

The New Liberals

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Evangelicalism has produced a new breed of liberals. These "new liberals" claim to believe what the Bible says and retain orthodox theology, but they adopt the same notion of cultural relevance that drove the old liberals.

When the enlightenment and the age of reason invaded Christianity the result was classic liberal theology - the placing of reason over biblical revelation. Such embracing of modern culture did great harm to the Christian message. We can rejoice today because, for all practical purposes, classic liberal theology is dead. We are living in the age of postmodernism.

Classic liberal theology, primarily the product of 19th century German rationalism, imposed its mind-set on the Christian Church. Today, with the advent of postmodernism, the classic liberal is as politically incorrect as the conservative Bible-believer. It is not proper, according to the postmodernist thinker, to impose your viewpoint on other people. They have their truth, and you have your truth. The folks of the "Jesus Seminar" are, for the most part, aged scholars attempting a last hurrah.

But there is a new threat on the horizon. It is no longer the classic liberal but the new liberal - **the culturally relevant postmodern evangelical.**

Liberals and Conservatives

Traditionally, the terms *liberal* and *conservative*, when applied to Christianity, defined two divergent viewpoints as to the relationship between reason and revelation. While the liberal was progressive in his embrace of the rationalism of the culture, the conservative remained the cautious traditionalist.

The liberal placed reason over revelation in order to accommodate the culture and make the Christian message palatable to the modern, scientific mentality. The liberal attempted to form a "religion of the people" by offering a culturally relevant message.

On the other hand, the authentic Christian conservative, on the other hand, while not rejecting the role of reason, willingly submitted reason to biblical revelation. The conservative was also interested in reaching people, but he was motivated by the greater desire of faithfulness to biblical truth. For the conservative, the Word of God, not the culture, determined the church's agenda.

The real issue that divides liberals and conservatives is not specifically the role of reason but rather *the issue of cultural relevance*. Being culturally relevant in the modern scientific age demanded watering down the Christian message by eliminating the offensive elements, such as miracles.

The postmodern culture is not characterized by rationalism but by relativism. Absolute truth claims are rejected. Truth is either personal or the perspective of a specific community of faith.

Postmodernists are driven by the *heart* rather than by the head. This "new age" is also a *spiritual age*, yet it is a spirituality *based* on feelings, the development of the inner-life, not on propositional truth. I believe it is proper to conclude that the desire for cultural relevance defines and distinguishes the progressive liberal from the authentic Christian conservative. As the philosophic underpinnings of the culture change, the result will be a new breed of liberals.

This new liberal is not a rationalist. He may believe that the Bible is inspired and inerrant and may claim to possess theological soundness, but is driven by the same desire for cultural relevance that drove the classic liberal. The result of this new liberalism upon the Christian Church is as devastating as the intrusion of the classic rationalist.

Cultural Relevance

Where did we get the idea that the Christian Church should be culturally relevant? Obviously, this is not a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod idea. We required two world wars before we stopped speaking

German. The present expression of the drive for cultural relevance is a product of modern evangelicalism.

Present day evangelicalism or neo-evangelicalism is rooted in the 40's. While emerging out of fundamentalism, it was a *reaction* against fundamentalism. Various conservative Christian leaders such as Harold John Ockenga, Carl F. H. Henry, Edward John Carnell questioned the relevance of the fundamentalist stance.

In assessing modern conservative Protestantism, they rightly noted that, while many fundamentalist churches were growing, they were primarily appealing to the lower, uneducated, socio-economic level. They concluded that this brand of Christianity would not impact the modern culture with the Gospel. Out of these observations emerged a "new evangelicalism" characterized by scholarship, social relevance, and an attitude of non-separatism.

What is an evangelical? Noted fundamentalist leader Bob Jones defined the new evangelical as one who would say to a liberal, "I'll call you brother if you'll call me smart." Others have referred to evangelicals as simply "smiling fundamentalists."

The new movement began to take shape. In 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals was formed. Fuller Theological Seminary, organized in 1947, became the training center for the new evangelical pastor. The Billy Graham Crusades beginning in 1948 led the evangelism impetus for the new evangelicals. The first issue of *Christianity Today*, the scholarly journal of conservative evangelical theology appeared in 1956. Within a few years it had more readers than the more liberal *Christian Century*.

