

Understanding and Responding to Liberalism

The first time I visited the gothic York Minister in England the thing I noticed was the damage that had been caused by a lightening strike to the roof. Some commentators were drawing a link between this event and pronouncements that had recently been made by the Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, to the effect that the resurrection of Christ was nothing more than a “conjuring trick with a bag of bones”. Whether or not the weather had a hand in speaking for God, the cleric’s alleged comments caused a storm of its own and threw into sharp perspective the dimension of unbelief that existed in the Anglican priesthood.

What is Liberalism?

Liberalism, or modernism, is nothing new. During my growing-up years my parents left the church they had been instrumental in founding because a new minister was an acknowledged modernist. “Jesus isn’t mentioned on every page of the Bible”, was his reply to those who asked why he didn’t preach Christ. He had sorely missed the salient point, explained by Jesus, that the Scriptures spoke about him (John 5:39, cf Luke 24:27).

Liberalism is still alive and well. If we are to be relevant Christians in a world of uncertainty we need to know what we believe and how to detect nascent unbelief in our own circles. Church life surveys in the West over recent years have revealed that a growing number of clergy and other church leaders question (or do not hold to) the inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God, with all that flows from such a precarious premise. Much has been written for and against the approach to defining Christian belief and praxis that is generically known by the terms “liberalism”, or “modernism”. But what is it?

At heart, theological liberalism is a system of unbelief that effectively undermines Christian faith from within the established church. It operates on the basis of secular intellectualism masquerading as serious exegesis (study of the Bible and the circumstances in which it was written and compiled). Its proponents are not Biblical Christians. If we are to make our faith relevant to an unbelieving world we need to hold to those truths the Holy Spirit has revealed to the church and live out the power of Christ in our lives.

Liberalism is a pseudo-faith that deifies man and dethrones God. It is located between ancient orthodoxy and experimental new cults. It is, in essence, an anti-belief system that preaches a vacuum of belief.

Liberals in the New Testament

The Sadducees were the liberal theologians of Jesus’ day. They focussed on the Law but rejected the supernatural, including angels, spirits, resurrection, judgement and divine intervention in the world. Jesus criticised them for “knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29).

The Apostle Paul prophesied that people in the last days would have “a form of godliness (religion) but deny its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). He warned the Colossian Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8). At the close of the first century, John recorded a warning that the Laodicean church was “rich, had acquired wealth, needed nothing”, but Jesus Christ was on the outside (Revelation 3:14-22).

Many modern ministers and churches have been influenced by the same thinking. We need to understand the way liberals view the Bible, Christ, the Christian life and the church’s role in society; We have to be equipped to distinguish between liberal principles and Biblical revelation and then to respond confidently with life-changing truth in a way that informs and changes lives.

How did liberalism come about?

The historical shift from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance (which made a cult of “man” and revived the Classics in place of the Bible) led to the abandonment of “absolutes” (sects, denominations and philosophies flourished after the Reformation). This resulted in a loss of Christian imprint on a nominally “Christian” society in the 17th-and 18th Centuries and led to acquiescence by the Church to non-Christian values (such as slavery, a savage prison system; inhumane treatment of children; eugenics and so-called “Social Darwinism”) and to a search for a more “acceptable” message.

Globalisation has contributed to a weakening of missionary enterprise in many parts of the world (British colonisation did not get involved in local belief systems), contributing to acceptance of pluralism, unqualified ecumenism and accommodation with non-Christian world views. This is to be expected in non-Christian circles; where it has filtered through to Christian paradigms the damage has been substantial. Liberalism has taken advantage of a lack of credible, high level evangelical scholarship equipped to meet the challenges of secular humanism and provide answers and clarifications that thinking people are demanding. A consequence has been a spiritual vacuum, concern for material values on the part of many Christians, instead of concern for spiritual values above all else; and weakening of the moral authority of the church. Instead of godly values, emphases on man’s physical and environmental welfare and capacity for self improvement have triumphed over the state of his soul and relationship with God. Selfishness and loss of community have led to demands for self-fulfilment “now”, instead of concern with fulfilling God’s will and preparing for eternity (Liberals contend evangelical Christians are myopic about the future and neglect pressing social needs).

What are the main differences between liberals and evangelical Christians?

Evangelicals believe some things in the world are stable and fixed (Malachi 3:6a; Hebrews 13:8). They believe conclusions can be reached in the field of

theology that can be regarded as certain and final (such as Jesus as the embodiment of Truth, John 14:6). They believe the Bible was written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; that it is the infallible and inerrant Word of God (2 Peter 1:20-21). Evangelicals emphasise faith as the basis for the Christian life and salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 11:6). They believe modern man must adjust to the Bible (2 Timothy 3:15-17), not the other way around. They believe the answer to our problems is for man to be reconciled to God and to man through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Evangelicals believe all men are sinners and that the death of Christ paid for the sins of the human race. They assert that God is all-powerful and is able to do what is humanly impossible, including miracles in the context of the human story. Christians believe Jesus was both human and divine. Old Testament prophets foretold the future and events it records were “types” of things to come. Christianity is predicated on truth about God as well as ethical standards of behaviour. Christians hold to the truth that God’s Word and Christ’s salvation are good for every generation and apply to every generation.

