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The Roots of Theological Liberalism

Eugene F. Klug

Theological or religious liberalism may be said to reach back to the Garden of Eden. Its roots are traceable to man's yielding to Satan's tantalizing suggestion, "Yea, hath God said?" Ever since that time human doubt has challenged God's revelation of Himself, His Word, His mighty acts — in fact, God Himself. The person of Christ was often the target of early liberalism, particularly His true deity, but at times also His true humanity — a situation which has not changed, of course, up to this present time. Dynamic Monarchianism has been particularly influential among the intelligentsia of all centuries. It started with Theodotus of Byzantium (second century) and Paul of Samosata (bishop of Antioch, ca. 260 A.D.), surfaced again with the Socinians during the Reformation, and reaches down to contemporary times through theologians like Bultmann, among the Protestants, and Hans Küng, among the Catholics. In this way of thinking Jesus was a mere man — a man, however, into whom and upon whom divine power flowed (either at his birth, or his baptism, or his resurrection — the latter not necessarily an actual physical event), elevating him to the level of "God" in a manner of speaking. There probably is no form of liberalism which has been so long-lived, century after century. Dynamic Monarchianism intends to elevate Christ in some manner, but begins and ends with a denial of His full and true deity.

This de-potentialization of Christ, or stripping of divine majesty, is regularly accompanied by a companion de-potentialization of God's Holy Word, the Sacred Scriptures. Almost all forms of liberalism in theology wage a dual attack in this manner. The incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and the inscripturated Word, the Bible, remain the focal targets of liberalism's assault. Neither is held to be sacred, certainly not above a certain amount of criticism, demythologizing, even outright reproach.

Liberalism likes to describe itself more as a method than as a religion. The fact is that it becomes the latter, too, in view of its arbitrary, stilted dialectic, which deliberately sets itself over the inspired Word of God and all the articles of Christian Faith. One of the tragedies of modern times is that this "religion" has become the warp and woof of the ecumenical movement, particularly the World Council of Churches, but also other pan-demoninational organizations as well. The shadow of liberalism is cast over much

of this organizational life, in the conception of faith, life, order, and work of the church. There is no clear-cut respect for the authority of Scripture, nor for Christ's true and full deity, or His work; nor for the meaning of the hope which the church preaches for the future, for salvation, for heaven. The focus instead is on a this-worldly sort of expectation in terms of social gospel and activism.

The consequences of rationalism in theology in our day are that Scripture is viewed as capable only of giving time-bound, though pious, testimony from the apostolic age, not actual revelation; that Biblical criticism, more generally known as higher criticism, or the historical-critical methodology, is conceived to be the Biblical theologian's proper task, questioning all the data presented as historical in the text, especially the so-called miracles and all that smacks of the super-natural; and that Jesus must be seen as a human being, like any other, an archetypal, prophet-like sort of man, upon whom the power of God came in an unusual way and measure, but not the very Word of God Himself, of one substance and being with the Father.

Liberalism has accepted the "findings" of the historical-critical school of Bible interpretations, which is ready to be informed as much by extra-Biblical sources as by the Biblical. Pre-eminent among these sources are the sciences of historiography and psychology. According to their dictates, it must be granted that all historically-oriented religions — Christianity not excepted — derive from the human spirit. It is the church's task to understand this process and translate it down to the masses. The result, of course, has been the virtual shredding, cover to cover, of Holy Scripture. The sophistication and conceit of these artisans of Biblical criticism have left the uninitiated spellbound with their audacious claim of increased self-understanding for the church, for its theology, for its Biblical basis.

Contemporary Liberalism usually traces its roots back to the period of the so-called Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Thus, the modern attack on the Bible began with Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), professor at the University of Halle, who was among the first in modern times to assert that the Bible was to be treated like any other book. Since then there has been an almost uninterrupted chain of attacks on the Bible's integrity as the inspired Word of God, down to contemporary exponents of this way of thinking, like Rudolf Bultmann and his many disciples. Among liberals in all branches of Protestantism and the various schools of thinking within Roman Catholicism there is agreement

with Semler's dictum that the Holy Scriptures should under no circumstances be simply identified with the authoritative Word of God. The result, of course, is predictable: for the last two hundred years there has been no way of determining where, if anywhere, the Word of God can be found. The search for the "canon" within the canon of Scriptural writings has been as hopeless as Don Quixote's jousting with the windmills. In this scrambling, if one still is to be counted as Christian, the task is to try to determine what, if anything, can be identified with the *kerygma*, or "message". Under no circumstances must the *kerygma* be lost or yielded, said Bultmann. But what is this *kerygma*? The field, understandably, is wide open to uncontrollable subjectivism. Private scholarly opinion has totally supplanted the authoritative Word of God itself. The inspired Scriptures of the Holy Spirit, "who" — so the fourth century Christians confessed in the Nicene Creed — "spake by the prophets," no longer retain their normative authority.

