

YOU AND THE NEW THEOLOGIES

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Before you decide that this article would be of no consequence to you, will you just read this first paragraph? I want to say two things. First, theology is all-important because all that we do (ethics) is really based upon and is a reflection of what we believe (theology). Reading this article, therefore, might help you to sharpen your own thinking about what you yourself believe when you understand some of the viewpoints that are being taught today. Second, the so-called new theologies and not just things you might run across in the religious section of Time magazine or something which you might have to study if you ever went to seminary, but they are being preached from pulpits and printed in Sunday School literature all over the world. Reading this article, therefore, might help you to listen more sharply to what you hear. Maybe then you could help someone else who doesn't realize that he may be listening to one or the other of these new theologies being preached Sunday by Sunday.

In other words, what I am saying (and I apologize for getting into a second paragraph) is that theology is relevant and contemporary. And since there is such a hue and cry today calling for relevance and contemporaneousness, how can you afford not to read this article?

Why is theology so important? Let me tell you two stories that are rather extreme in opposite ways. The first is a classic one. To illustrate the importance of one's theological viewpoint, a famous person once declared that even the student about to rent a room could ask no more important question of his prospective landlady than, "Madame, please tell me, What is your world-view?" This is not quite such a ridiculous question as it might seem to be at first glance. The world-view or theological perspective of a

landlord or landlady can radically affect (1) his or her interest in people (including the renter), (2) how generous or stingy he might be (as with the lights and heat and hot water), (3) how honest and upright he is (concerning, for instance, a point not specified in the written rental contract). In other words, our theology directly affects important relationships in life.

The other story is a personal one. I used to have a Sunday School teacher who--believe it or not--said that it really did not matter what you believed as long as you lived it. Now, of course, I had to grow up a little before I realized that living "it" (whatever "it" is in that statement) is a reflection of what I believe even though I may not state my beliefs very formally. But this illogical pronouncement of my teacher that only living, not believing, is important, has, unfortunately, become a dogma in our day. The truth of the matter is that you do live what you believe.

In the realm of these new theologies of our day this same principle operates. All of these new ideas concerning ethics, and, ~~believe me~~, many of our social problems today have their roots in these new theologies. So theology is important.

A little running start (historically speaking) may help orient us. It seems like trends in theology are rather like a pendulum on a clock--they swing back and forth with the times. As soon as somebody tries to steer a straight course somebody else will come along and start a swing in the opposite direction. Then ideas will merge and a sort of compromise will evolve. This compromise then becomes the middle course until someone else comes along with an opposite viewpoint and the cycle starts all over again.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation the main stream of professing Christianity was found in the Roman Catholic Church with its many abuses and false practices of that time. The Reformers countered with their emphasis

on salvation by faith alone and on the dignity and worth of individual man redeemed by the grace of God. Soon others came along who emphasized the dignity of man without recognizing his sinfulness and need of salvation. Thus the humanism (emphasis on the inherent worth and ability of man) of the Renaissance gained ascendancy over the orthodoxy of the Reformation. As you might expect, there soon was an attempt to put some religion back into humanism. The leader in this was a man named Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who wanted men to have a religious experience but who found his authority for religion in the soul's experiences rather than in an external authority. In other words, he tried to build a theology on subjective experience alone. This subjectivism is the emphasis of all liberal theology. In relation to the Bible, liberalism promoted the higher criticism of the 19th century. Higher critics sought for the origin of the ideas of the Bible in the historical situation or in the cultures of the writers but not in God. In other words, the writings of the Bible, according to them, grew out of the conditions of life in which the various writers found themselves as they wrote.

There were several important results of the teaching of the old liberalism (old means pre-World War I), and ^ethey all stem from this exalted view of man. One was that man was thought to be able to do anything, including the bringing in of the kingdom of God on earth by his own efforts. After all, if man is not sinful but inherently good, he is limited practically only by what he has time to do. Another was the soft-peddling of the distinctive message of the Gospel that man needs personal salvation. After all, if man is not so sinful why does he need a Savior? He may need a helper or guide, but not a Savior. So the thrust of the Gospel was turned toward redeeming society rather than men.

