

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cbtj.php

A Study Of Modernism As A Method

Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

One of the most significant and most concise characterizations of modernism is contained in a 48-page booklet by Professor Lewis Berkhof entitled *Recent Trends in Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1946). He comments on page 14 that though the majority of Christians still think of modernism primarily, if not exclusively, as a system of doctrines that are contrary to the Word of God, "Modernism should be regarded, not as a type of doctrine, but as a method." Modernists may each decade modify the particular teaching, but that which remains constant and differentiates modernism from Bible-believing Christianity is its methodology. Whether they be known as modernists, liberals, neo-liberals, or neo-orthodox, they do not depart from that methodology which places them opposite fundamentalism.

Modernism is not in any sense a systematic development of truth; contrasting ideas can be and often are held side by side within the framework of modernism. Self-contraction does not bother those who are not concerned about final truth or in their methodology are not even seeking after absolute information. Modernism has no doctrinal statement, in fact no doctrinal agreement. The only real agreement among modernists is in the area of methodology. The modernistic movement of the past half century in America can be understood only by recognizing that it is a general tendency to move in a certain direction rather than a positionalized body of beliefs.

"A Study Of Modernism As A Method" is a reprint from *Central Bible Quarterly* (Spring 1959) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Dean of Central Baptist Seminary.

Modernistic Methodology

Identifying that methodology which unites them, however, is not easy. In fact, as Berkhof remarks on page 15, "The only point on which they are all agreed is negative rather than positive: they cannot follow the antiquated method of authorities, cannot accept the teachings of the Bible at their face value." They have full trust in the natural and the human; they cannot accept the supernatural and divine. Modernists have implicit trust in their methodology; they correspondingly have little use for any who do not follow their methods.

At its heart, modernism consists of accepting a human philosophical viewpoint rather than Biblical convictions. Because there have been so many varying human philosophies employed by different modernists, there have been radically different modernistic elements. Obviously these various elements oppose each other; naturally they all can unite in opposing the fundamentalist; and the fundamentalist responds, as he must, by opposing all the various shades of modernism.

The end result of the modernistic method is invariably denial of the great fundamentals of the faith: the infallibility of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and the physical resurrection and future bodily return of Christ. We must continue to recognize that those who deny or pervert any or all of these fundamental truths of Christianity are outside the realm of true Christendom. Very frequently these are modernists; however, not all modernists actually deny any or all of these fundamentals of the faith. Some full-fledged modernists may and do believe these fundamentals, and yet would not in any sense want to be known as fundamentalists.

Yet this area of deception and confusion is not the primary purpose for this study, but rather a correlated observation. There may be some (and probably are many) who hold faithfully to a doctrinal position which includes the five fundamentals of the faith who, whether unknowingly or purposely, have accepted the methodology of modernism. This obviously would entitle them to the label "modernist" and yet because of a misunderstanding of what is involved in modernism, the reaction of the individual concerned, and often of the public, is "He cannot be a modernist; he does not deny any of the fundamentals of the faith!"

With a proper understanding of the nature and influence of modernism, it is obvious to conscientious and concerned Christian

leaders that modernism is entering the ranks of fundamentalism. A faithful watchman must be on the lookout for the enemy, no matter what his disguise, and also should recognize that in these last days Satan's work is much more subtle than previously.

Many of the philosophical positions undergirding modernism are strange to the thought of the day, and as a rule there is no great difficulty in perceiving that they amount to human limitation or adjustment of the Word of God. The gravest danger comes from those philosophical systems which are basic to and naturally assumed within our current culture. To illustrate, neo-orthodoxy is not readily accepted in America as yet since it is based on a philosophical system of existentialism which is foreign to our soil, whereas materialism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism are ingrained in our present American culture. Consequently a fundamentalist needs consciously to keep himself from evaluating the Scriptures in the light of his own cultural background. It is because of these subconscious attractions and tendencies that modernism can break into sound Bible-believing groups without being noticed until its damage has largely been done.

Tendencies of Modernism

Understanding that modernism is primarily a method, a human philosophical methodology, it is also important for us to notice certain characteristic tendencies and goals of the modernistic movement of the day. This is not an attempt to be exhaustive in this identification, nor is it an attempt at clear differentiation inasmuch as several of these tendencies are closely related.