If Semler was the progenitor of modern Biblical higher critics, then Friedrich D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), professor at Berlin, is the grandfather of all liberals in systematic theology, the discipline which shapes or formulates doctrinal teaching. The platform for his reconstruction of theology was his book, *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799). This was a landmark achievement, a sort of "Copernican revolution" for liberal theology. Schleiermacher conceived it to be his task to entice the "cultured despisers" away from the by-now-repudiated Biblical text to a sophisticated mystical theology of religious experience, the so-called pious self-consciousness of the theologizing subject. The essence of faith, according to Schleiermacher, was feeling — specifically a felt dependence upon God, in the manner of Jesus. Schleiermacher's Jesus was the archetypal man (cp. the "New Being" of Tillich), because he achieved a perfect kind of God-consciousness.

The push was clearly away from substantive, cognitive truths taught for faith's acceptance (*fides quae creditur*) to faith as an internalized disposition or experience (*fides qua creditur*). Luther and the other Reformers absolutely repudiated an anchorless faith like this. For them it was not an "either-or," but a "both-and," proposition — *both* the clear-cut articles of faith taught in Scripture *and* a personal trust in Christ's atoning self-sacrifice (the chief article). They based their position on solid Scriptural grounds (e.g., Rom. 10:17); but Biblical authority meant little to Schleiermacher. Miracles, even Christ's resurrection, meant even

less. Thus, it is hardly a surprise today when seven British theologians fire a salvo at the resurrection of Christ and His incarnation (John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977). This is all part of the *Vorverstaendnis* (pre-supposition) of liberal theology since Schleiermacher's day. The church, by this posture, must not concern itself about whether Moses really confronted God in the burning bush, whether fire actually fell from heaven to consume Elijah's thoroughly soaked altar of sacrifice, whether Christ really walked on the water, whether He actually (i.e., physically) rose from the grave.

Sin, according to Schleiermacher, is primarily a serious disjunction putting man out of kilter with God — and not total depravity placing man, if left to his own resources, irreparably under the wrath and judgment of God. The best answer for sin is man's "redemption," but redemption in the sense of an individual's felicitous relationship with God and with the community of men around him. Jesus was the one who, best of all men, succeeded in this redemption by achieving a pre-eminent sort of consciousness of God and satisfactory relationship with the Father; and our redemption lies in emulating Jesus in this pursuit. Obviously missing in this "gospel" of Schleiermacher is any reference to vicarious atonement, forgiveness of sins, God's grace in Christ, or eternal life. Schleiermacher's "theology of experience" is little more than Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* couched in theological, Christian-sounding terminology.

After Schleiermacher the liberal mantle fell on Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), professor at Goettingen. He had been strongly influenced by Schleiermacher's theologizing and Kant's philosophy. Ritschl virtually denied every distinctively Christian article of faith, yet claimed to be a Lutheran. Ethical matters were decisive for Ritschl, and he emphasized that Christ most excellently exemplified conformity with the will of God through His life here on earth. Under the loving god of Ritschl (Ritschl rejected completely the concept of wrath in God) ethical conformity is the essence of true religion. Christ can be called "God" because His life had a divine sort of worth, conforming perfectly with the Father's will. Ritschl's theology played a major role in shaping social-gospel theology. In America the chief proponents of his thinking were Walter Rauschenbusch of Colgate University and Shailer Mathews of the University of Chicago.