But even this rosy outlook was soon challenged. The tragedy of the first world war played a very large part in shattering the theology of liberalism. To those who were lucky enough to live through the war, the golden age seemed very far off, and their theology was shaken by the obvious fact that man's human nature which they had been taught was so inherently good had itself invented and carried out the atrocities of the war. Some men began to look for some answer outside of man himself, and this was something that liberalism could not provide.

NEOORTHODOXY

But a man named Karl Barth thought he had the answer, and for nearly 50 years a system of belief known as Barthianism or neoorthodoxy has tried to offer an alternative to liberalism. Who is this man Karl Barth? Born in Switzerland in 1886, he studied in the leading universities of his day and under the outstanding liberal professors. Originally he was a thoroughgoing liberal, but his liberal philosophy began to crumble under the questions which he himself began to ask during his first pastorate. The practical pressure of knowing that his parishioners came to church to hear a message from God and not to hear his opinions or speculations forced him to ask himself if he really had anything to give them. In 1918 Barth published a commentary on Romans which literally shook the theological world. He said that man cannot discover God (as the liberals were trying to do by their investigations) unless God takes the initiative to reveal Himself to man. Two other men have contributed to neoorthodoxy too. They are another Swiss born just 3 years after Barth, Emil Brunner, and an American, Reinhold Niebuhr.

The most important thing to understand about neoorthodoxy is to know what is meant by their concept of the "Word" and the relation of the

"Word" to the Bible. You and I are accustomed to using the term Word of God to mean either the written Word, that is, the Bible, or the living Word, that is, Christ. But neoorthodoxy uses the phrase to mean only Christ. I already mentioned that Barth said that if anyone is going to know anything about God, God has to take the initiative in revealing Himself. And, said Barth, God has done just that. He has revealed Himself. How? In the Word. But he means by the Word, Christ.

Now, of course, there is nothing heretical about saying this, for God has revealed Himself in Christ. Indeed, this is one of the chief ways in which God has made Himself known. Christ Himself said that He had declared the Father (John 1:18). But we also believe that God has revealed Himself with equal authority in His written Word, the Bible, and neoorthodoxy does not. We believe that there is a revelation of God in the words of the Bible as well as in the historical appearance of Christ. But neoorthodoxy believes that the Bible is not in itself a revelation from God but that it only points to the revelation in Christ. And in pointing it is not accurate or completely reliable. Thus to the Barthian parts of the Bible (those which tell of Christ) are more inspired than other parts. In other words, God reveals Himself in Christ; the Bible points to or witnesses to that revelation; but the Bible is not accurate; so the pointer (the Bible) may be bad though the revelation (Christ) is good.

Such a view of the Bible is very convenient, for it allows one to give a certain status to the Bible while at the same time it permits one to believe that the Bible is full of errors. And, as a matter of fact, this is exactly what Barthians believe about the Bible. It is authoritative, they will say, because it points to Christ. But it is not accurate because it is merely the product of fallible human authors. So Barthians can very

conveniently believe all that liberals believe about the Bible (which isn't much) and at the same time turn right around and preach the Bible as if it were true. But make no mistake about it, to the Barthian there are errors in the Bible. To the Barthian, Adam did not really live. To the Barthian, the gospel writers invented some of the "facts" about the life of Christ.

Is there any chance that you will ever hear a Barthian preacher? Yes, there is a very good chance, for a lot of preachers have been trained in this error and are preaching it from very respectable pulpits every Sunday. How can you tell if you are listening to a neoorthodox preacher? Well, there are several tests you can apply. First, does the preacher (or author if you are reading some suspicious book) consider the first chapters of Genesis to be actual history? That is, does he regard Adam as a real person who lived on this earth at a particular time in history? The Barthian does not so regard Adam but understands him to be a fictitious man who merely pictures you and me as sinners.

Second, does this preacher or writer acknowledge the Bible itself as a revelation from God? Usually the Barthian will avoid saying that the Bible is a revelation from God. To him, it is a witness to God's revelation in the Word, Christ.

Third, you should be alert to what he says about mistakes in the Bible, particularly in the areas of science and history of the Old Testament and accuracy of the Gospels. Barthians will deny the accuracy (but not the authority) of the Bible. Of course, liberals also consider the Bible to be full of errors, but to a Barthian these factual errors do not affect the "truth" which the Bible stories are trying to convey.