(1) The first of these tendencies is the doctrinal attitude. Modernists do not openly oppose acceptance of a doctrinal system; yet their entire emphasis is toward minimal doctrinal beliefs. They sound magnanimous when they boast that they can fellowship with those of varying beliefs; but what they mean and even actually suggest is that one's beliefs are quite insignificant, it is the methodology that is important. Thus in concepts of a super church, those of varying beliefs and practices can be included -- with the understanding and intention that in a generation or two such concepts will fall off, it is only a matter of enduring the cultural lag of these religious prejudices until future generations can be educated within modernistic one-church concepts. "Come in as Baptists, and we will see to it that your children are true ecumenists." One's position is not at all important; that which is important is whether he fits into the program and cooperates in the activities of the organization being formed. Many areas of

disagreement are mutually recognized as non-essentials, and there is no desire to discover the true teaching of the Word concerning these so-called non-essentials. Rather the tendency is toward continually increasing the list of those things which are to be evaluated as non-essential. The whole tendency is away from increasing convictions based on the Word and toward dropping by the wayside many of the convictions which our forefathers considered were taught in the Word.

(2) The second tendency which we need to consider is related to this, as Professor Berkhof points out on page 27, "The really important thing in religion, as they see it, does not consist in dogmas or ideas, but in fellowship and worship." Emotional or intellectual experience thus becomes the basis for the proposed one-world church, rather than Biblical convictions. Whereas in past centuries fellowship among believers has been determined by standards of like faith and practice, now that is to be set aside and fellowship is to be on the basis of mutual experience and common desire to work together in spite of significant differences.

(3) Coupled with this, as the third tendency to note here, is the attitude that that effort which is above and beyond the local church or the denominational group is true work for the Lord, whereas that which is performed within the area of doctrinal agreement is really limited and ineffective, almost to be frowned upon by true ecumenical Christians. The promotion campaign in this regard has great influence and force in our nation, and those Christians who have sought to maintain a separatist position have found themselves despised rather than admired in their local communities, and often even within church fellowship.

(4) A fourth tendency which has been quite evident through past decades has been the subtle and quite unethical method whereby modernists have obtained power and authority within denominational groups and institutions. Modernists have not wanted others to know that they did not actually hold to the doctrinal positions which they verbally claimed to accept. They have redefined terms and adjusted concepts within their own thinking, but have hesitated to make these changes known. They have for political and economical reasons hidden from view their true methodology and doctrinal position. Early in the history of modernism it was recognized that modernism could not hope to control schools and church organizations if it publicly asserted its true nature; consequently, since their purpose was to take over the existing Christianity (even though modernism itself is not Christian) these modernists have carefully avoided clear identification of their real persuasions.

(5) A fifth tendency present among modernistic churches is that of emphasizing the secular rather than the Biblical. This is evident in the preaching of the social gospel. It frequently is evident in promotion of dances and suppers within the framework of the church life. It has entered into Sunday sermons and weekday activities to the extent that real spiritual concepts usually are lacking in modernistic churches.

Methodologies of the Day

According to some, the modernism of the first part of the twentieth century changed to liberalism in the face of the world catastrophes in the second quarter of the century. This change did not in any way affect the methodology involved. A further reaction has come more recently against the influence of neo-orthodox tendencies, introducing a movement which is sometimes identified as neo-liberalism. Again, the areas of discussion have altered slightly, but the methodology remains the same.

A major theological movement of our day is known by various names, perhaps the most frequently used being that of neo-orthodoxy. It claims to be a return to the orthodox position of Augustine, Calvin, and Luther, a return to the proper understanding of the Scriptures. In the eyes and evaluation of the Bible believer, however, it still falls within the realm of modernism, for its methodology is little different. It has sprung from a philosophical basis and is an adjustment, an interpretation of the Bible according to that philosophical system. Though claiming to recognize the supernatural, it has redefined supernaturalism in such a way that its considerations remain subjective. The Bible is still evaluated by neo-orthodox men as a human production containing errors. All areas of human research are to be accepted, but the supernaturalistic testimony of the Bible itself is not accepted at face value.

These things are obvious to and accepted by most Bible believers. There are, however, two other groups in this day whose methodology comes so close to that of the modernist that, if they cannot be considered modernists at this time, at least their tendencies head toward the same direction. These two groups may actually be closely interrelated, so much so perhaps that in the actual historical outworking of the tendencies presently evident the two may become one.

New Evangelicalism

The first of these groups, and perhaps the most important for Bible believers to be aware of in this day, is that group which call themselves new evangelicals. Actually, much has been written both by proponents of and opponents of new evangelicalism, and yet fundamentalists as a whole are unaware that such a movement has arisen, in actuality quite in contrast to the fundamentalism of which it has been and in some respects still is a part. Perhaps the most revealing identification of the true nature of new evangelicalism was presented by Sherman Roddy in the October 1, 1958, issue of the *Christian Century*.