Liberals, on the other hand insist that belief must not go beyond tentative assumptions, because there are no absolutes. They believe it is unsafe to develop fixed ideas about God and theological truth. (Who/what is God? What is he/she like? What is truth?) They believe the Bible contains (or may not contain) the Word of God or words about God, that it is just a book, written by men for men, full of errors, subject to scientific investigation. Liberals insist the Old Testament was written by Jews, for the Jews, and no one else. Bishop Barnes said that, “The Old Testament is Jewish literature. In it are to be found folklore, defective history, half-savage morality, obsolete forms of worship based on primitive and erroneous ideals of the nature of God, and crude science”.

Liberals claim that, apart from their methods, the Bible cannot be studied. They assert the Gospels are inaccurate and inconsistent. Benjamin Franklin’s “The Life and Teachings of Jesus of Nazareth” removed all of the miracles and much of the teachings of Jesus. Thomas Jefferson (a Deist) went through the Gospels picking out ethical and moral teachings and produced the “Jefferson Bible”.

Liberals claim that a modern man or woman who honestly faces all the recent scientific discoveries can no longer accept the supernatural elements of Christianity. They believe the Bible must adjust to modern man and the answer to our problems is man’s reconciliation with man through self-effort.

Liberals believe evangelical beliefs offend modern sensibilities. There is no place for repentance. In some circumstances “confession” is acceptable, but only for therapeutic or cathartic value. To Liberals, the Bible is just a human document; written to inspire religious experience, the record of some peoples’ experiences expressed in mythological or poetic language, not reliable in historical terms. The interpreter is free to decide which teaching he or she will believe or rule out. (Archaeological discoveries, including sites I have visited) have shown the methods and conclusions of many liberals to be wrong;

scores of events and places denied by them have been proven by subsequent scientific evidence.) To the die-hard liberal everything is explicable within the laws of science. Statements in the Bible that are contrary to their world view are ruled out as “primitive”.

Jesus’ divinity is rejected by liberals, who believe it was invented by religious writers. The miracles of Jesus are seen as assertions of belief rather than statements of fact. The work of Christ is dismissed. Notions of sin and sacrifice are seen as Greek or Jewish ideas, which must be reinterpreted.

Liberals limit religion ethics and morals. They assert that we live in a “modern” world and need a modern message. (What we need, in fact, is a presentation of the eternal truth in a contemporary way, which is different.) Liberals claim the Bible has out-of-date stories, concepts and values, that it needs to be reinterpreted to fit current epistemologies, changing social conditions and new theological beliefs. Liberals reject the existence of God (in some cases), Biblical inspiration (or else they emphasise partial inspiration); the authority of the Bible (it is up to us to find out for ourselves; all views are ultimately valid and each person should live in the light they have); the literality of Biblical accounts of creation, the fall, the flood, Jonah, Daniel and other prophets, the Trinity, the miraculous elements of Jesus' life & ministry, the primacy of Jesus Christ (seen as just a teacher of ethics) and his vicarious death and resurrection. They refuse to accept the personhood of the Holy Spirit, the new birth (described by Jesus in John 3:1-8), or the concepts of holiness, Judgement, Second Coming and Hell.

Liberals emphasise current social issues, such as the environment, human rights, sexuality, women in ministry, social justice, access and equity, use of the behavioural sciences (without God) to meet human needs, cultural relativism, situational ethics, economic equality and indigenous rights, stressing a “social” interpretation of passages such as the Sermon on the Mount (while missing their underlying spiritual truths). These are all issues on which Christians need to have credible and well-argued positions, but not at the expense of “core truth”.

What are the results of liberalism?

When Liberalism becomes a faith system, when Christ has no authority, people become selective about what they will read and believe. In these circumstances, it is possible for an agnostic to function as a member of the clergy. A sense of futility emerges, as people wonder why they should bother with Christianity at all (Romans 1:21). Belief becomes shallow and uncertain, hope dies, church attendance declines, the Church loses its moral authority, man is magnified, God is minimized, cults and neo-paganism grow as people become disillusioned with “the church”, there is no missions vision because there is nothing to share, the Bible loses its authority and there is no hope for lasting change in the human condition. (Man is incapable of ultimate self-fulfillment by the powers of intellect; he has no inherent capacity for love, forgiveness or charity).

Responding to the challenge of liberalism

How do we respond to the challenges of godless, faithless, imperious liberal theology? There are several things we need to remember. The first is, don't despair – God is alive and well! Be secure in the divine revelation (Jesus emphasised the literality of the Old Testament). Start with revelation rather than ideology (otherwise we will end up picking and choosing with the same eclecticism as the modernists). Do not be anti-intellectual but overcome error with truth (cf John 8:32). Don't be afraid of a scholastic approach, but don't put the scholar above the Word either (God has magnified His Name and His Word above all things, Psalm 138:2). Know what and why you believe, based on fact.

When someone accused Billy Graham of “putting Christianity back 50 years” he responded that he wanted to put it back 2,000 years. Learn to be a radical Christian. The word “radical” comes from the Latin word for “root”; a radical Christian is one who gets back to the Biblical roots of faith (cf Isaiah 51:10).

When dealing with people, it is important that we see past unbelief and minister to the individual in redemptive love; find out what led to their current position (eg backsliding; disillusionment with Christians; “no one had answers during a crisis”) and allow ourselves to be channels of God's love for them.

Know why you believe the Bible to be the Word of God and encourage people to know and practice it. Emphasise the presence and power of God to meet peoples' needs. Be open to the Holy Spirit– only He can strive with people and bring them to genuine repentance. Study books about apologetics, so that you can answer critics and genuine seekers. Make Christ the centre of your faith. And don't neglect social involvement, or the gap will be filled by others.

Finally, it is not up to you to change human hearts. Remember it is “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6).