While fundamentalism had responded to liberal theology by being *separate*, clinging to their own out-dated culture, the new evangelicals attempted to become *integrated* and *culturally relevant*. The movement was highly successful. *Time* magazine declared 1976 as the Year of the Evangelical.

Evangelical Style and Method

For the first twenty-five years, the Billy Graham Crusades characterized the evangelism zeal of the new evangelicals. In the past twenty-five years, the *Church Growth Movement* has taken over as the primary evangelical distinctive.

The new evangelicals desired to remain faithful to the Gospel proclamation, but recognized, along with the classic liberals, that the preaching of the cross of Jesus Christ is *foolishness* to the modern culture. While the classic liberals attempted to reach the culture by changing the *product*, the new evangelicals set out to change the *packaging* by adjusting style and method.

In 1970, Donald McGavran of the School of Missions at Fuller came out with the groundbreaking book *Understanding Church Growth*. Since that time, the face of American Christianity, including the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, has not been the same. Grasping McGavran's theories, Fuller Seminary professors C. Peter Wagner, Arthur Glasser, Alan Tippett, Charles Kraft, and others began to widely disseminate these "Church Growth Principles."

Commenting on the effects of the Church Growth Movement upon evangelicalism, David Wells writes:

A new and more culturally adapted evangelicalism emerged, the central figures of which were no longer the scholars who had been prominent in the immediate post-war years but rather a host of managers, planners, and bureaucrats – and not far behind them, marketers This new set of leaders view growing a church or, for that matter, any Christian ministry as essentially no different from growing a business. (1)

Instrumental in the move to turn the local Christian congregation into an efficiently functioning business were the writings of marketing expert *George Barna*.

(2) He conceived of the church as a business, the pastor as a CEO, and the Gospel as a product. Many LCMS congregations have jumped on the "*mission statement*" band-wagon, thinking that the word "mission" defined a Christian thing. The fact is, the "mission statement" idea emerged out of the

marketing strategy of secular corporations. In a college business textbook the authors write: "A mission statement broadly outlines the organizations future course and serves to communicate 'who we are, what we do, and where we're heading'." (3)

In his book *Dining with the Devil*, Os Guinness points out that the Church Growth Movement has caused theology to take a back seat to methodology. He writes:

Today theology is rarely more than marginal in the church-growth movement at the popular level. Discussion of the traditional marks of the church is virtually non-existent. Instead, methodology is at the center and in control. The result is a methodology only occasionally in search of a theology. After all, Church Growth, as opposed to church growth, is a self-professed "science," not a theology. (4)

Relativism

As postmodernism gradually replaced the age of reason, evangelicals, in search of cultural relevance and driven by "seeker sensitivity," readily adopted the new paradigm. The issue for us is no longer simply adopting "evangelical style" while retaining "Lutheran substance."

Since the primary manifestation of postmodernism is the relativity of truth, when such a mind-set invades the church, the results will be the same. Truth will be deemed relative. Dr. Mike Horton writes:

In fact, evangelical Christians, according to Barna, are equally divided between those who strongly agree and strongly disagree with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth." . . . Even among conservative evangelicalism the accommodation to contemporary culture's retreat from objective truth is obvious. . . . If the early church defended its convictions with "It is written. . ." and the medieval church with, "The Church says. . .", today's evangelicals often throw out slogans and the appeal, "I feel that. . ." (5)

Dr. Albert Mohler adds:

Yet to our shame, the modern secular worldview has wrought destruction within the church as well. The modern attempt to dominate truth has given way within sectors of the church to the postmodern rejection of truth itself. Indeed, in many denominations and churches, notions of orthodoxy and heresy have become "conceptual emptiness." The boundaries have vanished. The very possibility of heresy is dismissed in many circles within Protestantism. (6)

Experience over Doctrine

While the classic liberal placed reason over Scripture, the postmodern liberal places experience over Scripture.

People join a church today because "they like it." They have a good experience. They listen to their pastor, because "they like him." Whether or not the church teaches truth or the pastor proclaims truth is no longer the issue.

