

Church History: “Self-Deception” 1850 –

(Part 3)

What is Protestant Liberalism?

“It was an ‘attempt to lead the Protestant churches into the new world of modern science, modern philosophy, and modern history’. Liberals ‘precipitated the most fundamental controversy to wrack the churches since the age of the Reformation’.

“Liberals believed that Christian theology had to come to terms with modern science if it ever hoped to claim and hold the allegiance of intelligent men of the day. They refused, therefore, to accept religious beliefs on authority alone. They insisted that faith had to pass the tests of reason and experience. Man’s mind, they believed, was capable of thinking God’s thoughts after him, and the best clues to the nature of God were human intuition and reason.

“The *Origin of the Species*, the most important book of the century, revolutionized the concepts about the origin and evolution of life on planet earth. Darwin followed his first bombshell by a second. In 1871 his *Descent of Man* applied the natural selection to human beings and reached the controversial conclusion that man’s ancestors were probably monkey-like animals. . . .As time went on liberals came to believe that the evolutionary theory supplemented rather than contradicted the basics of Christianity.

“As serious as the challenge of science was to orthodox Christianity, it was clearly secondary to the new views of history. Science could only question God’s rule in the physical world, but historical criticism advanced directly to the domain of the Christian faith, to the revelation of God in the Bible.

“Liberals welcomed higher criticism because they recognized a radically different view of the Bible was necessary for intelligent moderns. They felt free from the need to apologize for the whole Bible as the infallible Word of God.

“The studies of the higher critics, said the liberals, make it clear that God has revealed himself through an evolutionary process. . . . finds its fulfillment in Jesus, where God is portrayed as the loving Father of all men. If biblical criticism denies Jesus’ miracles, his Virgin Birth, his pre-existence, this does not make Jesus less valuable to us. Belief in the divinity of Jesus does not rest in any of these; it rests solely on the fact that he is the source of a value-creating movement; he has led men to find the God of values. That is, Jesus’ life was the embodiment of such high ethical ideals and attainment that we are inspired to live as he did. Jesus is divine in the sense that he can do for us what God does; he makes us conscious of the highest in life. From Jesus’ influence, then, come the church, a value-creating community: the spearhead for building a society inspired by love, the kingdom of God upon earth. “The impact of liberalism was not limited to any single denomination or country. It challenged traditional orthodox bodies all

over Europe and North America. Liberal theology appeared among New England churches under the title New Theology. . . .Prior to 1880 most New England ministers held to the sovereignty of God; to the innate depravity of mankind (which they traced to the sin of the first man); to the atonement of Jesus Christ, the ground of man’s forgiveness of sin; to the Holy Spirit as essential to conversion; and to the eternal separation of the saved and lost in heaven or hell.

“After 1880 every one of these beliefs came under heated fire from the liberals. The spark that lit the flames of controversy was a series of articles in the *Andover Review*: . . .that heathen who die without any knowledge of the gospel will have an opportunity in the future life either to accept or to reject the gospel before facing final judgment. Step by step in the debate that followed faculty members moved toward the public defense of liberal theology.”

“No one expressed the irony of liberalism better than H. Richard Niebuhr when he said in liberalism “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

“Church History” Bruce L Shelley pp.411-432

What is Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is usually dated from a series of twelve small books published from 1910 to 1915 containing articles and essays designed to defend fundamental Christian truths.

In 1920, “fundamentalists” within the Northern Baptist Convention were called to a conference in Buffalo, New York. This group of conservatives believed that the modernists were surrendering the fundamentals of the gospel: the sinful nature of man, his inability to be saved apart from God’s grace, the centrality of Jesus’ death for the regeneration of the individual and the authoritative revelation of the Bible. They were unable to gain the adoption of a confession of faith among Northern Baptists, but although some did not consider theirs a lost cause, more militant Baptists disagreed and formed the General Association of Regular Baptists.

The Presbyterian champion of orthodoxy was Professor J. Gresham Machen of Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1929 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church authorized a reorganization of the seminary. Machen and a small retinue of distinguished professors at the school felt that a merger of boards strengthened the liberal influence in the school. They withdrew from Princeton in protest and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. When Machen refused to break his ties with the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions, he was brought to trial in his church’s courts and found guilty of rebellion against superiors. As a result conservatives in the denomination founded the Orthodox Presbyterian and Bible Presbyterian churches.

At the heart of these modernist-fundamentalist differences were conflicting views of the Bible.

“Church History” Bruce L Shelley pp.451,452

