

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

NINETEENTH-CENTURY THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM AND MODERN EVANGELICALISM

The four academic degrees that I have earned are in history and historical theology. Therefore, the historical perspective is quite important to me. In this *Perspective*, I seek to give an important historical perspective to the origin and development of 19th-century theological liberalism. When I am finished, I will make application to what is occurring within certain parts of current American evangelicalism.

- First, a brief review of the origins and development of theological liberalism. The shift really begins with the 18th century Enlightenment, which altered the connection between faith and reason. Near the end of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote several books that attempted to destroy the traditional arguments for God's existence. For Kant, there was no empirical way to answer questions about God, immortality and human freedom. Kant therefore blocked the road to knowledge of God through reason. One could not know God for there was no way to verify His existence rationally. Religion, then, to him, was mostly human-centered in its orientation and grounded in a sense of duty and obligation. To Kant, religion was not an objective set of beliefs rooted in God's revelation to man. Instead, one lived as if God existed and as if one were accountable to Him. Personal religion was a set of ethics, not propositional theology. As Kant blocked the road to God through reason, the only road left was the interior life, the realm of subjective experience. The founder of theological liberalism, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), maintained that Christianity was not knowledge or propositional truth, nor a system of ethics; it was a "feeling of absolute dependence" on God. This was the essence of Christianity. Gone was any affirmation of Christ's deity, His substitutionary atonement or propositional revelation from God. If Christianity is reduced to feeling and Jesus was merely a suffering man, then the question became, can we trust the New Testament accounts of Jesus? David Strauss (1808-1874) interjected the term "myth" into the discussion about the Gospel accounts. He argued that the supernatural elements in the Gospels were not trustworthy. The Gospels were not history but mere reflections of the New Testament writers on what they wanted to believe about Jesus. If the NT contained myth, what then is the distinctive nature of Christianity? Theological liberalism reduced the Christian faith to righteous behavior, grounded in the ethic of love. To Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), the center of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God and its ethics. Further, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) asserted that the essence of the Christian faith was "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." Was Christianity unique? Not to liberal theology. From 1880-1920, in what was called the History of Religions School in Germany, Christianity was regarded as a human religion like all others that needed to be studied historically. Jesus was a historical figure but not the one pictured in the NT. Liberal theology, then, began a quest for the historical Jesus. Since we

cannot trust the NT, what is the ground on which we can build our understanding of Jesus? Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) called for the “demythologizing” of the Gospels, to find the kernel of truth in Christianity. That Jesus existed, Bultmann argued, is about all that can be claimed as certain. The antisupernaturalism of the Enlightenment reached its peak with Bultmann.

- Second, in a recent issue of *Time* magazine, an article by Jon Meacham summarizes the “new Christianity” of Rob Bell. Meacham offers some helpful information on the family and background of Bell and also offers a most positive affirmation of Bell’s new book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Bell suggests that the redemptive work of Jesus may be universal, that all could have a place in heaven, “whatever that turns out to be.” As Meacham writes, “Bell’s arguments about heaven and hell raise doubts about the core of the Evangelical worldview, changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation.” Indeed, Bell suggests, “I have long wondered if there is a massive shift coming in what it means to be a Christian. Something new is in the air.” All of this sounds hauntingly familiar. Early in the 20th century, a most gifted Protestant pastor and preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, became the epitome of American theological liberalism. He preached that we must abandon the literal truth of the Bible and the existence of hell. It was time, the Fosdick and other liberals argued, for Christianity to surrender its supernatural claims. Meacham maintains that “Bell is more at home with this expansive liberal tradition than he is with the old-time believers. . . He believes that Jesus, the Son of God, was sacrificed for the sins of humanity and that the prospect of a place of eternal torment seems irreconcilable with the God of love.” Meacham is correct in his analysis because Bell states that “At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.” For this reason, Bell’s work is so significant. History is repeating itself! Gary Dorrien of Union Theological Seminary, has observed that “it was the doctrine of hell that marked the first major departures from theological orthodoxy in the United States. The early liberals just could not and would not accept a doctrine of hell that included conscious eternal punishment and the pouring out of God’s wrath upon sin.” Therefore, they abandoned it! Bell strongly contends that “. . . [the idea that part of] humanity [will] spend forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance of anything better. . . is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.” Theologian Albert Mohler correctly observes that “Bell’s argument is centered in his affirmation of God’s loving character, but he alienates love from justice and holiness. This is the traditional liberal line. Love is divorced from holiness and becomes mere sentimentality. Bell wants to rescue God from any teaching that His wrath is poured out upon sin and sinners, certainly in any eternally conscious sense. But Bell also wants God to vindicate the victims of murder, rape, child abuse, and similar evil. He seems to not recognize that he has undercut his own story, leaving God unable or unwilling to bring true justice.” Bell has abdicated biblical authority, denied biblical truth and presented a false Gospel. Mohler: “It misleads sinners and fails to save. It also fails in its central aim—to convince sinners to think better of God. The real Gospel is the Gospel that saves—the Gospel that must be heard and believed if sinners are to be saved.” Many years ago H. Richard Niebuhr brilliantly distilled theological liberalism down to one sentence: “A God

without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” History is repeating itself—and we within evangelicalism had better sit up and take notice!

