— 2 —

ORIGINS OF THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

Eight Contributing Factors

Preface: "A Different Gospel."

- Theological liberalism is not true biblical Christianity.
- Theological liberalism is parasitic to true Christianity.
  - While claiming to be "Christian" and often using familiar Christian terminology, in fact it is "*a different gospel*" that has a "form of godliness" but "denies the power" of the true gospel – Gal. 1:6-9.
- There are fundamental (and irreconcilable) differences between the beliefs of theological conservatives and liberals regarding the seminal defining issues of the Christian faith.
- There is considerable diversity among theological liberals when it comes to the basic doctrines of the faith because liberal theology is intrinsically subjective.
  - Therefore, liberals are less inclined to accept and adhere to any set objective standard.
  - Like postmodernists, liberals aren't so concerned with what the Bible actually says as much as how it affects them personally – i.e., whether it seems sufficiently rational, loving, compassionate, humane, tolerant, etc.
  - This allows ample latitude to pick and choose which doctrines, morals and ethical principles to accept and which to disregard as antiquated and irrelevant such as, for instance, the biblical condemnation of homosexual behavior.
- Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries there was a trend in Europe and America away from traditional historical Christian orthodoxy for a variety of reasons.

1. Reformation-Era Religious Wars.

- For 130 years – beginning in the 1520s – Catholic and Protestant "Christians" intermittently slaughtered one other by the hundreds of thousands over doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes.
  - In addition, they killed Anabaptists and other dissenters by the tens of thousands.
  - An estimated 15-18 million Europeans perished as a result of these wars.

[NOTE: These "religious wars" were not fought purely for religious reasons. Like all wars, there were a variety of political, social and economic factors – of which religion was only one.]

- Thirty Years War (1618-48):
  - The last (and greatest) of the religious wars was the Thirty Years War – one of the most devastating wars in European history.
  - All told, about 1/3 of Germany's population perished in these campaigns.
  - Not since the 5th century and the fall of the Western Roman Empire had Europe suffered on this scale.
    - David Goldman: "This was the definitive disaster in modern European history."
  - On a proportional scale, the Thirty Years' War was more destructive than World War II.

- English Civil War (1642-51):
  - Two competing political ideologies: royal absolutism v. constitutionalism.
  - Religious factions: Presbyterians and Protestant Independents v. Anglicans and Catholics.
  - The most devastating war in English history.
- Although these wars were fought in the *name* of Christ – none were fought in the *spirit* of Christ.
- The damage done to the Christian faith is incalculable.
- Sickened by all the conflict, discrimination, persecution and killing, many Europeans, British and Americans lost interest in theological controversies.
  - A shift away from doctrinal orthodoxy to moral orthopraxy.
  - The call for religious tolerance – and eventually, religious liberty and the disestablishment of state churches.

2. The Scientific Revolution.

- The Scientific Revolution of the 16th century and the dawn of the "Modern Age."
- Amazing discoveries by Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Boyle, Newton, *et al.*
- The key to discovering new knowledge: inductive reasoning developed empirically through human experience, experimentation and rational interpretation of data.
  - *Not* received authority: tradition, superstition, mythology, divine revelation, or Scripture.
- As science discovered natural causes for many of the mysteries of the physical world, it appeared to marginalize God as the direct agent behind these natural processes.
- A pivotal figure: Charles Darwin (1809-82).
  - In *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin's theory of evolution implied that God was neither the direct cause of natural phenomena nor the indirect (or ultimate) cause.
  - Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) elevated science to the status of an infallible discipline – the cult of "Scientism".

3. Enlightenment Rationalism.

- 17th century *philosophes*, inspired by the remarkable new discoveries in science, sought to apply human reason to the social sciences.
- The dawning of the Enlightenment – the "Age of Reason."
- New knowledge gained through the natural and social sciences was considered superior to that transmitted through the ages by ancient religious texts such as the Bible.
- With Reason as our guide, there was less reason for divine revelation – even in theology.

4. Deism (and Unitarianism).

- Deism was a natural extension of the Enlightenment emphasis on Rationalism.
- At best, Deism attempted to redefine and update Christian theology using human reason alone.
- Being made in the image of God, human beings were capable of discovering and applying moral principles without the need for ancient religious texts such as the Bible.
  - Deists rejected the doctrine of the Fall.
- Deism exploited several weaknesses in Christian history:
  - It was a reaction against all the religious-based bigotry and violence of the past;
  - The Christian religion had often functioned as a tool of oppressive political regimes;
  - Deists objected to the overemphasis on orthodoxy at the expense of orthopraxy.