A contemporary of Ritschl was Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), professor at Tuebingen, and founder of the so-called Tuebingen school of theology. He drew heavily on Hegel's idealistic philosophy and argued that man and the world are but the self-manifestation of God. Thus God can be known and understood from immanent principles discoverable by man through logical principles and observations of the realm of nature around him. Baur repudiated everything supernatural. Thus he denied miracles, the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ — in fact, the historical Christ Himself — though Baur, like other liberal thinkers, wished to hold onto the first-century Jew Jesus. The ethical system which Jesus taught was the only part of Christianity which had abiding value for us today.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), professor successively at Goettingen, Bonn, Heidelberg, and Berlin, was the founder of the famed history-of-religions school. His contention was that the same evolutionary process had gone on in the development of all religions as had occurred in all other areas of life. A similar psychological process had gone on in Christianity as elsewhere in world religions; only the symbols or names were different. Under the influence of Troeltsch the comparative study of religions became the queen of the sciences, and Christian doctrine was thought to have met its Waterloo. Like his liberal predecessors and contemporaries, Troeltsch denied every fundamental article of the Christian faith. Albert Schweitzer was also a disciple of his, agreeing fully that Christianity was only the highest form of psychological development in the field of religion and, therefore, by no means absolute.

One other figure looms large in the liberal movement at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, namely, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), professor for many years at Berlin. The simple religion of Jesus was quite different, Harnack argued, from the doctrine which the church formulated in His name. To Harnack dogma was the "creation of the Hellenic spirit on the soil of the Gospel," and was, therefore, to be repudiated. He was able, of course, to show that some dogmas were fabricated wrongfully through the centuries in various quarters of the church. He refused to acknowledge, however, that many articles of faith were clearly taught for faith's acceptance in Holy Writ. Like his predecessors, he granted only that the Bible was a wonderful book, but hardly authentically inspired by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, authoritative and binding on faith.

The theological descendants of these liberal giants are more numerous than locust swarms. Needless to say, there is no section of the world where Christianity has escaped their impact and erosive effect. Sweeping claims are made that there is no theological school or scholar worthy of the name that has not absorbed much of the historical-critical technique, whether in Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. For a time it was thought that Karl Barth, and others of the so-called neo-orthodox or neo-Protestant or neo-Reformation school, had reversed the tide of liberalism. Barth, it is true, seemed to emphasize once again the importance of the Bible. He never gave up, however, the historical-critical methodology with its various negative judgments against the Scriptures. Thus, he did not agree that the New Testament was in and of itself the message of salvation, but only a reference to it, or a witness of it. The "divine Word" is something other, above and beyond the written Word, and comes "straight down from above." In Barth's teaching on Christ it is as difficult as with the Word to know what is actually event and what is mere sign or symbol. His dialectical method of theologizing (a thought process which sets differing points of view into opposition to each other in order thereby to shed light, hopefully, on the matter in question) has been seen by various scholars as a revival of ancient Docetism because of Barth's "reinterpreting" or reducing of the Scriptures to symbolical "meaning." This allows the old liberal categories to stand, though now garbed in orthodox language. Some have labeled this procedure a deceitful manipulation of fact and event, a serious charge indeed. Moreover, these scholars claim that a speculative form of universalism is implicit in Barth's thought, just as outspoken liberals of the past had entertained universalistic ideas.

The true horror of liberalism is evident precisely at the point where it denies Christ's unique role as the Savior of mankind through His vicarious suffering and death for men's sin. This is what the apostles proclaimed to the world, and this is the Gospel which Christ mandates His church to proclaim also now. The gospels do not consist in pious embellishments of what Jesus' followers thought about Him, fancifully enhanced by miracles and a fabricated report of His resurrection. These gospels consist in the revelation of God, recorded by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, for faith's acceptance. It is not the faith *of* Jesus of which the Scriptures tell: it is faith *in* Jesus which they proclaim. To assert that Jesus was a remarkable person, but not God incarnate, may seem to some to be the way to get modern man to accept Him

without sacrificing intellect, scholarly know-how, and scientific bent. But such an assertion is diametrically opposed to Christian truth as revealed by God through His mighty acts and His inspired Word. Liberalism today should be seen for what it really is: the revival of dynamic Monarchianism! It is significant that even an outsider to Christianity like the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapidé should note the inconsistency of liberal theologians who profess to be Christian and yet deny the resurrection of Christ, thus “sawing off the branch of faith upon which they are sitting” (Time, May 7, 1979). At the same time that liberalism grants that Christ was a mighty fine person, it rejects Him for what He in fact was, God’s own Son and mankind’s Savior, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; cp. 1 John 1:7, 2:2.) For this living hope Christ’s triumphant resurrection was the seal (1 Pet. 1:3-21), in spite of all of liberalism’s denials.