You see, the Barthian tries to maintain the "truth" of the Bible without the facts. This is a neat trick if you can do it. But how can

you have truth that means anything if it isn't based on facts? For instance, the resurrection of Christ is a most important doctrine to Barthians, but whether or not the body of Jesus came out of the tomb makes little difference to them. To me, this is a most obvious logical impossibility, but the Barthian takes it in stride as part of his system. So expect to hear a Barthian preacher talk about the resurrection, or Adam or the events of the life of Christ as if it all actually happened. But don't be surprised if he somewhere slips in a statement to the effect that we really don't know if these things happened or not.

Let me illustrate how illogical this approach is. Once my wife and I had a get-together in our home for members of a class studying neoorthodoxy. We decorated the house with typical Barthian statements. On the kitchen door we placed this sign: "This is the kitchen. If you think you are going to have refreshments tonight, remember that the truth of refreshments is more important than the fact of refreshments!" At the risk of boring you, may I rehearse the obvious point: it is rather impossible to fill an empty stomach with the truth of refreshments unless the kitchen table is first filled with the facts of refreshments.

You might be thinking that this disregard for the Bible is counter-balanced by a high regard for Christ who is the revelation of God. But this is not the case. Again the Barthian gives you this double-talk about the facts of the life of Christ not being important--just the significance of His life. This view conveniently allows you to deny the accuracy of the Gospels and accept all the things which liberals teach about their unreliability. It allows a Barthian to believe that many of the stories were concocted by the early church or to believe (as they do) that John's Gospel is a novel about Jesus written by a trembling old man. At the same time it allows you to

preach with fervor (even pound the pulpit) about the significance of the life of Christ. It allows you to talk about the death of Christ. But you will notice if you listen to a Barthian regularly that he seldom, if ever, speaks of the blood of Christ as the payment for our sins.

Is there any way to help someone who has become involved in neoorthodoxy? Well, you might try to point out the inconsistency of this attempt to affirm the significance and deny the historicity. Notice Romans 5:12-21. In this passage Paul clearly teaches that at a certain time, in a certain place, a certain person, Adam did a certain thing. If you remove time and space from this passage, what is left? And if nothing is left of Adam, then the parallelism in the passage between Adam and Christ requires you to conclude that nothing is real about the work of Christ. Barthians deny the historicity of Adam but affirm the historicity of Christ. But Paul affirms the historicity of both in a parallelism which breaks down completely if Adam was not a real person. So perhaps you could show a Barthian from this passage that if he accepts what is taught there about Christ he ought to accept what is taught about Adam.

Or you might try to show him that the Bible itself claims to be a revelation from God in and through its own words. Paul claimed that what he taught in his epistles was "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (I Cor. 2:13). Revelation does come through the words of the Bible. Or you might point out what use the Lord Jesus Himself made of the Bible. He appealed to it again and again as the final unchanging authority. In His temptation, His answer to Satan was simply "it is written." He did not say, "it witnesses" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 19:3-9; John 10:35). The Lord believed that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired and authoritative. So if you acknowledge the authority of Christ

(which Barthians profess to do) you really ought to acknowledge the authority of the Bible, since He did. But beware, this is a very subtle error and often hard to discover. But it is a very serious error, for although it tries to give some objective basis for religious authority (in the revelation in Christ) it denies the objective authority of the Bible which is, after all, our only source for the knowledge of Christ.

You should begin to be asking ^{something} about systems of theology by now, and that is this. Where is the objective authority for what the system teaches? By objective authority I mean authority outside of one's personal experience. Now, of course, there is authority in experience and all religions recognize this. Conservative Christianity promotes a practical experience of faith. But the difference between conservatism and these new theologies is in the kind of objective authority they have in addition to the subjective experience.

EXISTENTIALISM

Now this subjectivism is existentialism. You have undoubtedly heard this word existentialism used and perhaps wondered about it. Actually it is a perfectly good term to express the subjective experience which one can have in the exercise of his faith. Evangelicals are existentialists for two reasons: to become a Christian one must have an existential experience of placing his faith in Christ as Savior; and to live the Christian life it is necessary to have existential experiences of walking with God. But all such experiences are based on objective authority found in the written records of our faith, the Bible, and in the historical facts concerning God and Christ which it records. These new theologies attempt to broaden the area of religious experience that can be known by existential experience to include the objective basis of authority for one's faith. Barthianism, for instance, declares that our relation to the Bible should be an existential

one--that is, truths in the Bible become truth to us when we personally experience them. This is practically saying that what I consider truth in the Bible is truth and what you consider is too, even though we don't agree. To be very fair, however, one must add that Barthians are not quite that subjective about the Bible since they say that we are all to be guided by the interpretation of the church throughout history. But they never say which branch of the church!

