

Dealing with Liberalism in Reformed Theology

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We can all be agreed that liberalism, or modernism, is the enemy of all true theology, i.e., the true knowledge of God. But we must first understand exactly what liberalism is. According to the New Dictionary of Theology (Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, editors), liberalism has the following features:

1. A purpose of adapting the substance of faith... to current naturalistic and anthropocentric viewpoints, abandoning traditional dogmas when necessary.
2. A skepticism regarding the supernatural.
3. A view of the Bible as human record of religious thought and experience.
4. God working only in natural human development (e. g., evolution) for the progress of the human race.
5. A theology based on experience rather than revelation.
6. Denial of the fall, depravity, guilt removed by atonement, and Christ's personal return.

On the basis of these six features, we may conclude that liberalism is a doctrinal system which, based on human experience rather than divine revelation, presents God as the product of man's thought and opinion, and salvation as inherent human progress. Ultimately, Liberalism makes man into God, by making man the final judge of truth and by presenting man as his own savior.

Liberalism is the enemy of Reformed theology because it is sharply opposed to the very basis upon which Reformed theology stands. That basis is the revelation of God in Christ to His people in the Holy Scriptures. Liberalism is the enemy also because it denies the truth about God and about man. And, since it is the enemy, it must not only be dealt with, but also completely driven out of Reformed theology with the sharpest anathemas.

The question I intend to answer is how to deal with Liberalism. My thesis is that Liberalism is best dealt with by the Reformed theologian who always keeps in mind two things. First, he must always remember Who God is. Second, he must always remember who he is, and what the human race is.

The true knowledge of God and the true knowledge of man (based on Scripture, the only source of truth) will shut liberalism out and keep it out. The Reformed theologian knows that God is, and that He stands infinitely exalted above all that is created. God is the independent one. He has no need of the creation, not even to add to His glory, His glory which is infinite in Himself. But, God has also created, placing Himself in a certain relationship to that creation. Because He is king over creation, He has all authority over it. And everything that happens in the creation serves His purpose.

The true knowledge of man will also shut and keep out Liberalism. Man is but a creature, who is always and everywhere dependent upon his Creator for all that he is and has. This should be enough to keep man humble before God. But there is more ground for humility. Man is not only a creature, but also a sinful creature. And his sinfulness is not a mild restraint upon his innate progress. The sinfulness of man is his death, so that he can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to please God. More, the sinfulness of man is such that he neither can nor will know anything true. Sinful man knows nothing at all.

This is where Scripture comes in. The Reformed theologian knows that he can know nothing except God, Who alone knows the truth, reveal that truth. And God does reveal the truth, both about Himself and about mankind, in Scripture. Scripture, since it is the Word of God, must be received as inspired in its very words. Such a view of Scripture is essential to Reformed theology, and certainly safeguards against Liberalism. If Scripture is only the record of man's earlier religious thought and experience, then we ought to give ourselves up, and change our theology from Reformed to Liberal. For then, God would not have spoken, and would have revealed no truth. Then we would, of all men, be most miserable.

Knowing these two things, Who God is and who man is, will keep Reformed theology safe from liberalism. But it must also be understood that this knowledge is not simply of an intellectual nature. Reformed theology is safe only when the theologian loves the true knowledge of God and himself. The truth must not only be confessed but also embraced wholeheartedly. The one who works with Reformed theology must, therefore, be a child of God. He must be born again by the Spirit of God before the Spirit can lead him into the true knowledge of God and himself.

To summarize, then, in order to deal with Liberalism in Reformed theology, the theologian must know Who God is and who he is. He must also love that truth. This means that God must work by His Holy Spirit in His church, so that true, Biblical, Reformed theology is preserved from the destructive force of Liberalism. Let the church then pray for the Spirit's work in her pastors and teachers, that Reformed theology may be kept safe from Liberalism. ❖

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