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The Trouble with Conservatives



P. Andrew Sandlin

We know the main trouble with theological liberals. They want to reconstruct Christianity to conform it to the modern (and now postmodern) temper. Liberalism, in the succinct words of David Tracy, is "the need to rethink the fundamental vision and values of traditional Christianity in harmony with the fundamental vision and values of modernity."¹ During the nineteenth century, this meant questioning (among other beliefs) the divine authority of the Bible and the supernatural redemptive events it relates. In the twenty-first century this means (in some quarters) support for homosexuality, abortion rights, and goddess religion. With Bishop John Shelby Spong, it means denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Liberalism infecting the evangelical camp appears in the so-called "Open Theism." Its most revolting and anti-biblical tenet is that God is not omniscient, since future events are not by their very nature knowable by man or God.² This fits quite nicely, thank you, into a postmodern age that questions certain knowledge: "We humans can't know very much, so we're pretty sure [!] that God can't know everything."³

"DON'T GIVE ME THAT OLD-TIME MODERNISM"

This fact doesn't imply that theological conservatives are home free, however. In fact, sometimes those considered most

conservative entertain rather "liberal" beliefs. This problem started quite early in the Church's history. The big theological predicament of the post-apostolic Church was a tendency to compromise with the surrounding, urbane Greek culture.⁴ One example of this compromise is a rather static view of God (against which today's Open Theists flagrantly overreact).⁵ Today's theological conservatives who depict God as absolutely unchanging and unemotional are nearly as erroneous as the Open Theists. The only real difference is that the conservatives have *preserved* (conserved!) the "liberalism" of the first couple of centuries, while the Open Theists are creating their own liberalism in the twenty-first century. *But ancient liberalism is no less dangerous than contemporary liberalism.* The trouble with conservatives is that they tend to equate their own long-inherent beliefs about the Bible with what the Bible actually teaches. But if the Bible, in fact, is the only written revelation from God, then all beliefs must essentially be judged by it. This idea doesn't connote that Christian orthodoxy may be jettisoned;⁶ it connotes that it is *right* because it is in line with the Bible.

Conversely, the trouble with liberalism is not that it is new; the trouble with liberalism is that it is anti-biblical. Ancient liberalism is not somehow rendered credible in that it is old. Biblical truth is not somehow rendered suspect because it was only recently discovered.

INNOVATING TRADITIONALISTS

The Protestant Reformation is a prime example of a movement within the Church that maintained both continuity with the past while it responsibly innovated.⁷ No one before Heinrich Bullinger had structured the entire Bible in terms of a covenantal understanding.⁸ No one before Martin Luther had defined justification as exclusively "forensic."⁹ I'm surely glad both of these men innovated. It was precisely because both were willing to abandon their conservatism on these points that we Protestants today can, in fact, be "conservative." Conservatism needs innovation in order to have something to conserve.

Whenever a speculative conservative suggests we examine some cherished belief in light of the Bible, he is roundly criticized by fellow conservatives, who often seem to have forgotten that had not their predecessors innovated, their successors (that is, they themselves) would not have been in a position to defend conservatism today.

There certainly need to be theological boundaries. The post-apostolic Church recognized the early ecumenical creeds as the boundaries of Christianity. These boundaries, however, are not a substitute for the Bible. They are valid precisely because they reflect what the Bible teaches, understood in historically conditioned terms.¹⁰

If the trouble with liberals is the attempt to conform the faith to the contemporary world, the trouble with conservatives is the refusal to rethink their cherished convictions in terms of biblical truth.

Both are wrong; both are troublesome; and both must be avoided.

Author

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Notes

1. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 26.
2. Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 10-18.
3. Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 9, 19 and *passim*.

4. Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard?* (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books [1958], 1995), and Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1978), 200-209. The aversion to the Greek influence in early Christianity obviously makes for strange bedfellows.
5. Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).
6. Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
7. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
8. R. E. Clements, "Covenant," edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 128. But on Calvinists' continuity with the medieval Nominalistic view of the covenant, see Armand J. Boehme, "Justification by Grace Through Faith: Do Wittenberg and Geneva See Eye to Eye?", *Logia*, Vol. 11, No. 4 [Reformation 2002], 20. Boehme notes that Calvinists do not agree with Lutherans on the definition of the doctrine of justification—and never have.
9. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification—The Beginnings to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 186-87.
10. Jürgen Moltmann, "Theologica Reformata et Semper Reformanda," in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 122-25.