The Dangers of Liberal Theology

By Curt Daniel

What is theological Liberalism? There is no one Liberal denomination or creed, nor is it a homogeneous movement. Rather, it is a general tendency towards worldly philosophy and against historic Christianity (which may variously be termed Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy). Within those professing Christianity there are those holding to the essentials of the faith and those who do not; the latter group includes cultism, Roman Catholicism and Liberalism. This short paper examines Liberal Theology.

Liberal Theology is not new. The Jewish Sadducees were basically Liberals who denied the existence of angels, demons and the resurrection of the body (Acts 23:8), and tended to reject the inspiration of all the Hebrew Bible except the Pentateuch. There was little Liberalism among the early Church Fathers, except for the Alexandrian School, which greatly allegorized Scripture, weakened Christ’s deity, and frequently taught that all men (and even Satan) would eventually be saved. Pelagianism was somewhat Liberal in stressing the ability and goodness of Man and denying Original Sin. Later, during the Renaissance, much of Catholic culture and popular religion was a man-centered Liberalism that borrowed much from ancient Greek culture and philosophy.

Then at the time of the Reformation, Socinianism denied the Trinity and deity of Christ. In America this developed into Unitarianism, while in Europe it lay behind the Enlightenment and its revulsion for all traditional religion, ostensibly in the name of science and mature thought. Then there was 18th-century Deism, which denied the Trinity and deity of Christ, but also God’s intervention in history (God was an absentee landlord, therefore there are no miracles). Related to this was Rationalism, which virtually deified reason and dethroned revelation. Other philosophies followed (Empiricism, Skepticism, etc.), all having counterparts in theology. Latitudinarianism was a movement to reduce the basics of Christianity to an absolute minimum; in effect, virtually everyone was a Christian.

Classic Liberalism reached its height in 19th-century Germany with its emphasis on the universal Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of all men, and the development of the Historical-Critical method of studying the Bible. It is also known as Modernism because it implies that what is new is good and true, and what is old is bad and false.
There was also the Comparative Religion movement, saying that all religious are true and developed from the same polytheistic nucleus. Classic Liberalism’s optimism was weakened by World War I, and most of it changed into Neo-Orthodoxy, which stressed the otherness of God, subjective and existential faith, and the need to recognize myths in Scripture. More recently there has been Neo-Liberalism and the Ecumenical Movement. All of these forms are man-centered, and ignore, oppose or condescendingly patronize historic Christian orthodoxy. Liberal Theology dominates all the so-called “mainstream Protestant denominations” and has even made major advances in Roman Catholicism.

In the second century, a Church Father named Irenaeus listed and refuted most of the heresies of his day in a book entitled Against Heresies. Below is a list of some of the main heresies of Liberal Theology. Not all Liberals accept them all, but the general tendency can easily be detected. Scripture tells us to “Test all things” (1 Thess. 5:21). The only true test is, “What saith the Scriptures?” (cf. Acts 17:11). “To the Law and to the Testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, it is because they have no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). Therefore, each Liberal theory will be compared with the Bible. Let the reader judge weather Liberalism is true or is weighed in the balances and found wanting.
1. “The worst heresy in church history is that of equating the Bible with the Word of God.”
   But: The Bible itself identifies itself as “the Word of God” (e.g., Mark 7:13; Luke 8:11, 21; 11:28; John 10:35; Rom. 9:6; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Tim. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:9; Tit. 2:5; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23; 1 John 2:14, etc.). Emil Brunner’s theory, therefore, is wrong. Virtually all Liberal heresies can be traced back to a denial of Holy Scripture.

2. “The use of the Bible as the final authority is bibliaotry (book-worship).”
   But: All theories are to be tested by Scripture and Scripture alone (1 Thess. 5:21). The Bereans were commended for this (Acts 17:11). Jesus Himself appealed to the Bible as the final authority of truth (Matt. 4; 22:29; John 10:35). There is no higher authority than God. Since Scripture is the Word of God, it alone is the highest authority to which we can appeal. “Thus saith the Lord” and “It is written” settle a matter. The Bible is no “paper pope”, as Liberals scoff. It is the Word of God.

