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Legalism and the Authority of the Word of God

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

A few weeks ago I looked more into the subject of legalism in Christianity. Since people accuse fundamentalists of being legalists I decided to read up on the subject. My search in the Duke Library was very productive. As I read I forgot legalism. What I was learning gave me some insights into the origins of the state of Protestantism in the Western world today. I want to share these insights with you.

I am not sure if I have mentioned this before, but I recently read two articles that impressed me. One of them was by Donald Bloesch a reformed theologian at Dubuque Seminary in Dubuque IA. The second was by Thomas Oden a professor at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison New Jersey. He is Methodist. Bloesch writing in the Presbyterian and Reformed Renewal newsletter commented on the state of affairs in that group of churches. He predicted that, if things did not change, mainline denominations, as we know them today, will not exist ten years from now. Good New's magazine published a review of a book by Oden (to be published this spring) in which he analyzes the state of modern mainline seminaries. He observes that liberal and neo-orthodox teachers make up the bulk of their faculties. He does not think it is possible to change them.

As I reflected on these two opinions during the ensuing months, I recognized that during the last 100 years liberal professors in mainline seminaries have produced liberal pastors who became leaders in the church. Bloesch intimates that this is the cause of the decay of mainline denominations. Oden believes that the faculties of most seminaries cannot be changed because of tenure and the structure of university administrations. Eta Lineamann has written a strong polemic against this structure. Oden believes liberal faculties are infecting the bulk of seminarians who study there with liberal theology even if they enter with an orthodox faith.

But what do liberals believe? I had to admit that I did not have a clear understanding until I had spent a rainy weekend reading about fundamentalism. Throughout my Christian life I have encountered liberal thought in my work with the bureaucracy of the United Methodist Church. I had also hear the complaints of my evangelical brothers and sisters in other denominations. These include the Episcopal, Presbyterian Church USA, Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, The Christian Church (Disciples) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. All of them are battling with the spirit of the age in their denominations about the subjects of homosexuality, abortion, evangelism, authority of scripture and liberation theology. Although I was not actively involved in their battles, I

found that they were doing battle with the same forces armed with the same weapons that I have fought in the UMC.

Bloesch's and Oden's pessimism is not unwarranted. There is no question that we fight against principalities, powers and rulers that occupy well-fortified positions in the hierarchies and bureaucracies of mainline Protestant denominations. Though our weapons are mighty, we can't pull down their strongholds. None of the renewal groups in mainline denominations have captured the positions of the enemy. I have been involved in the ecumenical renewal movement on a national level. There I have observed that other than whooping it up at various Holy Spirit conferences and congresses for the 29 years of my Christian life, there has been little progress. Oh, to be sure, people say, "look over here, this is a great renewed church, and look over there, there is another." They also point with pride at the number of renewal events they conduct in denominational churches, but the bleeding continues. They have not started a fire in the denomination to sweep over the earth. Huge numbers of people continue to exit the mainline churches.

Why is this so? William D. Hendricks in a recent book entitled *Exit Interviews* (see book review section) gave the following reasons. (1) They could not trust the church. They assumed the institution existed for their good, but they found out it didn't. (2) They were bored with church services. They were not worshipful. THE CHURCH DID NOT HELP THEM MEET GOD. (3) Those who left did not feel people in the church were real. They avoid the "bad stuff." (4) The garbage they had accumulated in life is not dealt with. Their church is not a healing community. (5) There is a resentment by women. They feel excluded from the ministry of the church. (6) They do not like cookbook Christianity. They know that there are few easy answers, but the answers they get are too trite. (7) There is too much busyness. (8) There is a two-story church. There are two worlds, the world of the church with its customs and language, and the real world with its customs and language. Faith is not integrated into life. (8) There is no answer to important questions. They ask, "Where is God and why doesn't he do or say something to me?" They get no answer. (9) Lastly, they wonder why there is no respect for feelings. Their feelings are ignored.

Hendricks only interviewed a few (15) people, but I think his observations are worthy of consideration because these are the same complaints I have heard people voice before they leave mainline denominational churches. It is not hard to understand why they have these complaints. To find the cause all one has to do is to inspect the theological climate of their church. What is that climate? My impression is that the clergy of the mainline churches is made up of persons who subscribe to either liberal or neo-orthodox theology. Let me explain what I mean.

There are three theological positions in American Protestantism today. The first is Fundamentalism. Because the word Fundamentalism has received a

pejorative meaning and to avoid the pejoration, some call it Evangelicalism. Even so, we will use the terms Fundamentalism and fundamentalist here.

Fundamentalists believe in: (1) The verbal and inerrant inspiration of the Bible. (2) The virgin birth of Jesus Christ. (3) His substitutionary atonement, i.e., He died for our sins. (4) The physical or bodily resurrection of our Lord. (5) The immanent second coming of Jesus Christ. Supplementary to these are (6) His deity. (7) The depravity or sinful nature of man. (8) The eventual physical or bodily resurrection of believing or regenerate Christians. (9) Salvation and justification by faith through the Grace of God, and (10) The trinitarian nature of God.

