

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Summer 2007 No. 105

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CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM – ARE THEY TWO DIFFERENT RELIGIONS? – CHURCH SOCIETY CONFERENCE REPORT 2007

By David Meager

The aim of the Conference was to show how liberalism is contrary to Scripture, to learn from previous Christians who have stood against it, and to examine its impact on evangelicals in the Church of England today.

John Richardson, from Henham, Elsenham and Ugley, opened the conference by using Colossians to show the distinction in doctrine between evangelicals and liberals. Chapter 1 v 13-14 shows that because of the work of Christ there are now two groups of people, the saved and unsaved. This is a stumbling block for liberals, because they believe that God loves all people without distinction, consequently liberals are in favour of an inclusive church.

Liberals hold these beliefs because they do not understand from Scripture who Jesus is. Colossians 1v15-21 presents Christ in all his fullness. In Christ God is incarnate, all things were made by him and for him, in him all things hold together. Therefore because Christ made everyone, including Mohammed, there can be no other paths to God.

Lee Gatiss, Associate minister of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, then spoke about J. Gresham-Machen (New Testament Professor at Princeton Seminary between 1915-1929) and the Presbyterian controversies in the USA during the 1920s and 30s. The aim of the talks was to examine Machen's stand for biblical truth in the US Presbyterian Church and Princeton Seminary and then to look at some of the parallels for us in the Church of England today.

The Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) was built on solid biblical foundations (The Westminster Confession of Faith) but by the 1920s the PCUSA had become modernist (liberal). How did this happen? Modernism came to dominate mainly because of a laissez-faire attitude to doctrine by the moderates ('middle of road') who sided with the modernists (liberals) against the 'fundamentalists' (bible believing). Machen tried to enforce faithfulness to the Westminster Confession but to no avail, consequently he left to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

Machen predicted that Princeton would follow the PCUSA in becoming a modernist institution. Eventually an alliance of liberals and moderate conservatives in 1925 turned Princeton into a moderate school. Machen left Princeton to form Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia (1929). Machen also ended his involvement with the PCUSA missionary work (Board of Foreign Missions) due to liberal inroads. Machen set up a new organization, The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (1933).

Lessons

Conservative foundational documents are not sufficient to maintain a biblical denomination. The Gospel must be fought for in every generation. Experience shows us that moderate ('middle of the road') Christians who side with liberals will take the church in a liberal direction - such movements don't stop halfway. However, we can take encouragement from Machen, as we are not the only generation to face these difficulties - 'We read to learn that we are not alone.' Those who forget history are more likely to make the same mistakes.

The day ended with **David Phillips** leading an open session discussing some of the issues in the

Church of England. David talked about the submission to the legislative drafting group on women bishops. He later went through a list of the dioceses where there are problems due to the support of homosexual practice.

Day two began with **John Richardson's** second bible exposition on Colossians. Chapter 1 v19-20 states the work of Christ and although liberals believe that Christ died for our sins they don't believe that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures* (1 Cor 15 v3) i.e. in the Old Testament sacrifices had to be made to atone for sin (Lv 7 & 9), Christ has now been sacrificed for our sins so we have peace with God. (Col 1 v21, v22).

Therefore because liberals have a faulty view of the gospel their ministry is defective. True gospel ministry is to present God's word in its fullness (v25) - to present everyone perfect in Christ (v28). Do we see this kind of ministry being carried out in the Church of England? Sadly we often don't, the training often given doesn't train ordinands to give people a deeper understanding of Christ. Instead there are those in the church who will deceive by fine sounding arguments (2 v4) based on hollow and deceptive philosophy and human tradition (v8).

After John's exposition, **Ian Hamilton**, minister of Cambridge Presbyterian Church spoke about his personal experience with the Crieff Brotherhood. The Crieff Brotherhood was formed in 1970 by William Still who invited thirty Church of Scotland ministers (including Ian) to meet in Crieff (Scotland). The aim of the Brotherhood was to foster a brotherly spirit amongst evangelical ministers in the CofS and to try and reform the church through 'quiet infiltration' to the standards of the Westminster Confession of Faith. During the 1970s and early 1980s the Brotherhood grew to 250 (about one-fifth of the ministers in the CofS). Rutherford House was then developed and it seemed as though the Brotherhood was making its mark on the CofS.