Roddy says that the new evangelicals "constitute a bridgehead to which contacts may be made" to assist them to reach the camp of liberal Christianity toward which they are heading, "to provide these pilgrims a new home." The reason that these new evangelicals constitute a bridgehead, according to Mr. Roddy, is that they have "in consequence of their learning shed much of the fear implicit to fundamentalism." He identifies this methodology when he criticizes fundamentalism for rejecting "the critical methods of the past hundred years" and repudiating "the scholarship of the past century and a half."

Roddy further classifies new evangelicals as falling within the framework of modernistic methodology when he tells us that "they must wear the old garments of fundamentalism while changing the man within. For economic and political reasons they are reluctant to appear as friends of the enemy, even though privately they recognize the enemy as part of the Christian community." Those who approach them "will discover among them a vast conspiracy of silence covering an equally vast reorientation of sentiments."

Showing his antipathy toward doctrinal convictions, Roddy deplors "authoritarian sermons" and black-and-white ethical evaluations. His entire direction is toward the super church and the possibility of including this further group of Bible-believers within the ecumenical effort. We have early observers of this new splinter from fundamentalism called it a new evangelical modernism.

New evangelicalism, according to the characterizations of its leading proponents, approaches modernism in its methodology. It is strongly inclusivistic, uniting the efforts of believers and unbelievers in scholarly and evangelistic endeavors. The heretical opinions and presentations of those who reject the Bible are seemingly sanctified by contact with ecumenical evangelicals. Next, note that the tendencies

of new evangelicalism correspond surprisingly to those which accompany modernistic methodology.

(1) Consider the doctrinal attitude. Roddy's opposition to authoritative proclamation of the Word of God and his opposition to clear convictions about right and wrong evidence more than just an attitude away from holding a convicted position; he is definitely against the possibility of any man proclaiming "Thus saith the Lord." His entire article is a promotion of the super-church, and the only thing really essential is the willingness to cooperate in such a program.

(2) Roddy considers that a common emotional experience is the basis for mutual fellowship and worship; however, he sneeringly scoffs at the fundamentalist concept of conversion as "the overpowering and absolutely necessary experience," referring to conversion as "the central sacrament of these churches." It is really the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which provides "the meeting of the temporal and the eternal, the material and the spiritual" (a neo-orthodox concept), which "hallows the common life and lays hold upon Reality for the children of God."

(3) The third tendency, super-church activity, can be at least twice noted from the work of Roddy. He easily slipped from Baptist circles into Presbyterian work; doctrinal convictions have not hindered him. Further, the whole purpose of his article is based on the super-church concept. He is doing the ecumenical church a great service in describing these new pilgrims.

(4) Nothing is more shocking or disgusting in the Roddy article than the evidence of the fourth tendency, the unethical quest for power and support. These men are actually two-faced he tells us, "double minded" (Jas 1:8) according to Scripture. They purposely continue to accept their bread and butter from solid Bible believers while they capture control and effect a truce with modernism. They constitute a fifth column, and seek to place themselves out front where they can lead fundamentalist forces quickly and quietly into the modernistic fold. As plainly as Hitler and Stalin revealed their programs, Roddy has warned us that "for economic and political reasons they are reluctant to appear as friends of the enemy."

(5) Inasmuch as ecumenical evangelism is pleased to align itself with new evangelicalism, its worldly extravaganzas provide perfect illustration of the fifth tendency noted, that of bringing the secular in to replace the sacred.

Ecumenical -- Interdenominationalism

The other movement which may seriously affect the sound testimony of Bible-believing Christianity is a modern trend in interdenominationalism which we may conveniently label ecumenical-interdenominationalism. Ecumenical-interdenominationalism is forsaking the time-honored testimony of historic interdenominationalism in adopting inclusivistic tendencies. Most Christians are acquainted with the interdenominationalism of a decade or two ago, when it involved cooperative efforts of convinced men who respected and admired the convicted positions of the others. A former generation never dreamed that it was participating in that which would be used to construct a "super-church" fellowship. Many today who are still active in interchurch enterprises realize that a change has taken place and a new "denomination" is being developed. Yes, the interdenominationalism of today almost amounts to another denomination -- but a denominational fellowship without a unifying doctrinal position. Modern interdenominationalism does not know whether it is Arminian or Calvinistic, holiness or pentecostal, wet or dry. In a sense it tolerates all varieties and opinions and desires no solid convictions. Its tendency is thus the same as that of modernism: pay no attention to the non-essentials, seek for the least common denominator of fellowship and emphasize experience rather than convictions.