3. “The Bible contains the Word of God, but is not the Word of God itself.”
   But: This is not taught in the Bible. The Bible says that it is the Word of God, not merely contains it. A cup can contain coffee without being coffee. The very nature of Scripture is that it is the very Word of God, not the word of Man (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13).

4. “The Bible becomes the Word of God when we believe it.”
   But: Scripture does not say that it “becomes” the Word of God. It is already the Word of God whether anyone believes in it or not. We merely need faith and illumination to believe what it already is (cf. Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:17-18). But our faith cannot make it what it is not already by nature.

5. “The Bible bears witness to the Word of God, but is not the Word of God itself.”
   But: This too is not what Scripture says about itself. The Bible is God’s Word. Liberals often say that God’s “saving acts in history” are alone the Word of God, to which the Bible witnesses. It is correct that in these special acts and miracles, God communicates to Man. But they are not verbal communication. Scripture alone is the verbal Word of God and takes precedence even over miracles (Luke 16:31).
6. “Jesus, not the Bible, is the Word of God.”
   But: It is not a matter of either/or but both/and. Jesus is the personal, incarnate Word of God (John 1:1, 14; Rev. 19:13). But Jesus Himself also referred to the Bible as the Word of God (Matt. 4:4; John 10:35; 17:17). Jesus testified to Scripture, and in turn Scripture testifies to Jesus (Luke 24:44, 46; Acts 10:43; John 5:46). Liberals would reject both testimonies.

7. “The Bible is ‘a Word of God’ together with preaching.”
   But: Only the inspired preaching of the prophets and apostles could ever be considered ‘a Word of God’ comparable to Scripture, and even then they based their preaching on special divine revelation. We do not receive this direct divine revelation any more (cf. Heb. 1:1-2), and so our preaching is qualitatively different from Scripture. It is used by God only insofar as it is faithful to the message of Scripture. Liberal preaching is not even that.

8. “Divine revelation is not verbal propositions, but personal encounter.”
   But: Scripture does not teach this. God moved the prophets and apostles in a special, miraculous way (2 Pet. 1:21). He guided them in the exact words to write down. God even selected the exact letters in the words (Matt. 5:18; Gal. 3:16). Neo-Orthodoxy says that human language is incapable of being used by God to communicate His message. This wrongly limits God. God gave us His Word through the words of His inspired prophets and apostles. These words have meaning and form sentences (propositions). What Scripture says, God says.

9. “The Bible is subject to human reason.”
   But: We are explicitly told to submit our minds to God (2 Cor. 10:5; Pro. 3:5). Revelation, not reason, is our guide. The Bible judges us; we are not to judge the Bible (John 12:48). We believe that we may understand, not vice-versa. Liberalism refuses to truly believe and therefore does not understand.

10. “The Bible is to be interpreted exactly like every other book.”
   But: The Bible is to be interpreted according to its grammar and historical context. But because it is unique and unlike all other human books, it cannot be interpreted exactly like all others. The first rule in properly interpreting it is realizing that it is not a mere human book (cf. Matt. 22:29). It is to be interpreted in accord with its own nature and message.
Recommended Reading:

Machen, J. Gresham, Christianity and Liberalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).


Packer, J.I., Fundamentalism and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

MacArthur, Jr., John, Exposing False Spiritual Leaders and Avoiding Spiritual Counterfeits (Chicago: Moody Press).

Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies (Garden City: Doubleday).

Schaeffer, Francis, The Church Before the Watching World (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press).

Van Til, Cornelius, Christianity and Barthianism (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed).

Lindsell, Harold, The Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

Smith, Wilbur, Therefore, Stand (Grand Rapids: Kregel).


Ryrie, Charles C., Neo-Orthodoxy (Kansas City: Walterick).

Sell, Alan P.F., Theology in Turmoil (Grand Rapids: Baker).