CHAPTER 17

Deeper Understanding of the Liberal Gospel

Liberal Theology is the expansive term which includes many doctrines which deviate intrinsically from acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as immutable and the substitutionary work of Yeshua, Jesus on the Cross as the only acceptable way to reconciliation with Elohim for all humans of all ages. As a theological construct, liberalism is a product of human reasoning and logic. However, because liberal theologians are great humanists and engaged in great social works, they are so popular that their views are scrutinized, posing a challenge to the faith of many young believers who may admire their personalities and public image. Many of the mainline Protestant Denominations have opened up to liberal theology and have lost some of the most fundamental pillars on which the gospel has rested since the first century AD.

Liberal Theology needs to be examined further in this course so that we can have a better and fuller understanding of what it is. In this way, we can be equipped to stand for biblical accuracy. Writing in thegospelcoalition.org website, Andrew Hoffecker defines Liberal Theology and expounds it extensively.

> "Liberal theology is rooted in modern, secular theories of knowledge and has moved towards participation in the work of the church as the priority for Christians at the expense of delineating theological belief, which has led to the abandonment of many orthodox beliefs in many mainline denominations.

He goes further to articulate eye-opening statements in the scholarly article which peels off the veil to a form of Christianity which has been gaining traction since the 17th Century:

> "Liberal theology includes a wide variety of theological, philosophical, and biblical perspectives that have their roots

> in the European Enlightenment (c. 1660–1798). In preceding centuries, Christian theology was expressed in creeds and confessions based on the authority of the Bible and tradition which extended back to the early church. The newer theologies were products of universities that substituted modern, secular theories of knowledge that rejected external sources of knowledge and substituted subjective autonomy of human reason or experience."

Hoffecker in the same article identified distinctions between standard theology and those which emerged from the Enlightenment:

> "Although previous confessions differed in their emphases, they expressed doctrines consistent with the belief that the Bible and the creeds articulated a coherent, unified, and authoritative worldview, which Christians accepted as cognitively true, and constituted a sound basis for living. The Enlightenment methods of rationalism and empiricism replaced traditional alliances between philosophy and theology in the search for truth. European thinkers argued that traditional theologies were outmoded and that Christianity must adapt to developments in modern culture if it was going to survive. Without modification, it was thought, Christianity would become increasingly irrelevant. Such accommodation made liberal religion subjective—a matter of one's moral speculation or a function of human feeling or intuition and later as a matter of pragmatic action."

In the same article, Andrew Hoffecker traced the origins and growth of this form of theological thought and how it invariably opposed one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Bible: The concept of the Triune Elohim or Trinity.

> "The earliest expression of liberalizing Christianity was the Polish Racovian Catechism's (1605) Unitarian beliefs which replaced the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. Eventually,

> Deism gained wider acceptance as a rational substitute for historic Christian belief. Deists claimed that from the vast number of doctrines and practices of the world's religions, human reason could distill a bare minimum of beliefs that constitute a purely natural or rational religion. One Deist enumerated the following beliefs: the existence of God; God is worshipped by virtuous behavior (all other acts such as prayer, hymn singing, and sacraments not being virtuous are irrelevant); penitence washes away sins (not Jesus' death and resurrection); rewards and punishment await mankind after death; priests ought to abandon teaching mysteries (especially miracles) and instead encourage rational moral living."

In that same piece, Hoffecker did an excellent work in linking up the rise of Liberal theology with the rise of intellectualism where the human mind played an oversized role in formulating this changed expression of Christian thought:

> "The modernizing of Christianity was abetted by new methods of biblical interpretation. Previously the Bible was privileged as divinely inspired and therefore authoritative in its theological and historical content. Theologians cited biblical texts to establish doctrines and practice. Liberal scholars insisted on applying modern hermeneutical tools used to interpret other ancient literature. The unique redemptive events witnessed to by the Bible were reinterpreted as myths that were products of communities's religious experience at the time they were written. Lower criticism evaluated the preservation and transmission of texts and established which texts were most reliable. Higher critical methods went further by using secular reason to evaluate authorship, dates of composition and questioning traditional meanings and interpretation."

Hoffecker identified a major moving force in propelling this philosophical approach to theology in the person of Immanuel Kant, one of the most brilliant minds of his generation.