- A new concept of God:
  - God (or "Providence") is the Creator and Divine Architect of the universe.
  - God is transcendent, eternal, infinite, and omnipotent.
  - God is *not* immanent, omni-present, or necessarily sovereign over his universe.
  - Anti-Trinitarianism: God is One both in essence and in personhood.
  - Jesus Christ was a great moral teacher and an example of godly humanitarianism – but only a man.
  - Most Deists conceived of God as personal, but others preferred to speak of God as an impersonal force or a unifying principle – "Providence."
- All that can be known of God comes via General Revelation (i.e., nature) and human reasoning.
- Claims of Special Revelation (i.e., the Bible) were dismissed as ancient superstitions.
  - The cosmos is a closed system.
  - God established a "clockwork universe" that runs like a giant machine according to fixed physical laws.
  - God is not actively involved in this world – nor can human beings have a personal relationship with God.
  - Miracles are a violation of the natural order.
- A new view of human nature:
  (1) Human beings are basically good.
  (2) Human beings are basically rational.
- Mankind's fundamental problem is not sin but ignorance and irrationality.
  - Therefore: The solution to humanity's problem is not spiritual salvation but education and socio/political reforms.
- Throughout the 19th century, many Deists embraced Universalism.

5. Humanism.

- Western societies became less theocentric and more anthropocentric.
- Unlike the Christian humanism in the past, Enlightenment humanism eventually devolved into secular humanism.
- An emphasis on secular concerns related to this life and this world rather than spiritual and religious matters.
- Based on a new concept of human nature, a more optimistic view of human potential emerged.
- Increasing skepticism regarding biblical doctrines such as the Fall, Original Sin, and the deity of Christ – along with the Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity.

6. Calvinism.

- A reaction against the Calvinistic Puritan theology.
- Doctrines of Total Depravity, Limited Atonement and Predestination (Unconditional Election).

6. Modern Philosophy.

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).
  - The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ as "sequels" to the story of Jesus.
  - *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).
    - Epistemological agnosticism.
  - Christian faith can only be *fideistic*.

- Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).
  - The "father of modern liberal theology."
    [NOTE: More accurately, he was a "father" of modern neo-orthodoxy and Romanticism.]
  - The influence of Kant.
    - Schleiermacher in 1787: "I cannot believe that [Jesus] who called himself the Son of Man was the true, eternal God; I cannot believe that his death was a vicarious atonement."
  - Schleiermacher sought to turn Protestantism toward an existentialist orientation and away from either traditional supernaturalism or modernistic rationalism.
  - A radically different concept of Christianity.
    - The essence of religion is neither intellectual (beliefs and knowledge) nor ethical but rather existential – feelings and emotions of absolute dependence on God and consequent union with Him.
    - True religion is not dogmatic or doctrinaire – it is subjective and intuitional.
    - Religious authority is found not in a book or creed, but in the context of individual experience.
    - Schleiermacher: ""Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion.... Religion is the miracle of direct relationship with the infinite; and dogmas are the reflection of this miracle."

      [NOTE: This is nonsense. What is it that we encounter? What is "the infinite"? It must be reality – or else purely our own imagination, which is an illusion.]
  - Christianity has no independent or objective reality – it is true only to the extent that we believe it to be true.

    [NOTE: Something is either objectively true (i.e., real) or else not – regardless of our subjective opinion.]
  - Therefore, Schleiermacher advocated a form of romanticized Christianity – one that emphasized human emotions and imagination.
  - Schleiermach's influence on the Romantic Transcendentalism.
- G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831).
  - Modern man must cease thinking in terms of propositional truth – rigid categories and delineations of "right" and "wrong" in terms of theses and antitheses.
  - Everything is in flux, and our knowledge continues to expand.
  - Truth must be redefined in terms of ongoing syntheses.
- Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72).
  - An outright atheist and a political liberal whose theories on dialectical materialism influenced Karl Marx.
  - In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach developed "the true or anthropological essence of religion."
    - Basic theme: God did not create man; man created God out of a sense of need.
    - Religion is a human invention, and the concept of God corresponds to some subliminal need of human nature.
    - Therefore: "The divine being is nothing else but... the human being purified .... If man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God."

7. Biblical Criticism.

Biblical Textual Criticism:

- Skepticism regarding the divine inspiration of Scripture and its doctrinal and moral authority.
- The origins: The search for the original biblical texts.
  - John Mill (1645-1707) and the issue of textual variations.
  - Daniel Whitby's response.
  - Anthony Collins' critique of biblical reliability.

