

The challenge of liberalism & postmodern hermeneutics

Liberalism

- Attempt to make Christianity acceptable to modern man
- Personal religious experience not history (Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834))
 - Schleiermacher was influenced by a 'higher life' doctrine through the Moravians who also influenced Wesley; experiential emphasis
 - Also influenced by [Romanticism](#)
 - Schleiermacher very much led by feeling in his politics ("red-blooded nationalism"¹) and private life – became romantically attached to a married woman, declared her unhappy marriage not genuine (presumably because feeling is everything) and married her himself
 - Similar arguments for religious experience not history made by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), aligning Christianity with [existentialism](#)
 - The end point of this replacement of history with experience led, in later liberal scholarship to a denial of the historicity of:
 - the physical resurrection of Christ (it was just a spiritual experience for the apostles)
 - the physical return of Christ ('Realised Eschatology')
 - Jonathan Edwards argued very strongly for the importance of the religious affections but the difference was that for Edwards, Doctrine → Affections, whereas for Schleiermacher and those who followed him, Affections → Doctrine.
- Bible
 - Evolution not revelation (Schleiermacher)²
 - 'Higher criticism' of the Bible – in some ways an extreme version of the Reformation idea of Sola Scriptura and freedom from religious authority but also building very much on Schleiermacher's emphasis on the Bible as an evolutionary human product
 - Particularly popular in the 19th century
 - Techniques include: source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism
 - E.g. Documentary hypothesis of the 19th century that the Torah is made up of 4 sources: E, J, P, D. This view has now been criticised and surpassed both within liberal and conservative scholarship³ but it still gets taught in many theological colleges and is found in old commentaries.

¹ Michael Reeves, *On Giant's Shoulders*, p. 129.

² Interestingly he was writing before Darwin but already there was an evolutionary model of history emerging through the writings of [Hegel](#).

³ For example Robert Alter (a non-Christian Jew) has written powerfully in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* of the beautiful literary construction of the Hebrew Scriptures, explaining features that would once have been taken as evidence of different sources, as deliberate story-telling markers and techniques.

- *Contains* the Word of God or *becomes* the Word of God but is not in itself the Word of God (maybe Karl Barth (?)) but certainly later neo-orthodox liberals and postmodern/reader-response critics)
- Expiation but not propitiation. Rejection of penal substitution began with Schleiermacher and became particularly influential through the UK liberal CH Dodd (1884-1973).
- Church replaces Christ.
 - While early liberalism was still quite focussed on Christ (though an increasingly de-historicised and 'de-mythologised' Christ), in the second half of the twentieth century the emphasis shifted from Christology to Ecclesiology⁴ – 'being Christ to the world', 'being God's hands and feet', bringing in the Kingdom.
 - This led to the social gospel – the idea that social transformation *is* the good news.

Implications, echoes, trends:

- Where do we see these things in our churches?
 - Is there [latent liberalism](#) in our context?
1. Experience is everything
 - Mysticism as way to get to God
 - Rhetoric over content in preaching
 - Lack of concern for historicity of the gospel; shift in gospel preaching from what Christ did 2000 years ago to present experience
 - 'Atmosphere' ("Can you sense the Spirit?")
 - Pragmatics, experience and tradition over biblical church order
 2. Editing the Bible or avoiding certain passages
 3. Reader is the authority, we decide meaning
 - tending to relativism ("to *me* this means...")
 - tending to intellectual elitism (priesthood of scholars using long words)
 - tending to patronising reverse snobbery ("theologies of the oppressed")
 4. Discussion but not declaration – open-ended dialogue rather than authoritative monologue
 5. Inclusive gospel and cheap grace
 6. Culture following and avoidance of counter-cultural ethics (homosexuality, divorce, male headship, materialism)
 7. Ecumenism ("doctrine divides, Christ unites")
 8. Inter-faith worship/prayer
 9. Social gospel (sometimes driven by pragmatic/financial realities - much easier to get funding for an AIDS project than gospel ministry)
 10. High sacramentalism / neo-Catholicism (altars, robes, sanctuary, titles)

⁴ This analysis is made by Bruce McCormack in the 2011 Kantzer Lectures.