

The Rise of Liberalism

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – The rise of liberalism as a response to the Industrial Revolution and modernism
2. aim – To cause us to understand the nature of liberalism and its impact upon the church

b. outline

1. The Industrial Revolution
2. The Voices of Liberalism
3. The Social Gospel

c. overview

1. the **Modern** Church – the history of the W church *in modern times*, as seen *primarily* in America, but with profound influences coming from Europe
 - a. now into the period after the Civil War – the beginning of the modern age
 - b. but ... what contributes *largely* to the realities of the church *after* the Civil War had actually begun *prior* to it ...

I. The Industrial Revolution

Content

a. the nature of the Industrial Revolution

1. an economic movement created by virtue of the invention and implementation of new manufacturing processes in Europe and the United States; a major turning point in human history, where almost every facet of human life was influenced (both positively and negatively)
 - a. **e.g.** the standard of living began to rise dramatically for the average person (although that would be seen *mostly* in the late 19th – early 20th C.)
 - b. **e.g.** the general population of the world began to rise dramatically (**i.e.** the advancement of wealth changed the life-expectancy of the human race significantly, along with improved infant mortality)
 - c. **e.g.** W civilization “moved” from an agrarian-based economy to a capitalist one, with large migrations from farms to the industrial centers (**i.e.** major cities along shipping routes; **see below**)
2. most historians date the Industrial Revolution from c. 1760 to 1820-40 (continuing into the 20th C.)
 - a. early technological innovations were of *British* origin, with Great Britain becoming a global trading empire with colonies in N America, with military and political hegemony in India
 - b. **remember:** the *primary* emphasis of the original American colonies was *economic* – the development of technological advancements *massively increased* this focus
 - c. so ... once the Civil War was “resolved” the focus of America could return to this *economic* shift, and the effects of the Industrial Revolution would now flourish
3. the primary technological advances of this era included:
 - a. the advancement of steam power – the adaptation of steam to power engines driving machinery
 - b. the increase in iron production – the use of steam power to process iron in massive amounts
 - c. the invention of machine tools – the economical manufacture of precision metal parts
 - d. the factory system – the move from agriculture to factories, particularly in the *textile* industry
 1. driving the movement from rural farm life to urban factory life
 - e. **note:** a “second” Industrial Revolution is said to have begun near the end of the 19th C. when the process of smelting iron into steel was revolutionized by Sir Henry Bessemer – it continued into the 20th C. with the advent of petroleum products, synthesized chemicals, and electricity

b. the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the church

1. the mass movement of people into urban areas created very different lifestyles and focuses
 - a. the working class now crowded together around industrial sites, with the *early* realities of poor living conditions (**i.e.** crowded housing, poor sanitation, epidemics, etc.)
 - b. however, with the advancement of technology and political interventions, life improved dramatically in urban centers, and standards of living rose, food supplies increased, literacy grew, and a rise of a permanent “middle class” (eventually)
2. the Protestant church attempted to respond to this new urban reality
 - a. in the establishment of specific organizations to serve the inner-city masses: the YMCA and YWCA

- b. in the creation of Sunday School – in response to the *rapidly declining* knowledge of Scripture
 - 1. **i.e.** with an *increased* focus of time on *economic* (financial) realities, the amount of time given to the reading and study of Scripture *fell dramatically*
 - 2. the first Sunday School was established in 1751 by Robert Raikes in Gloucestershire, England to provide education to working children
 - a. originally, the idea was to provide classes in reading, writing, math, and Bible knowledge – since children (and their parents) were spending their weekdays in factories, Sunday became a good time for a general education – over time, as *institutionalized education* became the norm, the Sunday School moved to Bible study only
 - 3. the Sunday School movement came to America in 1790, when Samuel Slater began one in his textile mill in Pawtucket, RI
 - 4. by the early 20th C., the Sunday School movement was *ubiquitous*, to the point where (in many churches) the most important aspect of the church was its Sunday School time
- c. in the adaptation of the old camp meetings
 - 1. Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) – a Chicago shoe salesman who was moved to act by the lack of religious life among the masses of the great city
 - a. Moody was converted by his Sunday School teacher, Edward Kimball, in April, 1855 in Boston – he moved the next year to Chicago with dreams of making a fortune in shoes
 - b. he “conscientiously objected” to joining the Union Army, and joined up with the YMCA, where he evangelized many, creating a large Sunday School following – he started an independent church in 1864, the Illinois Street Church (now The Moody Church)
 - c. in 1872, while visiting London, he was first invited to preach, which led him to a call to preach to the urban masses
 - d. he had met Ira Sankey (a gospel singer) in 1871, and with him toured internationally, preaching to large crowds in great urban centers, with a simple emotive message of embracing the love of God in Christ
 - e. **LOW:** Moody was the “beginning” of an urban gospel revival movement that would continue with other “famous” evangelists into the 20th C. (**e.g.** Billy Sunday and Billy Graham)