Biblical "Historical Criticism":

- "Historical criticism" (a.k.a. "higher criticism") challenged traditional beliefs about the authorship, dating, and the agendas behind the various books of the OT and NT.
- Historical criticism departed from the traditional devotional approach to reading Scripture. [NOTE: Higher criticism can be legitimate and valuable – if the scholar is honest!]
- Johann Eichhorn (1753-1827): "The founder of modern Old Testament criticism."
  - The miracles in the Bible are attributed to natural phenomena or superstition.
  - Challenges to the traditional authorship of several New Testament books.
- Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) and the Documentary Hypothesis.
  - Therefore, the narratives in the Pentateuch are not so much *histories* of what God actually did and said as parables that express the religious views of later Jews.

The Quest for the 'Historical Jesus':

- Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) and the modern "quest for the historical Jesus."
  - Distinguishing the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith."
  - Jesus was a Jewish nationalist and one of many in a long line of failed revolutionaries.
  - Jesus was not only a failure, but a deceiver who falsely portrayed himself as a miracle-worker to his gullible followers.
  - All miracles in the Bible are merely fables and superstitions.
  - The resurrection was merely a hoax perpetrated by Jesus' disciples, the Four Gospels were fabrications, and "Christianity" was the invention of the early church.
  - However, Jesus taught some admirable things such as the brotherhood of man.
  - Reimarus' influences:
    - Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (1794).
    - Thomas Jefferson**,** "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth" (1804) and *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (the "Jefferson Bible," 1820).
- David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) and *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined.*
  - "Demythologizing" the Bible.
  - The gospels "present us with religious, not historical, truths."
  - The accounts of the Resurrection were products of mass hysteria.
  - The Gospel of John is entirely mythical and unreliable as an historical document.
- Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860).
  - For Baur, Jesus is a near-abstraction – mostly a mythical figure.
  - The Four Gospels were not based by eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus.
    - The Gospel of John is totally devoid of historical truth.
  - The Acts of the Apostles, written in the 2nd century, is mere mythology.
  - Much of the NT was written in the mid-to-late 2nd century.

- Bruno Bauer (1809-82): Jesus was purely a fictitious character.
  - The gospel accounts of the life of Jesus were purely literary devices lacking any historical authenticity.

Biblical Criticism: The Cumulative Impact.

- The cumulative impact of skeptical Biblical criticism shook traditional Christian orthodoxy.
  - William Ellery Channing (1780-1842): "I am surer that my rational nature is from God than that any book is an expression of his will."
  - John Dillenberger: "The acceptance of biblical criticism meant the abandonment of the belief that the Bible is an infallible record of divine revelation to men.... This was perhaps the most important development in 19th century Protestant thought, even more far reaching in its implications than the influence of the new scientific theories."
  - Louis Markos: "Liberal scholars begin not with an inductive search for truth but with an unsubstantiated prejudice against the supernatural....

    "For nearly two centuries our modern culture has entrusted a matter of highest importance – whether the Bible is accurate and reliable – to a group of scholars who deny *a priori* the miraculous and prophetic claims around which the Bible is structured."

8. Christianity as Ethical Humanitarianism.

- From the time liberal theology emerged in the 1700s, liberal Christians didn't perceive themselves as heretics.
  - In their mind, they offered a moderate and modern alternative to traditional Protestantism (primarily Calvinism) and religious Deism.
- Nineteenth century liberal Christians wanted to preserve what they regarded as the essence of Christianity – i.e., ethical humanitarianism – in keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment.
- Skeptical of traditional doctrines that they regarded as outdated or irrational, liberals questioned (or rejected) not only Calvinistic theology but core Biblical doctrines.
  - The divine inspiration and authority of Scripture;
  - The doctrine of the Trinity;
  - The Fall and original sin;
  - The Incarnation and Virgin Birth of Christ;
  - The Atonement;
  - The physical bodily Resurrection of Christ;
  - The deity of Christ;
  - The doctrine of the New Birth; and
  - Miracles.
- For liberals, what really mattered was orthopraxy – how one lives his life in accord with the ethical teachings of Jesus – i.e., the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount.
  - What matters is ethical humanitarianism – not the salvific mission of Christ who came to save us from sin and reconcile us to God.
- The issue of relevance:
  - Theological liberals attempted to update Christianity to make it relevant in light of the new discoveries in science and new theories in philosophy.
  - Many liberals sincerely believed they were "saving" Christianity by reinterpreting it and making it more modern, humane, loving and tolerant.