> "Philosophical innovations also profoundly influenced the development of liberal theology. Immanuel Kant articulated a revolutionary view of knowledge which made mankind autonomous in their knowing. He proposed a motto for the Enlightenment—"Dare to reason"—which he believed freed humans from slavish adherence to previous ways of thinking. He detached reason from faith regardless of its background in Protestant and Catholic traditions. Only what could be demonstrated by reason or learned through scientific method qualified as knowledge. Kant thereby not only assured the advance of science but also drove a wedge between religion that dealt with matters of faith and scientific experimentation which established matters of fact.
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> In Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793), Kant transformed Christianity from a redemptive historical religion revealed in the Bible into a deistic moralism. He dehistoricized the Fall by declaring Adam a moralistic idealization of how all people corrupt their moral dispositions. People do not inherit original sin, but like the story of Adam every person subverts moral duty, which is ultimate, to lesser, subordinate priorities. Being "born again" (John 3:3) was not the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit but an act of the human will which reorients the human disposition toward moral duty. Jesus's divinity consisted of his being the archetype of moral good will, not the ontological Son of God. Jesus's work was not a substitutionary atonement. Sin, or what he called "radical evil," is so personal that it cannot be atoned by someone else but must be atoned only by the autonomous self."

One insightful view of Hoffecker which all students of the Bible should understand is the way the philosophical inclination of

Immanuel Kant affected how liberals approach the sensitive issue of biblical interpretations.

> "To justify his divergences from orthodox Christianity, Kant said that whenever the Bible differs from our morally legislative reason we must conform the text to rational moral principles. He also formulated the modern distinction between the priest and the scholar. While clergy are morally bound to defend historical confessions of their respective churches, scholars are free to criticize and publish their findings based on modern criteria. This distinction established the precedent for a double standard of truth between what the church teaches based on revelation found in the Bible and the newly emerging modern theology based on rational criteria. Kant's philosophy and his reasonable religion earned him the title "the philosopher of [liberal] Protestantism."

Background

> The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy in an article First published Thu May 20, 2010; substantive revision Tue Jul 28, 2020 has this entry on this man whose works were quoted by Andrew Hoffecker:

Immanuel Kant

> Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is the central figure in modern philosophy. He synthesized early modern rationalism and empiricism, set the terms for much of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, and continues to exercise a significant influence today in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, and other fields. The fundamental idea of Kant's "critical philosophy" – especially in his three Critiques: the Critique of Pure Reason (1781, 1787), the Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790) – is human autonomy. He argues that the

> human understanding is the source of the general laws of nature that structure all our experience; and that human reason gives itself the moral law, which is our basis for belief in God, freedom, and immortality. Therefore, scientific knowledge, morality, and religious belief are mutually consistent and secure because they all rest on the same foundation of human autonomy, which is also the final end of nature according to the teleological worldview of reflecting judgment that Kant introduces to unify the theoretical and practical parts of his philosophical system.

A Practical Example of Liberal Theology

Late Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the most popular religious figures of both the 20th and 21st Century. A powerful speaker, his impact was far beyond his native South Africa. Few of us understood his theology, which is one of the driving forces of the modern ecumenical movement. The following piece is a typical liberal theology on convergence from Archbishop Tutu:

God Is Not a Christian

By Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Reader Supported News 02 June 11

The following is excerpted from the Archbishop Desmond Tutu's new book, "God Is Not A Christian: And Other Provocations." This talk also comes from a forum in Britain, where Tutu addressed leaders of different faiths during a mission to the city of Birmingham in 1989.

> "hey tell the story of a drunk who crossed the street and accosted a pedestrian, asking him, "I shay, which ish the other shide of the shtreet?" The pedestrian, somewhat nonplussed, replied, "That side, of course!" The drunk said, "Shtrange. When I wash on that shide, they shaid it wash

thish shide." Where the other side of the street is depends on where we are. Our perspective differs with our context, the things that have helped to form us; and religion is one of the most potent of these formative influences, helping to determine how and what we apprehend of reality and how we operate in our own specific context.