TILLICH

Paul Tillich who died ^{in 1965} just about two years ago was even more subjective or existential than Barthianism. Tillich is very difficult to understand. Indeed, many consider him entirely a philosopher and not a theologian at all; and, as a matter of fact, some go so far to say that he is not even a Christian philosopher. While it is often very unclear what Tillich means about most things, some aspects of his theology are quite plainly stated. For instance, he does not believe in a literal historical Bible. He does not believe in Jesus Christ as the God-man Savior. He does not believe in a transcendent God (that is a God who is apart from His universe and who is above our full experience or knowledge of Him). If you have heard anything about Tillich it is probably his phrase for God as the Ground of Being. The phrase evolves this way.

Tillich says that the most important question is, What is existence? To answer it one must first start by looking at himself, and in the process of investigating ourselves we sense something else which is the ground of our being. This is God to Tillich. He is certainly not a God who stands apart from His creation and who is known only because He chooses to reveal Himself (as conservatives and Barth teach). Neither is Tillich's concept of Ground of Being quite the same as pantheism where God is everything (like

God is this magazine or the chair on which you are sitting). But his concept is almost pantheism except it is more that God is under everything than in everything. Jesus is important because He somehow shows uninterrupted fellowship with the Ground of Being. However, Tillich is ready to admit that Jesus may never have lived, but this is not important since the picture of Jesus as the Christ inspires us to have courage in living out our existence (however illogical that may seem).

You can easily see even from the sketch of Tillich that he has less objective elements in his system than Barth. The Bible is reduced to nonsense and nothingness; Jesus may never have lived; the resurrection is a poetic rationalization; God is completely subjective based on our own experience and concept of Him.

GOD IS DEAD

The night before Tillich died some younger theologians were talking with him and thanking him for giving them the ideas on which they based their newer theologies. Realizing that these newer ideas were much more radical than even his own system, Tillich remonstrated with them and insisted that he never intended that his theology would go that far. But it did, and where it went was straight into the God is Dead theology of these younger theologians.

You have probably heard about the God is Dead movement since it has received a lot of publicity in the newspapers and news magazines. The four names that are prominently associated with this new theology are Thomas J. J. Altizer, Harvey Cox, Paul van Buren and Gabriel Vahanian. Some of these men are less radical than others since they believe that God isn't really dead. To them He has become so irrelevant that He might as well be considered dead though there has been no actual, historical death. Others

in this movement believe that God is actually dead. Strange as it may seem, however, even though these theologians want to get rid of God--whether actually or practically--they want to retain a kind of Jesus-hang-over. They want to see Jesus in society or in the neighbor or in secular thought. They even have the nerve to say that we ought to follow the ethics of Jesus. I say "nerve" since they reject the Bible completely. Now where else can you find the ethics of Jesus except in the Bible? So how can you reject the Bible and hold on to the ethics of Jesus? They are trying to believe in something (ethics of Jesus) which is bound in something they disbelieve (the Bible). To them, the historical evidence of the New Testament about the resurrection, say, is explained as merely the biased account of prejudiced witnesses who discerned a truth without any factual basis.

Personally, my mind cannot grasp such vague ideas. How can you have truth without facts? How can you retain ethical teaching while rejecting the source of that teaching? What ideas are conveyed by these typical meaningless phrases of the God-Is-Dead writers: "discernment situation," "every alien other," "the contradiction of life and the deification of nothingness," or--and hold your hats--"God is Satan." Or what can be understood by this statement that the fundamental theological principle is that "the God of faith so far from being unchanging and unmoving is a perpetual and forward-moving process of self-negation, pure negativity, or kenotic metamorphosis?"