II. The Voices of Liberalism

Content

a. the beginnings of liberalism

- 1. **remember:** the Enlightenment of the 17th-18th C. had spawned a period focused on the pursuit of knowledge by pure *reason* – a continuation of the *Scientific Revolution* of the Renaissance
 - a. the philosophers of the Age of Reason: Locke, Hume, Kant – the idea that men could “figure out” God through reason, without the need for special revelation – Protestant Christianity becoming highly *subjective*: whatever the individual dreamed it could be
- 2. during the 19th C., this movement *accelerated*, as the advancement of technology and science would fuel new *philosophical* studies (historical and critical) into the nature of God and of the Christian faith
 - a. most of these movements began in Europe, and began with historical studies regarding the authenticity of the Bible *and the stories that it told* (**see below**)
 - b. they included the propensity to discard anything *extraordinary* or *miraculous* from the faith – since human beings were **progressing** in their abilities so rapidly, the assumption was that we would usher in a new age of joy, freedom, peace, and abundance *without the need of God*
 - 1. **futurism** = that applied technology would advance the human race *beyond* poverty and class struggles into a utopian vision of equality, wealth, and comfort (**i.e.** the 20th C.)
 - 2. **e.g.** Darwin’s evolution was an expression of faith in progress = *progress* is the survival of the fittest, with *adaptation* advancing the species, which *progresses* towards a “higher” form
 - c. thus, Protestant Liberalism was an attempt to couch Christianity in the mold of these ideas
 - 1. **i.e.** history *itself* is a record of progress – humans are not always as they are now; that intellectual *and religious* views have *and must continue to evolve*
 - 2. the result: a series of *historical studies* that cast doubt on much of the traditional views of the past, *particularly* of Scripture and early Christianity

b. the voices of liberalism

- 1. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) – the Father of Modern Liberal Theology
 - a. born in Prussia to a Reformed Church (Moravian) chaplain, educated in Moravian Pietism
 - b. Schleiermacher rejected traditional Christianity and rationalism, and embraced *Romanticism* – a movement holding that there was more to human beings than cold reason

- c. his main argument was that religion is not a form of *knowledge*, nor a system of *morality* (as Kant implied), but a **feeling** – not a *sentimental* feeling, or a passing emotion, but a profound awareness of the existence of the “One” on whom all existence depends
 - 1. **i.e.** an absolute dependence on God – with significant consequences in rational exposition and in ethical responsibility
 - 2. **i.e.** that religion is “different” than knowledge – an understanding of historical realities *only as subordinate* to this “sense” of absolute dependence on God – anything that cannot be shown to be related to the feeling of dependence has no place in theology
 - 3. **e.g.** the doctrine of creation – to deny creation would be to deny the dependence central to Christian religious feeling – but ... no particular *mode* of creation is necessary; the *historicity* of **Genesis 1-3** is irrelevant (Schleiermacher rejected it as ahistorical)
 - 4. **IOW:** since modern science eschews the idea of the *supernatural* (**i.e.** all things can be explained *naturally*), the supernatural is *unnecessary* to this *feeling* of dependence, thus the past can be “reinterpreted” or *rejected*, as long as the dependence remains
- d. Schleiermacher’s influence was substantial – he was a very popular preacher in his day, and his influence over liberalism *grew* in later generations (**i.e.** to the days of Karl Barth, in the 20th C.)
- 2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) – the developer of a “system” of reason
 - a. thesis → antithesis (to question) → synthesis – a constantly advancing system of reason
 - b. to Hegel, all that that exists is the dialectic and dynamic thought of “the Spirit” = the whole of reality, which is advancing and developing over time
 - c. **i.e.** Christianity “sums up” the entire process of human religious development
 - d. **e.g.** the Incarnation (the divine and the human fully united) is the *apex* of the relationship between God and humanity, the “summation” of the entire religious experiment
- 3. F.C. Baur (1790-1860) and the liberal school of biblical and theological studies at Tübingen
 - a. Baur and his followers felt that the root of the NT was the *dialectic* between the *thesis* of Peter’s Judaism and the *antithesis* of Paul’s universal perspective – the *synthesis* was the Fourth Gospel, or moving into 2nd C. Christianity
 - b. thus began the beginnings of *historical criticism* = the study of church history through the lens of an “evolving” view of history itself – **i.e.** the evolution of Christian *dogma* over time was an unfolding of what was already implicit in early Christianity – that Jesus was *much more* than what is presented in the Scriptural accounts, and had been “blurred” by the dogmas of the church over time – thus, the *true beliefs* of the church needed to be “ferreted out” through study and criticism
 - c. resulting in the “quest for the historical Jesus” = finding *true Christianity* by finding the *factual* Jesus hidden behind the faith of the church (and even “behind” the accounts of the gospels)
 - 1. **e.g. The Jesus Seminar** – a renewal of this quest in 1985, including J.D. Crossan, Marcus Borg, Robert Funk, N.T. Wright, etc. characterized by dropping “colored beads” into a box to “vote” on whether the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels were *actually* true
- 4. **IOW:** an 18th-19th C. movement that attempted to “understand” Christianity within the framework of a new scientific and technological worldview

III. The Social Gospel

Content

a. the nature of the Social Gospel

- 1. begun by a small core of liberals who devoted their efforts to exploring and showing the relationship between the demands of the gospel and the misery in which the urban masses lived
 - a. generally traced to Walter Rauschenbusch, a professor of church history at a Baptist seminary from 1897-1918
 - b. he insisted that the social and economic life of the nation should conform to the requirements of the gospel, and *not* to the (good) effects of economic liberalism (**i.e.** supply and demand)
 - c. **i.e.** the task of Christians is to seek to aid the poor and promote greater justice – to overcome the evils of *society* before one addresses *personal sin* – to bring in the kingdom of God through good works (**e.g.** the YMCA [see above] was *itself* an outgrowth of this Social Gospel movement)
- 2. this understanding of the message of Christianity became *prevalent* through much of the *mainline* versions of Protestantism, and is still *actively taught and expected* in many denominations
 - a. however, because it fails to address the *primary need* of human beings (**i.e.** sin and death), it fails to be *any gospel at all* – its message treats Jesus as a “human helper”, not a redeemer