

AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Episode 5: The Modern Church

CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Liberalism

The liberals originally set out to defend the bible against rationalism, by attempting to make the Christian faith credible in objective scientific terms. But this led to scepticism about everything that couldn't be fully explained, and soon there was widespread doubt about the historical accuracy of the bible and about everything supernatural. Original sin and divine judgment were denied, and Jesus was regarded as simply an exceptionally wise moral teacher. The leading thinkers were found in German Liberalism. Schleiermacher said there was no transcendent, self-disclosing God, and Strauss relegated everything supernatural to the category of "myth."

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism began in the USA as a reaction to liberalism, reaffirming traditional confidence in the basic biblical doctrines. The Evangelical Alliance was founded in Britain in 1846 to unite those who opposed liberalism. The fundamentalists vigorously opposed Darwin's theory of evolution. At a debate in 1860 against Bishop "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, TH Huxley said he "*would rather be descended from an ape than from a bishop,*" and the evolutionists won the day. But the arguments go on. Some of the fundamentalists went too far, and argued that every word in the bible must be taken absolutely literally. They took no account of the different literary genres in the scriptures, and ended up looking extremist and rather ridiculous.

Dispensationalism

Rejection of the conclusions of biblical scholars opened the door to various ways of interpreting the scriptures. Dispensationalism claimed that God has dealt with men and women in different ways during different eras of biblical history. Scofield divided all of history into seven ages, and published the Scofield Reference Bible with notes explaining the system. Many dispensationalists continue to make a distinction between Israel and the church, such that they are looking for the re-establishment of the State

of Israel as a precondition for Christ's return. This has significant implications for the politics of the Middle East.

The Oxford Movement

In the early 19th century, a group of Anglicans in Oxford became concerned about the loss of mystery and tradition brought about by both liberalism and fundamentalism. "The Oxford Movement" put much emphasis on feelings and on symbolism and ritual, and came to have much in common with the Roman Catholic Church. John Henry Newman published a series of tracts setting out these beliefs, and the movement was sometimes known as "Tractarianism."

In 1845, Newman converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1879 he was made a cardinal. The views of modern Anglo-Catholicism are very much those of the Oxford Movement.

Neo-orthodoxy

In 1919, the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, published a commentary on Romans in which he reaffirmed God's sovereignty and self-revelation, and the finiteness of human beings. This was a landmark break with German liberalism, and the start of a movement called "neo-orthodoxy." Barth later produced a huge work called "Church Dogmatics," in which he insisted that the bible is self-authenticating, and can't be subjected to human criticism.

THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Revivalism

Reacting against rationalism, Christians became anxious to feel, rather than to think, and an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism developed. In the USA there was nostalgia for the exciting days of the Great Awakening, and people tried to recreate these events by organising meetings which they called "revivals." It's important to grasp the difference between a real "revival," when God sovereignly pours out his Spirit causing conviction of sin and leading to conversion of sinners – and this "revivalism," which is an attempt by men to reproduce what only God can do.

"Revivalism" started on the frontiers in the American West with huge open-air meetings at which the speakers whipped up their hearers' emotions and appealed for a personal response there and then. The movement spread and one of the early leaders was Charles Finney, who visited

Britain more than once. The most famous revivalist was Dwight L Moody, who had a huge influence in Britain during an evangelistic tour in 1873-75. The revivalists were very much Arminian in their theology, emphasising the centrality of human decision in conversion. Many people really were saved, but there were also many spurious professions of faith, and this set the scene for the widespread nominal Christianity of later years.

The Salvation Army was founded by William Booth in London in 1865. They combined revivalism with an emphasis on social action, and majored on uniforms and brass bands. Their motto was: “*Soup, soap and salvation.*” It was also out of revivalism that the Keswick Movement grew. They taught that Christians could be delivered from the power of sin once for all at a “second blessing,” and they proclaimed, “victorious Christian living,” as the goal. They started open-air meetings at Keswick in the Lake District and 1823, and these still continue every summer, although the theological emphasis has changed.

The missionary movement

The 19th century was a time of much evangelistic activity in overseas missions, with the development of a truly worldwide church.

William Carey was the “father of modern mission.” He founded the Baptist Missionary Society, and worked for many years in India, translating all or parts of the bible into 35 languages.

David Livingstone walked thousands of miles exploring southern Africa, campaigning against slavery and preaching the Gospel.

Hudson Taylor went to China in 1853 and founded the China Inland Mission. He adopted the local language and also Chinese dress and culture. If others had followed his example it would have lessened the problem of cultural imperialism, in which western culture was sometimes imposed as part of the package when the Gospel was preached.

In Edinburgh in 1910, the “World Missionary Conference” was held, with the optimistic motto: “*The Evangelisation of the World in This Generation.*”

Post-millennialism was widespread – people expected a literal 1,000 year Christian era of special blessing before the return of Christ, and that’s what they were working towards. All this changed after the First World War.

The Social Gospel

One of the outworkings of liberalism was an increasing focus on the here and now, and on social action. Christians led the way in seeking justice for

the disadvantaged. William Wilberforce opposed slavery, Lord Shaftesbury fought for better factory conditions and regulation of child labour. Thomas Barnardo and George Muller started institutions for orphans. Unfortunately, in many churches, social action came to displace the Gospel entirely, and an emphasis on changing society as a whole detracted from the holiness and purity that should distinguish the church from the world.

CHRISTIANS IN SOCIETY

Nominalism

In the 19th and early 20th century church-going became fashionable. The outward observances of Christian ritual were observed, but a living relationship with Jesus was often sadly lacking. This was “nominal” Christianity. Almost all infants were baptised, and were then thought to be Christians. Britain was said to be a “Christian country.” The church was powerful and the clergy well-respected. Becoming a vicar was a good and secure career.

World War I

The horrors of the First World War shattered misplaced optimism about human nature. The ruling classes in Europe collapsed with the disintegration of the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria, Hungary and Prussia, and the authority of the establishment church came down with the ruling classes.

Communism

In Russia the Tsar was overthrown in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and communism was established and spread to Eastern Europe, China and beyond. Karl Marx’s book, “Das Kapital,” written in the British Museum at the end of the 19th century advocated forcible overthrow of the class system, and the abolishment of private property. Religion was said to support the class structure, and Marx described religion as “*the opium of the people*.” Christians were persecuted. Some churches compromised to survive, and were “registered” by the communists; others went underground. There is still conflict between these two groups now.

Fascism

Fascism urges the rejection of individual liberty and concentration of power in the hands of dictatorial cult leaders. In Germany, Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 leading the National Socialist Party – the Nazis. The 19th century philosopher, Nietzsche, was the prophet of Nazism, proclaiming, “God is dead,” and advocating the development of an Aryan super-race. Mostly the church failed to stand up against Nazism. Where they did, churches were burned and clergy killed. In 1934 a group of Christian leaders from around Germany founded “The Confessing Church.” They included Pastor Martin Niemoller, who spent 8 years in a concentration camp, and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged for his involvement with the German resistance movement. If German Liberalism hadn’t rejected the doctrines of sin and judgment, the church might have been more ready to confront fascism when it came.

