

# The errors of Liberal Theology

Liberal theology is a wide spectrum of views, as is conservative theology. However, my concern is that liberal theology (which, of course, includes moral issues) is a deception. I say that with respect for liberal Christians, but, nevertheless, it is true. Liberalism isn't primarily intellectual tolerance. It is a spiritual infection which weakens the faith and spirituality of its proponents. I will summarise my reasons for saying that. My motive is not to attack liberals but to express concern for them.

## Liberalism is believing what you want to believe

This may sound unreasonable, but it is true. A proper approach to Christianity is to come to personal faith in God but then to SUBMIT to him. That means recognising he is a God of revelation. That is a fundamental truth. He doesn't leave us to make up our own version of Christianity. He has provided a written foundation for the faith – the Bible.

The apostolic attitude towards Scripture is as follows. Paul writes: "The Holy Scriptures, ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:15-17). To say that Scripture is "God-breathed" directly implies that Scripture is the authoritative Word of God.

Peter writes: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20-21).

We need to note, by the way, that the NT does regard the New Testament as well as the Old Testament as Scripture. Paul writes: "Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Tim 5:18). The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4. But the second one, under the title "Scripture," is Luke 10:7. So Paul puts Luke's record of Jesus' saying on a level with the OT Scripture.

Similarly, Peter writes: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:15-16). So, Peter regards Paul's writings as Scripture.

However, Peter says there are some things in Paul's scriptural writings which are "hard to understand." There are some genuinely unclear passages in such a complex book (or series of books) as the Bible. This is not the focus of this paper. My concern is to stress that for God to fulfil his role as a God of Revelation means that the vast majority of Scripture is clear. He is not a God of confusion.

Liberal theology does not submit to important, clear teachings of Scripture. Instead:

- It stresses the freedom of the individual from external control about what to believe.
- It stresses the reason and the experience of the individual in deciding what to believe.
- It aims to be acceptable and credible to modern society

This fits in with modern cultural views: the Me First/ My Rights generation.

So, liberals have said that:

- God is always revealing himself – there is no set theology.
- Bible facts don't matter – it's just about meeting Jesus in the pages of Scripture.
- True religion is the way of Christ, not doctrine about him.

## Liberalism dishonours God by undermining his revelation

I'm not saying that liberals *intend* to dishonour God. But if they undermine the truths God has revealed in Scripture – "God-breathed" truths, that is clearly dishonouring him. The key truths undermined by liberalism include:

- the Virgin Birth, which is essential to Jesus being both human and divine.
- the miracles of Jesus, which he taught were the evidence of him being the Messiah (Jn 11:2-5).
- the bodily Resurrection of Jesus, which is essential to the victory of the Cross over sin.
- the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Saviour, because he alone has paid the penalty for our sin.

- the bodily Return of Jesus, which is essential to the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes in the world.
- certain moral issues, particularly sexual issues today.

## **Liberalism weakens faith**

Liberalism promotes rationalistic human thinking which contrasts with what Paul writes: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4-6). "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). So, Paul does not want people to regard human wisdom as a foundation of faith. Liberalism does want them to rest their faith on human wisdom.

Liberalism tends to minimize or reject the supernatural nature of God's dealings with humanity. Yet the NT stresses the supernatural nature of Christianity: the priority and power of prayer, the gifts of the Spirit, etc. Liberalism is strengthened by a lack of experience of God powerfully answering prayer or of the gifts of the Spirit.

## **Liberalism is sometimes unloving**

I'm not saying that liberals don't seek to love their neighbour. But one aspect of liberalism is profoundly unloving – when it undermines the sternness of God's love (righteous judgment) and encourages behaviour which leads to condemnation. We need to warn people about divine judgment and the possibility of punishment. It may be alien to our modern society but Jesus frequently speaks of divine judgment and hell. He speaks of hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. He teaches that:

- We should fear God who has the authority to send us to hell (Lk 12:4-5).
- Impenitent sinners will face hell (Mt 13:40-43, 49-50).
- Most people are on the road to hell (Mt 7:13).
- Those who don't accept the gospel and trust in Jesus will finish up in hell (Mt 10:14-15; Lk 10:10-15; 13:22-30; Jn 3:17-18, 36; 12:48).
- Those who do great works in his name but don't obey God will be rejected by him on judgment day (Mt 7:21-23).
- Those who fail to provide for the basic needs of the poor and vulnerable will go to hell (Mt 25:41-46; Lk 16:19-31).
- Those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit (call what he is doing evil) will never be forgiven (Mt 12:31-37).
- Those who give way to temptations such as adultery and don't repent will go to hell (Mt 5:28-30).