My first point seems overwhelmingly simple: that the accidents of birth and geography determine to a very large extent to what faith we belong. The chances are very great that if you were born in Pakistan, you are a Muslim, or a Hindu if you happened to be born in India, or a Shintoist if it is Japan, and a Christian if you were born in Italy. I don't know what significant fact can be drawn from this - perhaps that we should not succumb too easily to the temptation to exclusiveness and dogmatic claims to a monopoly of the truth of our particular faith. You could so easily have been an adherent of the faith that you are now denigrating, but for the fact that you were born here rather than there.

My second point is this: not to insult the adherents of other faiths by suggesting, as sometimes has happened, that for instance when you are a Christian the adherents of other faiths are really Christians without knowing it. We must acknowledge them for who they are in all their integrity, with their conscientiously held beliefs; we must welcome them and respect them as who they are and walk reverently on what is their holy ground, taking off our shoes, metaphorically and literally. We must hold to our particular and peculiar beliefs tenaciously, not pretending that all religions are the same, for they are patently not the same. We must be ready to learn from one another, not claiming that we alone possess all truth and that somehow, we have a corner on God.

We should in humility and joyfulness acknowledge that the supernatural and divine reality we all worship in some form or other transcends all our particular categories of thought and imagining, and that because the divine - however named, however apprehended or conceived - is infinite and we are forever finite, we shall never comprehend the divine completely. So we should seek to share all insights we can and be ready to learn, for instance, from the techniques of the spiritual life that are available in religions other than our own. It is interesting that most religions have a transcendent reference point, a mysterium tremendum, that comes to be known by deigning to reveal itself, himself, herself, to humanity; that the transcendent reality is compassionate and concerned; that human beings are creatures of this supreme, supra mundane reality in some way, with a high destiny that hopes for an everlasting life lived in close association with the divine, either as absorbed without distinction between creature and creator, between the divine and human, or in a wonderful intimacy which still retains the distinctions between these two orders of reality.

When we read the classics of the various religions in matters of prayer, meditation, and mysticism, we find substantial convergence, and that is something to rejoice at. We have enough that conspires to separate us; let us celebrate that which unites us, that which we share in common.

Surely it is good to know that God (in the Christian tradition) created us all (not just Christians) in his image, thus investing us all with infinite worth, and that it was with all humankind that God entered into a covenant relationship, depicted in the covenant with Noah when God promised he would not destroy his creation again with water. Surely, we can rejoice that the eternal word, the Logos of God, enlightens everyone - not just Christians, but everyone who comes into the world; that what we call the Spirit of God is

> not a Christian preserve, for the Spirit of God existed long before there were Christians, inspiring and nurturing women and men in the ways of holiness, bringing them to fruition, bringing to fruition what was best in all. We do scant justice and honor to our God if we want, for instance, to deny that Mahatma Gandhi was a truly great soul, a holy man who walked closely with God. Our God would be too small if he was not also the God of Gandhi: if God is one, as we believe, then he is the only God of all his people, whether they acknowledge him as such or not. God does not need us to protect him. Many of us perhaps need to have our notion of God deepened and expanded. It is often said, half in jest, that God created man in his own image and man has returned the compliment, saddling God with his own narrow prejudices and exclusivity, foibles, and temperamental quirks. God remains God, whether God has worshippers or not.
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> This mission in Birmingham to which I have been invited is a Christian celebration, and we will make our claims for Christ as unique and as the Savior of the world, hoping that we will live out our beliefs in such a way that they help to commend our faith effectively. Our conduct far too often contradicts our profession, however. We are supposed to proclaim the God of love, but we have been guilty as Christians of sowing hatred and suspicion; we commend the one whom we call the Prince of Peace, and yet as Christians we have fought more wars than we care to remember. We have claimed to be a fellowship of compassion and caring and sharing, but as Christians we often sanctify socio-political systems that belie this, where the rich grow ever richer and the poor grow ever poorer, where we seem to sanctify a furious competitiveness, ruthless as can only be appropriate to the jungle." (www.readersupportednews.org)

One scripture which comes to mind is this:

> *Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set (Proverbs 22:28).*

In the modern era, some of the most popular preachers no longer insist accept this truth:

> *Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).*

Assignment

1. Please outline 5 deficiencies of liberal theology based on the article by Andrew Hoffecker.
2. What did you find divergent from the Bible in the article by late Archbishop Desmond Tutu?
3. How helpful is this chapter to your understanding of the subject matter of this course?