

Are We Again Turning Away from Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy?

The effort to package Christianity for greater acceptability. Liberals were concerned with making Christianity more palatable to the culture of the day. Today, Evangelicals often are concerned with the same thing. Willow Creek once sought to represent church as indistinguishable from the surrounding business culture. A good portion of Evangelical churches today use such techniques of blending in with the culture to draw seekers and make them comfortable enough to stay and hear a gospel message. The problem is that they then struggle to move people into a greater theological understanding and spiritual growth. The result [as it was for churches adapting to culture a century ago] is a church made up of people indistinguishable from their culture: materialistic, secular in priorities and values, and lacking life change, even if they do grow in Bible knowledge. This also results in a shift away from using the Bible to assess and understand culture, and toward using culture to assess and understand the Bible. The result of the liberal effort was to create churches that do not believe in any of the most important distinctive characteristics of the Christian faith – scriptural integrity; the incarnation, deity, and resurrection of Christ; or the atonement Christ accomplished on the cross – in other words, they created a Christianity that is worthless. I fear the trend in Evangelicalism is to soften the gospel and dilute the theology to the point that many even in our seeker churches never get saved, and those who do never grow to be true disciples of Christ. Marsden [*Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 255] pointed out that a century ago, among Conservatives, true discipleship was thought to include sacrifice, while it was Liberals who emphasized the worldly accomplishment and self-fulfillment now so pervasive in Evangelical churches. As is the case with most Liberals, a person has a hard time now telling an Evangelical from a peaceful agnostic by their lifestyles or values.

Abandoning the biblical text and early church theological heritage. Liberals abandoned dependence on, and confidence in, the biblical text because they could not believe in it as revelation, nor in its portrayal of supernatural events. Likewise they could not believe in the theological heritage of the early church or the reformers, because that heritage reflected supreme confidence in the biblical text. Thus they spawned the search for a non-biblical “historical Jesus,” the efforts to judge the integrity of each line of scripture, and revision of the important doctrines determined by the early church’s ecumenical councils. The Evangelical movement contains many independent churches which are so doubtful of tradition, or so rooted in the Fundamentalist movement of a century ago, that they too abandon their theological heritage, in an effort to be more purely Bible-based, not recognizing that a discerning look at their theological heritage would benefit them greatly through the insights of hundreds of good scholars over thousands of years, and protection from previously identified heresies and from the attacks of modern critics. Whether independent or not, many churches within the Evangelical movement today are taking steps which suggest they effectively [if not officially] are abandoning large portions of the biblical text, as they pander to the lowest common denominator of their audiences and the need to build ministry empires. Sermons by some pastors who are held up in this movement as great influencers contain barely any discussion about scripture, relying more on popular psychology, cultural issues, and charm. Some churches also seriously distort the biblical message, with such emphases as prosperity promises, social revolution mandates, risk of losing your salvation, universality of tongues, and not discerning your emotional ecstasy from the Holy Spirit’s prompting.

Effort to become successful on Modernity's terms. Liberals wanted respect from secular academia, which was one motivation for their adaptation to culture. Oden [*After Modernity, What?*, 11] went so far as to say that the Liberals allowed the philosophies of secular academia to transform their views of Jesus and Christianity. Today's Evangelical scholars are adopting Liberal techniques and assumptions, in part to gain credibility with Liberal academia. In part this is the adoption of historical and literary criticism. These techniques are optimized for analyzing poorly attested, non-inspired, texts, and Oden [81, 107] says these techniques [as Liberals devised them] carry assumptions that repress the Bible's ability to speak clearly and address the questions it was designed to answer. At the least, Evangelicals have made modern epistemology the foundation for their theology and exegesis, instead of Scripture itself. For the last century, Evangelicalism also has relied on the Modern assumption of needing to defend the Bible's historicity with documentary or archaeological evidence. While the effort is worth pursuing, relying on it is dangerous because science [natural and social] sometimes goes with theological understanding and sometimes against [it is fallible: see the liberal results using historical and literary criticism or the medical community's insistence in the 1970s-1980s that the margarine of that day was healthier than butter!], and when it goes against, we are in trouble if we were counting on it. If we use development theory in our analysis, we are relying on the work of Van Harnack or Bultmann, strongly liberal theologians, and even reliance on modern reason and experience is a resort to Liberal and Modern assumptions and techniques.

Willingness to depart from theological heritage and classic exegesis. Liberals have believed that new views and techniques are inherently better than pre-modern ones, and this led them into historical and literary criticism and thus abandoning all of what was glorious and supernatural in Christianity, even the resurrection. In the Evangelical seminaries, there is an increasing willingness to shove aside the conclusions and methods of our heritage, and to adopt the techniques of the Liberals in an effort to seek the truth wherever it might lead. Thus, we try to use historical and literary criticism techniques for apologetics and rely on extra-biblical sources to explain the scriptures. These tools in themselves are not evil, but if we are open to not defending the integrity of the text and our theological speculation is not bounded by the orthodox core of beliefs we have inherited from the early church's ecumenical councils, then we are vulnerable to stray into heresy. As moderate conservatives were vulnerable a century ago, already many Evangelical scholars have moved from inerrancy to infallibility, and I have heard a supposedly conservative professor state his opinion in class that abandoning even infallibility does not mean necessarily going down the path of liberalism. Discussions in other classes have led me to conclude that many Evangelical scholars are now willing to give up creation, to see the Mosaic Law strictly through the interpretive lens of Babylonian and other regional law systems, to stress the humanity of Christ over his divinity, to stress the human influence of the scripture writers over the divine direction of the scripture writers, to doubt the authorship of several Bible books, to think God might ask us to sin to accomplish something good, even to consider the possibility that the book of John is non-historical.