international ecumenism was given a boost when American churches came together to help the churches of Europe rebuild after WWII.

The first Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1948. Members must “confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹ The WCC is not a denomination or “super-church;” it is a fellowship of churches joined together to face issues of common interest.

III. The Second Vatican Council

Pope John XXIII called together all the bishops for the Second Vatican Council, also known as “Vatican II.) The pope stated that he desired for his pontificate to be one of updating and modernization. The tone of the Council was irenic and conciliatory. Contra the Reformation notion of *sola scriptura*, *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* affirmed the authority of both Scripture and Tradition. Yet Protestants were seen as “separated brethren” and true members of the church. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* stressed the notion of the church as “the people of God,” rather than as an institution.

The *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)* called upon Roman Catholics to enter into discussion with other Christians wherever it was possible. Pope John Paul II would later issue a new encyclical on ecumenism titled *Ut Unum Sint*.

¹ This statement is the “Basis” for membership in the World Council of Churches. Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches Constitution, Section I. Basis, *World Council of Churches: Yearbook 2001* (Geneva, Switzerland, WCC Publications, 2001), 86.

CH506: American Church History Lecture 9

IV. Other Ecumenical Bodies

There are other ecumenical bodies besides the World Council of Churches. Several of them include:

- A. The *Joint Working Group*
- B. The *World Evangelical Alliance* (WEA)
- C. The Annual Meeting of the Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CWCs)
- D. Various National and International bilateral and multilateral discussions and dialogues

V. American “Evangelical” Responses to the Formal Ecumenical Movement.

- A. Carl McIntire and the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC)
- B. The New England Fellowship
- C. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

VI. Grassroots Ecumenism

- A. Billy Graham
- B. Demos Shakarian
- C. The Charismatic Movement
- D. The “Third Wave”
- E. The “New Apostolic Movement”
- F. Promise Keepers

VII. Newer Ecumenical Movements

- A. Christian Churches Together (www.christianchurchestogether.org)
- B. Global Christian Forum (www.globalchristianforum.org)
- C. The future of ecumenism is in your hands.