See James P. Eckman, *Perspectives about Church History*, pp. 64-69, Jon Meacham in *Time* (14 April 2011), and AlbertMohler.com (16 March 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

CLAIMS ABOUT PLANNED PARENTHOOD

Planned Parenthood is one of the most dangerous organizations in America right now. Its view of human life growing in the womb is reprehensible. Basically, for Planned Parenthood, the baby has no value until it exists outside of the mother’s womb. It values the rights of the woman more highly than the rights of the child in the womb. It stands against everything I hold dear as a Christian. Planned Parenthood annually receives about \$363,200,000 in various government grants and contracts. [\$100 million of that amount comes from the federal government; the rest comes from various state funds.] Congress recently debated ending all funding of Planned Parenthood because no matter how one examines the issue, the government is indirectly funding abortions that Planned Parenthood performs.

One of the problems with this debate has been the use of facts and figures that are not always accurate or true. In this *Perspective*, permit me to be as accurate as I can be about Planned Parenthood. As Christians, when we debate or present a position, we must be as accurate as we can be. It is a matter of integrity.

1. Planned Parenthood claims that only 3% of its health services are abortion services. In 2009, Planned Parenthood conducted 332,278 abortions. It has 3 million clients. Therefore, about 10% of its clients receive an abortion.
2. Planned Parenthood does perform other services, including 1.8 million receiving cancer prevention and 4 million receiving tests and treatments for sexually transmitted disease.
3. The annual budget of Planned Parenthood is over \$1 billion, with over \$363 million provided by federal and state government grants and contracts. It performed annually over 332,000 abortions as well, about 10% of its offered services. No matter how one views Planned Parenthood, it is a giant organization, performing about 332,000 abortions and offering counsel that does not fit with God’s revelation. It would seem wise for the US government to end all forms of funding for Planned Parenthood. It does not seem wise nor necessary for this organization to receive so much funding for such controversial services. They have the freedom within the US to offer such services but not using, directly or indirectly, US taxpayers’ money.

See the very helpful article on Planned Parenthood in Christianitytoday.com (14 April 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

ISLAM AND POSTMODERN TECHNOLOGY: SOME REFLECTIONS

- Social networks have provided one of the several sources of energy for the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East. Information technology is changing the global balance of power. “The Facebook Generation” helped significantly to bring down Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. One of the heroes of this same revolution is the young Google executive, Wael Ghonim. However, as Niall Ferguson demonstrates, information technology is also providing opportunities for the enemies of freedom. How did the people of Afghanistan hear about the burning of the Qur’an by that strange pastor from Florida? The Internet! Also, consider that Facebook recently took down a page called “The Third Intifada,” which proclaimed that “Judgment Day will be brought upon us only once the Muslims have killed all of the Jews.” It had 350,000 hits. One can now download encryption software, pictures and 3GP-format video clips with titles like “A Martyr Eulogizing Another Martyr” by Somali-based mujahedeen. There is also the online magazine, *Inspire*, published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, aimed at inspiring jihadists in the West. It contains bomb-making instructions and publishes lists of people already on fatwah lists, which means they can be killed with the blessing of Allah. Islamic jihadists have seen the Arab Spring as a golden opportunity. The 29 March issue of *Inspire* records: “The Revolutions that are shaking the thrones of dictators are good for the Muslims, good for the mujahedeen, and bad for the imperialists of the West and their henchman in the Muslim world.” Fatwahs are now posted on Facebook, the call to jihad is now on Twitter and select passages from the Qur’an are now available via email. The radical Islamists may want a 7th century caliphate restored, but they are using the technology of the 21st century to get it.
- Second, consider the theology of Islam versus the theology of biblical Christianity. I am convinced that Islam is so appealing to so many because it offers clear, black-and-white answers. It is rigid, structured and a worldview that has very little tension. Allah is strictly and rigidly one God. There is no Trinity and there is no substitutionary death of the Savior. Genuine, biblical Christianity recognizes the reality of suffering, pain, death and evil. But it offers an answer. Suffering is real but our God understands our suffering. For that reason, He sent His Son, Jesus. The second person of the Trinity added to His deity humanity and came to earth. His express purpose for the incarnation was to become a victim of monstrous evil so that He could eradicate evil from the planet. He asks us to trust Him explicitly when things do not make sense. He asks us to trust Him when the tensions between His sovereignty and our free-will responsibility seem to conflict. He asks us to accept that in a fallen world there are not always neat answers to complex questions. Just because someone is blind does not mean that his personal sin or that of his parents caused the blindness (see John 10). There is theological stress and theological tension in biblical Christianity. But at the same time there is immense strength and fortitude in our faith. At Easter we celebrate the death, burial and resurrection of our Savior. He loved us so much that He (the Godman) died—became a victim of torture, loneliness, unimaginable suffering, and a horrific death—for us. As rebels we deserve hell, but we instead receive eternal life and the new heaven and new earth—because our God loves us! No other worldview and no other world religion offer such hope. The complicated, difficult, often tension-filled theology of Christianity has the answer and it is found in the cross and in the empty tomb. That is what Easter is all about. And it is imperative to remember that in Islam there is no Easter.

See Ferguson’s essay in *Newsweek* (10 April 2011) and Marvin Olasky in *World* (23 April 2011), p. 84.