If this seems to be nonsense to you too, don't worry. Here's what a liberal (Robert McAfee Brown) says about Altizer's new book The Gospel of Christian Atheism: "1. Either Altizer cannot write clearly; or 2. He can write clearly but does not care to take the trouble to do so; or 3. His subject matter is of such a sort that it is incommunicable in the prose style he has adopted; or 4. I am too dense to understand what he is writing about." If you agree with Brown about Altizer you may not be in too good company

theologically, but at least you are not alone in your reactions!

SITUATION ETHICS

The ethical counterpart to this God Is Dead theology is what is called Situation Ethics. It is a kind of rebel movement against authority in the matter of how we ought to conduct ourselves. The leading exponent of this idea is a man named John Fletcher, and he is very sure that the commandments of the Bible are not to be obeyed absolutely. Indeed his teaching has been caricatured as rewriting the ten commandments something like this: "Thou shalt not commit adultery--usually." Or "thou shalt not steal--unless the situation requires it." But the strange thing about Fletcher is that he is not quite prepared to say that we can do whatever we feel the situation warrants, or to put it very bluntly, we can do what we please. He still wants to retain some guidelines or some basis of authority which should govern our actions. In his teaching the authority is love, and he uses the Biblical word (agape) for it, but he divorces it of Biblical meaning. He also says that our motive will keep us from doing just anything since we should act from good motives, and he thinks we should try to predict the consequences of any action and be governed by that. When it is all boiled down Fletcher is saying little more than that we are guided by our own thinking which may or may not be reliable depending on how straight our thinking is and how moral is our character.

Situation Ethics is not new, believe it or not. The Bible allows this kind of action under some circumstances. When Paul was discussing the matter of whether or not the Corinthians could eat meats offered to idols he solved the problem by suggesting a situation ethic. You remember that he told them that if eating meat would hinder the Christian growth of a brother they should not eat; but if it wouldn't, they were free to eat.

This is situation ethics and it is Biblical. But it isn't the whole story concerning ethics in the Bible. God also declares that some things are definitely wrong and some things are always right. This is absolute ethics. This, of course, is the area that a man like Fletcher will not recognize, and unfortunately many Christians follow him in this, though not to the same extreme. The ethics of the New Testament can be divided into four categories. First, there are commands stated positively. These are things which are always right to do (like giving, or loving or praying). Second, there are commands which are stated negatively. These are things which are always wrong (like stealing, lying, adultery). Third, there is this area of situational action such as the matter of doubtful things like the meats of the New Testament times. Under some circumstances it is right to do these things and under other circumstances it is wrong to do the same thing. Fourth, there is an area of conduct which is governed or controlled either by parents or by the church. Ephesians 6:1 states that it is proper for parents to regulate the lives of their children, and Hebrews 13:17 indicates that the leaders of a church have not only the right but the obligation to rule the members. Both of these areas--parents in the home and leaders in the church--would involve the use of principles and rules to carry out these responsibilities. In other words the Bible sanctions ethics on the basis of (1) God's commands as recorded in the Bible, (2) the situation in which a believer finds himself, and (3) regulations laid down by parents and church.

AUTHORITY

Have you noticed something in this survey of various new theologies? What I mean is this: they all have some basis of authority, believe it or not. Evangelicals base their authority on the Bible and on Christ. Barthianism bases its on a fallible and perverted view of Christ only. Liberalism, Tillich and the God Is Dead movement all base their teaching on experience alone. This is not to say that evangelicals do not expect to have experiences in the

Christian life, but all such experiences are related to and governed by the teachings of the Bible. Tillich, liberals and the God Is Dead people (and even Barthians for that matter) do not really have any guidelines for their experiences other than their own minds, and that's pure subjectivism. In other words, your experience is as good as mine or vice versa, and who's to decide who is right. It's just one man's opinion against another's. Furthermore, evangelical Christianity is the historic teaching of the church. It is the liberal and the Barthian and all the others who have departed from that which had always been taught until they came along. Evangelicalism is old; these new theologies are the ones out of step with tradition.

Can the Bible be trusted? That's a subject for another time, but don't ever sell the Bible and its authority short. It has been proven to be all that it claims to be, and that means that it is safe to trust its guidelines. New theologies come and go, but the Word of the Lord abides forever and is relevant for today. You need to know something about these new theologies in order to be on guard, and I hope this article has helped to that end; but don't leave something tried and true for some temporary fad.