- In the 1800s liberals tried to reconcile Christianity with two new challenges: Darwinian evolutionary theory, and the social challenges posed by industrialization and capitalism.

[NOTE: In fact, true Christianity is always "relevant" to what matters most – the state of our soul and our relationship to God.

The Christian faith offers the most coherent, consistent, comprehensive, and satisfactory answers to the perennial questions in life:

(1) Why is there something rather than nothing?
(2) Where did I come from?
(3) What am I doing here – is there any meaning and purpose to life?
(4) Why do we believe that certain things are right or wrong?
(5) When I die, where am I going?**]**

- Christianity as ethical humanitarianism became the basis for the Social Gospel movement.
- Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89).
  - The Kingdom of God is the ethical transformation of society and culture.
  - Christianity is not an other-worldly religion but one by which this world is transformed through ethical action motivated by love and humanitarianism.
  - Sin is societal, and redemption comes via the improvement of social structures.

[NOTE: Ritschl was a major influence on Walter Rauschenbusch and many mainline Protestant theologians and pastors who were drawn toward liberal ("Modernistic") Christianity. In turn, Rauschenbusch was a major influence on Martin Luther King Jr.]

- Gary Dorrien: "American liberal theology was fed by the wellsprings of 18th century and early 19th century rationalism and romanticism.... It flowered, however, as a form of late 19th century social Progressivism.... It is that form of Christian faith in which a prophetic-progressive philosophy of history culminates in the expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth."

[NOTE: Regarding Christianity as ethical humanitarian philosophy:

- According to Plato, the purpose of life is to pursue the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.
  - Phil. 4:8 – "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is <u>true</u>, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is <u>just</u>, whatever is <u>pure</u>, whatever is <u>lovely</u>, whatever is <u>commendable</u>, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, ponder these things."
- Like Aristotle, Jesus taught that motives are as important as actions.
  - It is not sufficient to merely *do* the right thing if one's heart is impure.
  - Matt. 5:21-22 – "You have heard it said... 'Do not murder'... But I tell you that anyone who [hates] his brother will be subject to judgment."
  - Matt. 5:27-28 – "You have heard it said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who even looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."
- The Kingdom ethics of Jesus articulated three original moral ideas.

(1) The "Golden Rule": "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

- Other famous sages had taught the negative reciprocal of this principle:
- "Tsu-king [a disciple] asked [the Master – i.e., Confucius] saying, 'Is there any single saying that one can act upon all day and every day?'

"The Master replied, 'Perhaps the saying about consideration: 'Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.'"

- Tobit 4:15: "And what you hate, do not do to anyone [else]."
- Rabbi, Hillel (fl. 15 BC - 15 AD): "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole law. Everything else is a commentary on that."

- Note: Jesus' rule goes beyond the passivity of merely refraining from hurting another person. He directs us to love others proactively.

(2) Non-resistance to personal insults:

- Matt. 5:38-40 – "You have heard it said, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone wants to sue you and take your [shirt], let him have your [coat] also."
- Jesus is referring to personal insults – or perhaps even personal assaults.
- Note: This is not a proof text for pacifism, or for not defending others who are physically, verbally or emotionally abused.

(3) Universal love.

- Matt. 5:34-44 – "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
- Also: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

- Regarding social ethics:
  - Like the OT prophets, Jesus condemned the rich for the oppression of the poor.
    - Matt. 6:19, 24.
    - Mark 10:21-24.
    - Luke 16:19-31 – Parable of the rich man and Lazarus.
    - Matt. 25:31-46.
- Regarding religious hypocrisy:
  - Jesus condemned self-righteousness, religiosity and religious hypocrisy.
- The Greatest Commandment:
  - Matt. 22:37-38 – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind... and love your neighbor as yourself."
- Paul: The highest form of love – *agape* – is the greatest of all virtues – I Cor. 13.
- The uniqueness of Jesus:
  - In the final analysis: The most remarkable thing about Jesus was not what he taught, but that he actually lived what he taught!

The Summa.

- Altogether, these 8 factors undermined confidence in historic orthodox Christianity.
- Many of America's elite class, who prided themselves as intelligent men of the Enlightenment, were convinced that the trends in modern knowledge were leading away from traditional biblically-based Christian beliefs.
- Gary Dorrien in *The Making of American Liberal Theology*:
  - "Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the natural and social sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life;... and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people."
- QUESTION: So what's so wrong with that?

(1) It replaces the authority of divinely-inspired Scripture with fallible human reasoning.

- It rejects an objective standard based on absolute Truth for subjective intuition and feelings.

(2) It denies the sinful, egocentric realities of human nature.