If there are elements of the Christian faith which people do not like, those doctrines are not rejected but simply marginalized. People don't like the subject of sin and redemption. Therefore, for the postmodern liberal, Jesus is no longer primarily the suffering Savior who died to forgive human sin. Rather, he is our friend who helps us make it through the week. He gives us good principles for living so that we could be successful in our daily living.

Obviously, people don't like the doctrine of hell. Some postmodern liberals have adjusted the doctrine in order to be more culturally relevant. Unbelievers, according to their way of thinking, are not punished eternally but simple annihilated.

People don't like the idea of standing in awe of a holy God. One author speaks of this as the "cringe factor" that must be eliminated. God has become the "good buddy" of the postmodern liberal.

The postmodern pastor is dedicated to the task of offending no one.

Denouncing Polemics

If doctrinal truth is relative, there is no point in defending truth or pointing out error. Error does not exist. Dr. David Wells writes:

So it is that the particularities of evangelical faith, the things that make it different - are dissolved. Modern culture grants me absolute freedom to believe whatever I want to believe - so long as I keep those beliefs from infringing on the consciousness or behavior of anyone else, especially on points of controversy. (7)

Classic confessional theology has always embraced two parts: the first is the clear declaration of the truth; and the second is the description of heterodox positions (those positions that are in error). The postmodern liberal will hold to his truth, but will be uncritical of errorists.

The New Spirituality

We are living in a culture that has become *very spiritual*. While religion is "out," spirituality is "in." Popular techniques that are a part of the postmodern spirituality are becoming widely adopted by postmodern evangelicals, including those within the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

Recent publications by Lutheran organizations (8) have promoted popular New Age practices, including the technique of "centering".

While it is true that these techniques can be traced to the mysticism of the classic contemplatives, the popularity of these methods today is not related to a revival of classic mysticism but rather the proliferation of the teachings of the New Age movement.

Even though historic Lutheran theology has rejected the introversion and quietism necessary to engage in these practices, seeing them as a challenge to the objective nature of justification, this makes little difference. The practices are popular. People, especially women, enjoy this new spirituality. It's warm and fuzzy.

Collaborative Bible Study

The new approach to education in the postmodern age is what is called "collaborative learning." Gene Veith says:

The postmodernist emphasis upon groups shows up also in education. Students engage in "collaborative learning." Instead of each individual student learning the lesson and doing the homework, students work together in groups, collaborating to receive a group grade. (9)

The postmodern pastor, rather than being a teacher and defender of the truth of Christianity, becomes a group facilitator. Bible study is no longer the exegetically trained pastor saying, "this is what the verse means," rather, the group determines the meaning of Scripture as it applies to them. The pastor is no longer the spiritual authority figure - his opinions on spiritual matters are really no better than anyone else's opinion.

Trashing Tradition

When I took "worship" in the seminary, the historic liturgy was not "given to me," rather, I was given to the liturgy. Liturgical worship added the note of transcendence to the service.

The question was not do the people *like* it? It was what we did! If you wanted to sing gospel songs, go to the Baptist Church - that is what they do. Today, in the desire to appeal to the seeker, the postmodern pastors trash tradition. The postmodern expression of Christianity is no longer historically based, but is merely built upon the spiritual whims of the populace.

The Results

Fifty years after the rise of the new evangelicalism and twenty years after *Time* declared 1976 *The Year of the Evangelical*, what has become the shape of American evangelical Christianity? Has the push to attain cultural relevance been successful?

By and large, the Christian Church has not impacted the secular culture with the Gospel. Instead, the philosophy, methods, and style of the secular culture have invaded the Christian Church. Rather than adjusting the secular culture, the grand evangelical experiment in cultural relevance has produced a Christian culture that is virtually identical with the secular culture. Many churches are businesses. Their pastors are CEO's. The worship services offer entertainment. We have Christian television, Christian radio, Christian books, and Christian gift shops. We search the Christian "yellow pages," to find Christian lawyers, psychologists, and financial advisors. We cast our vote for the Christian politicians. Christian contemporary music is marketed in the same way as secular music. We can do Christian aerobics and join Christian weight-loss programs. A Christian ghetto has been produced. While Jesus told his church to be in the world but not of it, the culturally relevant evangelical is *of it but not in it*.