There is also in this group today an attitude of despising a Methodist or Presbyterian or Baptist who knows what he believes and why he believes it and of admiring the worker who can rise above local church activities to serve on a greater plane for the universal church. Those who have convictions and declare them clearly and boldly are not honored; only those who are fully interdenominationally minded are acceptable. Cooperation on the big-group level is the important criterion, not doctrinal soundness. "Send your children to our school as Baptists and we will see to it that they have so few convictions they will fit into almost any fellowship."

How does ecumenical-interdenominationalism stand in regard to the tendencies of modernism? (1) As for doctrinal direction, it is heading away from sound convictions based on the Word, considering many areas as non-essential. Convictions concerning the ordinances or eternal security may be embarrassing; messages dealing with the end times may differ from opinions of certain preferred authorities.

(2) As for the basis of fellowship, it is too often experience (a conversion experience, granted) rather than Biblical convictions. Pietism is increasing with an emphasis that is not healthy. (3) As for promoting super-church activities, it excels. Work on college campuses, among businessmen, youth and camping programs, and dozens of others can be named, many of which demand higher allegiance than to the local church. For almost all of them sound convictions are anathema; nominal convictions and maximum participation is demanded. (4) As for refraining from declaring what is actually believed, this is primarily accomplished by avoiding non-essentials. It is also to be noticed in the tendency to move schools with a clear denominational position into the vague and indefinite realm of interdenominationalism. There is a greater orbit of influence, greater economic and political gain, achieved by hiding doctrinal persuasions and presenting to the public an oblong blur. (5) As for secularism, many super-church activities rival Hollywood and top promotional agencies. The rankest of modern music has been displayed on Saturday nights. Public advertising rivals that of secular agencies, both as to gaudiness and extent of expenditure.

Is there an area of fundamentalism which has remained fully true to the Word? Yes, but with these repeated assaults, the force is becoming smaller. There is, praise God, a faithful remnant of convicted believers who accept the Word, and all of the Word, just as God gave it, as full and final authority. Even in the present decline of schools and agencies, there are still "safe" schools unaffected by modernistic methodology. Only eternal vigilance will keep this remnant from further splintering action, and it will probably be two or three decades before the present splinters of new evangelicalism and ecumenical-interdenominationalism are clearly severed from the main trunk of Christianity.

Possible Doctrinal Demarcation

It is of course too early to try to identify fully and properly the doctrinal defections responsible for the changes taking place. One area of difference has appeared to be significantly involved, and without attempt at over-simplification will be considered yet as part of this study.

There are at least three ways of evaluating the importance of the Bible as a source of truth: (1) it is of no more importance than other evidences, (2) it is the supreme authority, and (3) it is the only authority.

Modernism as a method proceeds according to the first of these. Archaeological evidences, reconstructions of evolutionary development, reasonable judgment of what can and cannot happen, etc, take precedence; when the evidence of the Bible does not contradict these it may be accepted.

The second of the possibilities named seems characteristic of new evangelicalism and ecumenical-interdenominationalism. The Bible is but one of many sources of truth, though accepted as the supreme source. Thus in areas where the Bible does not speak, reason and custom and science may be utilized in addition to the Word. The danger of this procedure does not usually become evident until in practice (though often not yet in theory) science or reason or some other aspect is placed above the Word, and the testimony of the Bible is twisted to fit some human evaluation. This again is clearly modernism.

The third possibility is that which we believe is unquestionably taught in the Word. It has historically been one of the distinctives of Baptists. It today is typical of fundamentalism in contrast to all other positions. In coming decades it may well constitute the line of demarcation between departing "pilgrims" and those who remain faithful to the eternal Word of Truth.

Christian methodology, as contrasted with modernist methodology, is to accept the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word. Other areas of study may lead to relative and usable information, but only the Bible leads to absolute, final, authoritative truth. Every fundamentalist should be on guard that nothing sway him from divine methodology, in part or in whole. In this day of frequent apostasy let us stand firm on the faith once for all delivered, the infallible law and testimony of the living God, both as to methodology and doctrine.

Three areas have been considered, heresy, methodology, and tendencies. Much of Christendom today has gone modernistic in all three senses. The burden of this presentation has been a belief that wrong tendencies will lead to wrong methodology, and wrong methodology surely and inescapably leads to heresy. "Awake to righteousness, and sin not" (I Cor 15:34).