

The challenge of liberalism

Personal background

Organisational interest – [iServe Africa](#)

Liberalism in Kenya

- A confused term
- [Latent liberalism](#)
- Plenty of exceptions

What is liberalism?

- Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)
- Attempt to make Christianity acceptable to modern man
- Personal religious experience not history
 - 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
 - Experience / feeling of absolute dependence / God-consciousness / relationship with God
 - Jonathan Edwards had argued very strongly for the importance of the religious affections (1746) but the difference was that for Edwards, Doctrine → Affections, whereas for Schleiermacher and those who followed him, Affections → Doctrine.
 - 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’)
- Bible as word of men not the Word of God
 - Evolution not revelation (Schleiermacher)²
 - Development into the (largely German) History of Religions School

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](#).

- Is the Bible written by men searching for God or by God searching for man?
 - ‘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.
 - Paul as the corrupter – inventor of divine Christ & atonement (Adolf Harnack)
 - *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)
- Hard empiricism / agnosticism / search for the historical Jesus / moralism – Albrecht Ritschl, David F Strauss – a harder positivist stream of liberalism somewhat opposed to the softer experience stream (Schleiermacher et al), but often ending up in a similar place
- Expiation but not propitiation. Rejection of penal substitution began with Schleiermacher and became particularly influential through the UK liberal CH Dodd (1884-1973).
- Social gospel – Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (New York 1917) – reacting to the individualised revivalist gospel and seeking to engage the social problems of the urban West → the idea that social transformation *is* the good news.
- Church replaces Christ
 - While early liberalism was focussed on Christ⁴ (though an increasingly de-historicised and ‘de-mythologised’ Christ), in the second half of the twentieth century the emphasis shifted from Christology to Ecclesiology⁵ – ‘being Christ to the world’, ‘being God’s hands and feet’, bringing in the Kingdom.

(While many of the key figures in the history of liberalism are German it is worth pointing out that the strongest critique and challenge to liberalism also came from Germany in the form of Karl Barth)

Echoes & trends:

- Where do we see these things in our churches or latent or threatening?
- Influences:
 - ATR (community defines truth, this world focus)
 - Culture of optimism (cf. 19th century Europe)
 - Cultural shifts & postmodernism

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.

⁴ In its contentions that a) salvation is an encounter with Christ and that b) our knowledge of Jesus is identical with our knowledge of God liberalism was making a very helpful corrective to natural theology / deism / philosophical theology (though it meant rather different things than Luther by these statements).

⁵ This analysis is made by Bruce McCormack in the 2011 Kantzer Lectures.

- Internet access
 - Theologians, theological colleges & money
 - Spiritual warfare
1. Experience is everything
 - Mysticism as way to get to God
 - Relationship with God is everything
 - Lack of concern for historicity of the gospel; shift in gospel preaching from what Christ did 2000 years ago to present experience
 - Pragmatics, experience, culture and tradition over biblical church order
 2. The Bible beside or below but not above me
 - “The bible is never really on the driving seat of most of our evangelicals. It is a tool to be used from time to time-a slave, not a master to our teaching and preaching.” (Harrison Mungai describing the contemporary scene)
 - 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”)
 3. Reading history as parable – e.g. crossing of red sea or calming of storm
 4. Discussion but not declaration – open-ended dialogue rather than authoritative monologue
 5. Inclusive gospel and [cheap grace](#) (opposed by Bonhoeffer)
 6. Culture following / hermeneutic of comfortableness-with “The bible’s truths are embraced to the extent they don’t rub us the wrong way. When they do, we take the same western path – “It was Paul’s culture.” Then we begin to pick and mix what we can use and what to dump – pragmatism” (Harrison Mungai describing the contemporary scene)
What this leads to is an *avoidance* of certain passages (edited Bible) so as to avoid counter-cultural ethics (homosexuality, divorce, male headship, materialism)
 7. High sacramentalism / crypto-Catholicism (altars, robes, sanctuary, titles)
 8. Unprincipled ecumenism or at least a lack of concern for doctrine (“doctrine divides, Christ unites”); Inter-faith worship/prayer (especially where the impression is being given that there are no differences, we’re all worshipping the same God)
 9. Social gospel (sometimes driven by pragmatic/financial realities - much easier to get funding for an AIDS project than gospel ministry)
 10. Language bending – evacuating words of meaning / filling with new meanings – e.g. Word of God, gospel, evangelical, mission, salvation, Christ, cross, Kingdom

How do we respond?

Building deep convictions

- Exposure – good Bible preaching & teaching
- Practice – handling the Word well, finding wonderful things in the Word
- Inoculation – awareness of liberal teachings
- Explicit teaching of doctrine of Scripture, from the Scriptures
 - Luke 16:28-31 – What’s at stake (heaven and hell); Jesus’ view of Scriptures (purpose, authorship, sufficiency)

- Luke 24:25-27, 46-47 – Jesus’ view of prophetic fulfilment & obviousness of content of Scripture; “all that the prophets have spoken” → Jesus’ sufferings and glory, proclamation of gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins
- Acts 9:15 – Paul is Jesus’ Paul
- Acts 26:19-29 – Moses & prophets; historicity; gospel
- Acts 28:23 – Moses & prophets; Jesus & kingdom
- 1 & 2 Peter also very useful on doctrine of Scripture⁶

Further reading on the doctrine of Scripture:

- BB Warfield, *The inspiration and authority of the Bible* ([available at ACTS](#))
- EJ Young, *Thy Word is Truth* ([available at ACTS](#))
- [Tim Ward, ‘An Introduction to the Bible’](#)
- [‘Can I trust my Bible?’ \(watumishi wa neno\)](#)

⁶ [Bible study resource available.](#)