Most Evangelicals, Holiness, Pentecostal and Charismatics (these are all born again believers) in our churches today subscribe to these fundamental beliefs. According to George Gallup they are the beliefs of a minority of the clergy who serve in mainline denominations. His polls also give us reason to believe that most of the laity subscribe to them.

To be sure there is distortion of the Fundamentalists belief system. The extremists among them often: (1) reject all biblical criticism, (2) interpret the Bible too literally, (3) believe in the mechanical divine dictation of the Bible, or (4) because of their literal interpretations become legalistic and works oriented. These extreme views are made normative by the liberal or neo-orthodox establishment, and used to discredit all who subscribe to fundamental beliefs. In these days they are used to describe the "*RELIGIOUS RIGHT*."

What then are most graduates of seminaries taught today. The liberal view is: (1) The Bible is not a divine record of revelations, but a human testament of religion. (2) God's character is one of pure benevolence without standards. Sin separates no one from His love (Universalism). He does not or will not punish sinners. (3) There is a divine spark in everyman. All men are good at heart and need nothing more than encouragement to allow their goodness to express itself. (4) Jesus Christ is man's savior only in the sense that He is man's perfect teacher and example. He is God only in the sense that He is perfectly God conscious. (5) He was not born of a virgin. (6) He did not work miracles. (7) He did not rise from the dead. (8) Christianity does not differ from other religions. All religions are forms of the same religion. Missions should not aim to convert, but to learn from other equally valid religions.

Liberalism is not as pervasive now in the theological world. Adolph Hitler, Mao Tse Dong, Idi Amin, Pol Pot and others have made it impossible to hold to the belief that all men are good. Therefore, another popular form of Liberalism called neo-orthodoxy has come into existence. It holds to some basic beliefs of Liberalism while retaining what they consider the more basic beliefs of Fundamentalism. The neo-orthodox try to hang on to scientific and historical criticism without throwing out all orthodox beliefs. They believe: (1) The Bible is

not the objective word of God, but a source of Christian truth. It is not inerrant. (2) God will help reduce inequality and disharmony among men. (3) Man is a fallen creature, but the biblical account is only a symbolic representation. (4) There is disagreement among the neo-orthodox about the virgin birth, but most of them doubt it. Jesus was only born with a divine nature. He is not the Son of God. (5) Christ's death on the cross is only a symbol of self-abnegation. (6) Many theologians of this persuasion doubt the resurrection but most accept it as a historical fact. (7) They reject the return of Christ (second coming). It will only be the eventual manifestation of God's divine love. (8) They reject the divine origin of the Bible, and reinterpret it according to "scientific" knowledge. They accept the results of historical criticism.

One can see from the foregoing that both Liberalism and neo-orthodoxy have a hard time with the Bible. Both reject its authority. Both relativize its teachings and presuppose that it is a book like any book of other religions. It is not sacred. It is not *Holy Scripture*. The Bible is reduced to a collection of religious writings. Words in the Bible are not God's words.

Eta Linneamann's *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, a book I reviewed last year, makes it plain that historical criticism of the Bible has profoundly influenced Christian theology in Europe, America and the rest of the world. She writes that it has influenced theology, "...like yeast permeates a lump of sourdough. If, however, one must work constantly with sourdough, one does not notice the smell after a while, even though it is noticeable to someone else." In other words historical criticism stinks.

She then describes the basic premises of historical criticism. These are: (1) The Bible is interpreted as if there is no God. (2) The Bible is relative. (3) The Holy Spirit is not involved in the interpretation of scripture. (4) Reason decides what is and what is not reality in the Bible. Flesh decides what is spiritual. (5) There is a resignation regarding truth. Like Pilate they ask, "What is truth?" (6) Assumptions are accepted as fact because they are agreed upon by the academic community, not because they have been empirically tested and proven to be true.

In the light of the above and the almost universal presence of these beliefs in most mainline seminaries, it is no wonder that one rarely encounters God in mainline churches today. The major testimony of God-the Bible-is negated and made of no importance. Once any part of the Bible is questioned, the whole of our faith collapses. We cannot encounter Him if His truth illuminated by the Holy Spirit is not available to us. Faith in a God who is Spirit requires some authoritative record of His revelation of Himself to humanity. This He has done in creation, by the prophets, and in Christ. Without a reliable witness both to His person and his activities we cannot have faith.

Liberal and neo-orthodox beliefs regarding the Bible have a profound effect on all other theological disciplines. It affects systematic theology in that theology cannot

be systematic if there is no authoritative statement of belief. Ethics have no meaning if the laws of God are relativized. Hermeneutics (exegesis) is of no avail since there is no truth to interpret. Homiletics becomes no more than public speaking if there is no gospel to proclaim. The whole of theology becomes a humanistic enterprise because there is no God and Jesus is not his Son. The Holy Spirit cannot live in us as promised, for He is no more than a mystical tendency of man. We are lost in our sins.