Successful postmodern evangelical pastors such as Bill Hybels and Robert Schuller are really no different than the successful modern liberal clergy, such as Sloan Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick. While Coffin and Fosdick built their congregations by appealing to human reason, Hybels and Schuller "grow a church" by appealing to the feelings and experience of the people. While the classic liberal pastor *questioned*, on the basis of reason, the truth of traditional Christian doctrine, the postmodern pastor *ignores* doctrine and focuses on methods that produce success. Doctrine that stands in the way of appealing to the culture, such as the issue of human sin, is *marginalized*.

On the surface, it may seem ironic to think of the evangelical as the new liberal. The roots of evangelicalism are found in the ultraconservative fundamentalism. Os Guinness comments on this seemingly strange reversal, "Mention of the liberal camp only deepens the irony . . . fundamentalists as modernity's former misfits have become its most ardent missionaries." (10)

Yet, it is not so strange that former fundamentalists are the new culturally relevant liberals. H. Richard Niebuhr points out that the fundamentalist attack on the so-called liberalism of cultural Protestantism was not so much motivated by the desire to preserve the authentic Christian faith, but rather an expression of loyalty to their own outdated culture. He writes: "the mores they associate with Christ have at least as little relation to the New Testament and as much connection with social custom as have those of their opponents . . . though the culture it seeks to conserve differs from that which its rivals honor." (11)

From fundamentalism to neo-evangelicalism the issue was always ***culture over Christ***. The difference is, the culture embraced by the neo-evangelicals is the *culture of the world*.

Response to the New Liberalism

The divisions that exist within Protestant Christianity today over the issue of *cultural relevance* are as great if not even greater than the divisions caused by liberal rationalism. In the April 5, 1997 edition of the *New York Times*, columnist Bruce Bawer commented on the state of American Protestantism:

American Protestantism is in the midst of a major shift. It is being split into two nearly antithetical religions, both calling themselves Christian.

Those who oppose this new liberalism dare not respond as old-fashioned cultural conservatives and yearn to recapture the good ol' days of the 40's and 50's. Old-fashioned conservatives are as much a hindrance to the Christian enterprise as are the new liberals. Did people in the 40's and 50's understand the liturgy of the church? Were they theologically astute? Were they effectively catechized? Were they able to *share their faith* or did they merely *invite* their neighbors to church to listen to the pastor?

Old-fashioned cultural conservatives may join the fight to preserve Bible-based, traditional, confessional Christianity, but they often do so out of the desire to *preserve* the good ol' days. From what I can remember about the good ol' days, they were really not that great. We boasted of having the "pure Gospel," but more often than not had no idea what that meant.

The advent of postmodern liberalism may be the very thing we have needed to *wake us* from our dogmatic slumbers. In the past, we have not done a good job of teaching and training the people.

Truth is relativized and tradition is rejected today because *neither were understood nor valued* in the 40's and 50's, but there are many good signs on the horizon.

There is a renewed emphasis in the LCMS upon catechesis – teaching and training people in the basic elements of the Catechism. If the postmodern age rejects truth, *the church must powerfully present truth* to fill the vacuum. If the postmodernist claims that there is no absolute truth, we respond by saying, "*Yes there is, and we have it. Come and learn.*" It is again time for the people in the LCMS to say, "We have the pure Gospel!" But this time, they should be *taught* what that means.

There is also a move among evangelicals back to the historic expression of the Christian faith as seen in the Church Fathers and in the Reformation. Former liberal theologian Thomas Oden now refers to himself as paleo-orthodox. He has returned to the historic roots of the faith. *The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*, a movement comprised of both Lutherans and Calvinists, is calling evangelicals back to the Reformation. Baptist theologians such as Albert Mohler, John Armstrong, Tom Nettles, and Rob Shorter encourage Baptists to find a deeper expression of their faith in Word and Sacrament.

Movements come and go, but the truth is eternal. Much of the controversy caused by the Church Growth Movement is driven by the baby-boomer generation. This generation will pass and "Woodstock" will no longer be celebrated in the sanctuary. Perhaps the time will come when the refrains of contemporary Christian music will be echoing through the halls of Lutheran nursing homes.

This is a very exciting time to be a part of the Christian Church. It is a time to learn and to grow, or "To get it right and get it out!" Jesus made it very clear that his Church will prevail and the gates of hell will not stand against it!

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