

Evolution of Theological Thought

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At the crack of the twentieth century, the modernist movement had already begun in the United States. Modernism was an attempt to modernize the faith and to state it in terms of contemporary concepts. With the rise of liberalism, which was a method that took a single source and could wind up in a variety of conclusions, the modernist movement quickly attached themselves. The modernist's usage of liberalism produced significant shifts in biblical understandings, particularly in the realm of the beginnings and the end.

More broadly, the modernist's usage of liberalism took a biblical principle and clothed it with a contemporary expression. The accounts of creation are therefore not historical but merely for God to communicate the origins of the earth to us in terms we would be able to understand. This thought brought forth the rise of varying creationist theories, such as the long-day theory, where the interpretation of "day" is not a typical twenty-four hour day but rather an era of time. Just as such, the modernist's usage of liberalism interprets the second coming of Christ along the principles of hope, not as much as an actual future event. More so, the events described in Revelation are more symbolic, to the modernist, of the chaos that will come over time because of sin too great in number to deal with.

The problem with modernism, which ultimately led to its decline of influence, is its dismissal of the supernatural realm that must exist in a biblical theology. The modernist point of view continued to develop into a worldview rather than a biblical worldview. The key component of the supernatural in the Bible was missing from the modernist viewpoint. Their response to this critical analysis of modernism is that God must have worked the miracles through the natural processes he created.

This view of divine immanence where God is present within reality, but not outside it, is what ultimately led to liberalism's takeover as the prominent theological thought. Within liberalism, there arose three prominent separations—pseudo-denominations as such. These three separate realms within liberalism categorized as easily as right, left, and center and all three held distinctly different views on the Bible and the historical Jesus Christ, among others.

To the left-liberalist, the Bible is the record of the religious experiences of a particular group of people, namely the Jews and Christians. Moreover, the historical Jesus Christ was a great teacher of spiritual and moral ideals. The left liberalist therefore must focus on the experience of the religious person, and is no longer of Christian religion, but of just religion.

To the center-liberalist, the Bible is the record of progressive discovery of God by a variety of means. Moreover, the historical Jesus Christ was the man who so dedicated himself to God that he discovered more about God than anyone ever had. The center liberalist therefore must focus on the initiation of the religious person and is no longer of Christian religion, because of the highly problematic doctrine of the resurrection.

To the right-liberalist, the Bible is the record of God's self-disclosure. Moreover, in regards to the historical Jesus Christ, God chose Jesus to be the one man in which God took the initiative to dwell with completely. The right-liberalist therefore believes that Christ was not in-God, but that God was in-Christ. To be sure, God was in Christ to a degree that he was not in with any other being.

Biblical Christians saw great revisions in modernism, and were cautious of the ambiguity of liberalism, and so they sought to identify what doctrines are essential to

qualify as a Christian theology. This was the start of the fundamentalist movement. A large group of these concerned Christians met in a multi-denominational conference with a desire to produce pure fellowship. The purpose of the fundamentalist conference was to defend the faith, and to counter the issues within modernism and liberalism. The conclusion of the fundamentalism was a series of basic doctrine that one must accept if he was to consider himself a Christian. These doctrines include the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, a super-naturalist viewpoint of God, substitutionary atonement, and the bodily resurrection of the historical Jesus Christ.

The rise of neo-orthodoxy is one of particular interest in the evolution of theological thought in the twentieth century because through the leadership of Karl Barth the biblical theology presented with fundamentalism was through the lens of the liberalistic hermeneutic. To elaborate, the explanation of revelation is one of simple concepts. Catholicism defined revelation as the Church, Protestants defined revelation as the Bible, and Natural theologians defined revelation as nature. Barth, on the other hand, asked what revelation even is, and through his answer differentiated himself from the other three. Barth concluded that revelation is a two-tier system; it is both the revealing process and the revealed product; therefore, to Barth, the Church, the Bible, and nature all meet the mould of revelation. More simply, God can use anything he wants to reveal himself to us in his own timing, including that of non-Christians or even inanimate objects.

These very positive notions of the universe and humanity lastly not long at all before the rise of world political dilemmas. With the events of World War I, the Holocaust, and World War II, the happy-go-lucky theological statements resulting from

liberalism and fundamentalism had to be reconsidered. Out of these results, people began to question the concepts of evil at a much larger scale, and the intrinsic interest in the deep philosophical questions of life began to take shape at a large scale.

From this reality, Paul Tillich sought to answer the questions posed by culture amidst the chaos of the post-world-war era. In Tillich's view, philosophy was responsible for providing questions and theology was responsible for providing the answers to those questions. Tillich's methodology starts by looking at the ethical means by which others are expressing their views and questions on revelation. From this method, the theologian has a better understanding of the situation of answering the question raised through philosophical means. For Tillich, theology cannot accomplish anything unless in response to a question or series of questions raised by philosophy. Therefore, to Tillich, both philosophy and theology play a vital collaborative role in discourse.

Tillich's doctrine of creation was one that initially thrust him into notoriety in the theological world. The question by which Tillich began was in regards to the concept of being. What is being? Tillich argued that God is that which is within every being. God is therefore not a being, but is that which is in everything and that which causes everything to be. Transcendence is thus not just on the surface, but into the depths of everything.