Can you see what has happened to the Church? With this kind of "theology" it has become a club or a civic organization. The radical need (emptiness) we have to encounter God cannot be met. Our lack of meaning cannot be healed, and our inherent sinfulness cannot be controlled. Since there is no forgiveness, we are filled with shame and riddled with guilt when we sin. Death is oblivion, and should be something to be longed for.

But we fundamentalists believe that there is a God, who through His prophets said that He would send His only Son named Jesus. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. He arose on the third day, and his resurrection was witnessed by 500 or more people. He was seen ascending into heaven by many of his disciples. He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, who came forty days later. The Holy Spirit transformed the lives of those in whom he resided. With the power he brought them they began the transformation of the Roman Empire, and subsequently the world. His revelation of himself is recorded in the Bible, and in the writings of the church fathers. To those who KNOW HIM, truth is revealed as they read the Bible. To those who only KNOW ABOUT HIM, truth is not revealed.

Eta Linneaman is one who, like anyone who is lost, did not know him, and did not understand the truth. She was a world renown liberal Bible scholar. She had been a student of Bultmann and Fuchs. Her liberal writings are still used in seminaries today. When she came to really know Jesus personally, her mind was illuminated and the truth set her free from the humanistic philosophical foolishness that had filled her mind in her unregenerate state.

Having described what God has revealed to me, I would now like to return to the statements made by Donald Bloesch and Thomas Oden. Is it highly likely that mainline churches will cease to exist as we now know them in ten years? I think so. Why? Because the products of the seminaries will continue to cause people to exit the church for the reasons that William Hendricks gave. Although the rate of decay has been steady, at some point, a sudden logarithmic increase will occur in the rate of defections. It will occur when those over fifty who have had a loyalty to mainline denominations begin to die at an increasing rate. Baby Boomers and the X-generation do not have such loyalties. They try to find places where they can meet God, be nurtured in the faith and have their psychological wounds healed. The fantastic growth of Calvary Chapels started by Chuck Smith,

and Vineyard churches started by John Wimber is a harbinger of things to come. God is doing a new thing.

Something I learned early in my Christian walk was that God most often does not actively punish those who sin. He lets them suffer the natural consequences of their behavior. What are the consequences for those who proclaim a liberal theology? The answer is easy to determine, no one wants to hear a message that does not meet their needs. If they are looking for an answer they will try to find it elsewhere. Thus the churches who subscribe to orthodox or liberal theology will decay because they do not proclaim a message of salvation, growth and healing. Persons who have heard such a message and have grown will have a need to tell others about the truths revealed to them. They can only do this if they are active in ministry.

Mainline churches are structured today so the minister does all of the ministry. This is not the way the Lord ordained it. He expects everyone to be a minister. The Holy Spirit reveals this to real believers both directly and through the study of His word. They will, therefore, find a place where they can be involved in ministry. In those churches where they are involved there is rapid growth. The converse is true. In congregations where they cannot be involved, growth is stagnant or there is a steady exodus.

What does this say to those of us who have remained in mainline denominations? I believe that if we choose to stay, we have no right to complain, even if we are working for the renewal of the church. Sadly, we may also be championing a hopeless cause. For those who want more, we may have only one choice. Get out! In 1748 Jonathan Edwards predicted a worldwide revival to occur at the turn of the next century. It is likely that it will, as it always has taken place, be outside the established institutional churches.

But getting out is fraught with difficulties. If we go to an independent church we may find that they have discarded all that is good from our past. The Church has traditions that God has zealously guarded throughout the centuries. These traditions are based on the fundamental truths that we have listed earlier. These truths are not only revealed in the Bible, but also in the creeds, the hymnody, and the liturgy of the church. It is unfortunate that many independent churches throw out the good aspects of liturgy, creeds and hymnody like the reformers did when they threw out the Catholic Mass. After they threw it out the Eucharist became a sacrament without meaning. There is little emphasis on its significance, therefore, today it is seldom celebrated in several denominations. Even in those where it is regularly celebrated, it still has little meaning.

It is my desire to see a denomination established that will retain the best of fundamentalism. It must emphasize the means of Grace, prayer, Bible study, the Eucharist and worship. Worship has to be free and encompass praise and thanksgiving in the music. It will use the joyous idioms of contemporary music

while retaining the majesty and sound theology of hymns written by Charles Wesley, Fanny Crosby, Isaac Watts and others. These are immanently singable and worshipful. Worship will include testimony, words of knowledge and prophecy, prayer for healing, and a vigorous proclamation of the Gospel. The sermons should be based on sound exegesis, and should address the need for salvation, and guidance for right living. The congregation will be a priesthood of believers. All members will be laity. There will be no pyramidal structure. The gifts of its members will be recognized and utilized.

Will I ever find such a church? Maybe, but I have not found it in my community. Therefore, I have to accept what is available that comes the closest to the characteristics I want. I would rather be partly satisfied than to stay in a moribund church where there is no life and little hope for any.