However Ian looked at the ministers in the Brotherhood and saw how few (10%) were in evangelical churches. He came to the conclusion that there was an unwillingness to 'grasp nettles'. When difficult decisions had to be made many refused to embrace the cross, many were not prepared to lose their livings for the gospel. Eventually Ian left the Brotherhood and the CofS because of its acceptance of women in leadership. William Still was later to respond 'we are not where we should be.' There was then time for discussion afterwards about the implications for Anglicans.

Melvin Tinker, Vicar of St John Newland in Hull, then spoke about the Influence of Liberalism upon Evangelicalism. We need to understand what a real Christian is since many people treat different brands of Christianity as the same i.e. they are all valid contributions which add richness and variety – 'like ice cream flavours'. However because evangelicalism is the fullest expression of the Christian faith then we cannot relativise it that way, other brands of Christianity are lacking. Jesus death is not a mere example or insufficient (needing works too). However liberalism has influenced evangelicalism and this can be seen in the different types of 'evangelical' liberalism:

Rational liberalism – Those who place divine revelation with human reasoning. These include people like Jeffrey John and Steve Chalke.

Experiential liberalism – Those who place experience before biblical truth. Therefore God can be approached or felt mystically even though what is believed may be contrary to the bible. Examples here include Larry Crabb - 'The Pressures off' - Striving is enslavement, however this often results in enslavement to experience.

Institutional liberalism – academy and church. In order to be scholarly acceptable we have to surrender to liberal beliefs. Evangelicals sacrifice gospel truth for a place within the academy or

they compromise with liberal clergy so they can have an influence in leadership.

The final day began with **Melvin Tinker's** second talk 'Engaging with liberalism'. Some 'evangelicals' do not think liberalism is bad, for instance George Carey is very positive of liberalism, *'Liberalism is a creative and constructive element for exploring theology today.....it is difficult to find any real ground for the contention that the enemy of the faith is liberalism.'* However, according to Scripture we have a duty to split from false teachers. If we examine church history up to the present day, Christians have split from false teachers e.g. Polycarp, Athanasius, the Reformers.

How are we to engage with liberalism? We are to have confidence in God (2 Tim 2v19) - that his word is true. Liberalism in the long term is self-destructive because it is parasitic. We need advances in evangelical scholarship and we need to engage more effectively with liberals rather than retreat. Our church members need to be equipped to deal with liberal theology otherwise they will be weakened by it.

The Conference ended with **John Richardson's** final talk on Colossians 2 v16-3v18. A right understanding of the gospel needs to be applied to daily living otherwise it will lead to dead orthodoxy.

Since liberals don't have a right understanding of the person and work of Christ they don't have a right understanding of church procedure. Liberals therefore use the law in the church to do what they want, they are also often 'high church' in practice because without Christ they seek a spiritual experience from tradition, c.f. Colossians, 2v18. Liberals are also incapable of living the Christian life since they are unable to put sin to death 3v5. Sexual immorality has spread so much in the church because liberals have turned from the truth (Rom 1) sexual relations have become perverted and society degraded.

Positively, we are to put on virtues to build each other up (3 v12). We are to love as love binds everything together (v14). Disunity is never good for the church, a passion for truth needs compassion and love for people – even liberals. We are to keep each other in the truth by teaching and admonishing one another v15-16. We are to do everything in Jesus' name v17.

Overall the conference was an edifying and encouraging time of teaching, prayer and fellowship. Some of the concepts discussed were complicated and challenging, as the nature of the subject is not always easy to discern. However, God's word is plain and if evangelicals are prepared to think, contend and act then there is hope for the Church of England. Hopefully we will all be strengthened to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.

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