(You can see more of the sternness of Jesus – rebuking hypocrisy and unbelief, demanding commitment and urging church discipline in my paper <https://christianteaching.org.uk/gentle-jesus-meek-and-tough/>).

If we know someone is heading for disaster and don't warn them, that is profoundly unloving. Instead, liberalism conveys (wrongly) that we will all get to heaven.

## **Liberalism weakens the motivation for evangelism**

Liberalism normally supports universalism: the idea that we all get to heaven in the end, whatever our beliefs and behaviour, which, as we have just noted, contradicts the teaching of Jesus. But belief that those who don't have faith in Jesus are heading for Hell is a powerful motive for evangelism. Liberalism removes this motive.

## **Liberalism weakens appreciation of the cross**

I'm sure liberal Christians have a good deal of gratitude for the death of Jesus. But liberalism removes one powerful basis for gratitude, namely that we have been saved from Hell by the death of Christ – we could have gone to Hell. I thank God daily for not condemning me to Hell.

## **Liberalism undermines the nature of Jesus**

Liberalism tends to regard Jesus as only 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild.' But, as we have seen above, the NT clearly shows that Jesus manifest both "the sternness of God" as Paul puts it in Rom 11:22. Liberalism also undermines the crucial teaching about Jesus being the only Saviour. Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Similarly, Peter said “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). John writes “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 Jn 5:11-12).

## **Liberalism encourages wrong behaviour**

I am not saying that all liberals deliberately promote wrong behaviour. But, because they do not accept crucial biblical teaching on certain moral issues, they do, in effect, promote wrong behaviour.

They are strong on corporate morality: issues such as racism, world poverty, peace-making, pollution, climate change, etc. But they are weak on some aspects of personal morality: e.g. individual sexual behaviour (including sex outside of heterosexual marriage), abortion, etc.

The TV series “Grantchester,” written by James Runcie, the son of Archbishop Robert Runcie, with whom I had numerous clashes in the General Synod, said “Grantchester ... comes, as you might expect, from a liberal Anglican sensibility that understands ambiguity, seeks understanding and embraces tolerance.” Sadly, that liberal attitude has become very influential in the Church of England, leading to the de facto approval of gay marriage, in contradiction of the clear and long-established teaching of Scripture. Ambiguity is certainly an element. Attempts are made to make Scripture say what it clearly doesn’t say. The House of Bishops put out an ambiguous statement saying “for the first time, same-sex couples could have a service in church in which there would be prayers of dedication, thanksgiving or for God’s blessing on the two people concerned, following a civil marriage or civil partnership. The proposals would not, however, change the Church’s doctrine of Holy Matrimony.” Clearly, even some bishops with traditional biblical views on the subject were taken in by the ambiguity. It is quite clear that what the bishops have decided is accepting gay marriage. The ambiguity is bordering on dishonesty.

I understand people wanting to make the Bible accept homosexual practice. But it doesn’t. This may sound like naïve dogmatism. But, for 36 years, I have been carefully weighing up the arguments used to try to make out that the Bible accepts homosexual practice. I have talked with many pro-gay people and homosexuals. The idea that the Bible approves homosexual practice is simply incorrect. People may want to justify homosexual practice but they shouldn’t try to make the Bible agree with them. Liberals sometimes try to make the Bible agree with their incorrect opinions. That is not the NT way of submission to God’s ways and his Word.

## **Our response**

Liberalism is seriously damaging the church and its witness. We are not going to win many liberals over to biblical views by debate. We urgently need the supernatural intervention of God. We need to pray and prepare for Revival. True Revival will bring a deep sense of God’s holiness and power, leading to an appropriately submissive attitude to God’s revelation in Scripture.