Tillich's influence was far more reaching than any other theologian was in the twentieth century. Although Barth was one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, Tillich's methodology put him at the forefront. In the developments brought forth by Rudolph Bultmann, the geschichte movement, and the developments of Wolfhart Pannenberg, the methodology of Tillich was vastly used. The question of the Bible's historicity is what led to these developments of demythologization and the

emphasis on biblical history in theological discourse. These historically based arguments have steadily grown to the modern era through proponents such as William Lane Craig, among others.

As the world dynamics changed through the seemingly continuous cycle of wars and conflict, a growing number of movements sprung up rooted in Tillich's question first, answer second methodology. A movement in particular has been liberation theology. Latin American liberation theology revolves around the question of the role of economics in relation to the Bible. Feminist and racial liberation theology revolves around the question of the role of retribution for inequalities. As those movements grew forth from those initial questions, the application of biblical teaching of ethics, Christian life, devotional life, and the application to human need is thus the starting point. Rather than start with the Bible to meet the need, these movements start with the need to meet the Bible.

While Tillich's influence most definitely did not influence the changes in the Catholic Church, his influence most certainly has shaped evangelicalism. This is noted in the vast growth of varying denominations. These denominations start with underlying questions—the Tillich method—and are answering them with the Bible through the lens of the questions that divide them. While most of these denominations would characterize themselves somewhere on the spectrum of Calvinist to Arminian, they all differ on a wide variety of issues beyond these two polar opposites that began as answers to questions.

A variety of events cause theological change, namely additions to the scriptural base, new information that causes better understanding of the scriptural base, local to

global dynamics that cause those involved to interpret the scriptural base differently, and by answering the profound questions raised by culture. These events in and of themselves are not what causes the change, but without them the change cannot occur.

Theology changes when additions are made to the scriptural base. While no additions to the scriptural base have been made in about 1,800 years, there certainly arose new theological insights to the Old Testament in the early church with the additions of the New Testament. We see many instances in the New Testament where the interpretations of Old Testament texts, such as Isaiah, are understood better. The “mainstream” viewpoints of those Old Testament texts are understood differently because of the new scriptural base. While it is the opinion of this author that there will be no more additions to the scriptural base, it is a reality that such an addition would have vast ramifications on theological thought.

When new information is uncovered regarding biblical events, times, culture, etc., the theological concepts also gain new insight. For instance, if archaeologists uncover a biblical city and in so doing uncover a library with scrolls or commentaries on scripture, those would most certainly change how we read a particular scripture. Of course, perhaps they would change nothing, but they leave the door open to a revised interpretation taking into consideration all the known facts. A better understanding of the original culture for which a scripture was written can aid in modern hermeneutical efforts to deduce the original meaning of the text. Through this, a biblical interpreter could better understand the principles behind a particular scripture as it pertains to applying those principles to modern usage. Therefore, with a better understanding of the original message to the original audience, one could conclude differently upon related doctrines.

Local to global dynamics also play a dynamic role in the trends of theological change. World War I and II most definitely changed theology, and yet, both wars have little to nothing to do with the Bible. It was not the Bible that changed, but the minds of those interpreting the Bible that changed. After these wars, with the institution of the Israeli State, dispensational theology grew into a more viable theological school of thought. After September 11, and even now with the growing influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria (ISIL/ISIS), the theological doctrines of end times seem to make sense at a level they did not prior to the new millennium.

Answering the profound questions raised by culture is perhaps the most highly volatile method by which theological change occurs. The questions raised by culture in the twentieth century revolved primarily around safety; however, in the first half of the twenty-first century, we can see that the trend of culture's questions will revolve around equality, tolerance, political correctness, and a preference for scientific evidence. As for the latter half of the century, this author fears the western theological trends will be meaningless in a United States where Christianity is disallowed.

The first challenge to mainstream evangelical western theology will be on marriage. As the courts seemingly weekly allow same-sex marriage in more states, eventually the United States will be a country where same-sex marriages are totally allowed, and this reality will pose very significant questions to the biblical dogma on marriage. This author fears that theology will evolve dramatically in such a way that allows for church-recognized same-sex marriages. This author anticipates that Matthew Vines, who argues that our definitions of homosexuality are different from times past, will lead this pack. This author labels Matthew Vines as a heretic.



The second challenge to mainstream evangelical western theology will be on women in leadership. Although a much more minimal issue than the others, this issue will lead to denominations compromising the very clear instructions of leadership roles. Throughout the biblical history, God has lifted women up above their standard role in culture, and was not shy about acting counter-culturally, yet did not appoint women as elders. This author believes that God intentionally did not lift women into leadership over men not because men are better than women are, but because men and women are different. Additionally, in Genesis, after the fall, God spoke of this very fact that women would crave the same roles men have. While women can be leaders of specific things, the issue of disallowing women to be leaders of all things will cause many denominations to suffer through means of tax disadvantages, among other things. This issue will eventually evolve into a theological viewpoint that women have different roles today than they did in the original audiences of the Bible and therefore the original roles are no longer applicable. This author disagrees, yet anticipates this viewpoint to arise.

With the growing influence of Islam in the world, culture will increasingly view Islam as more viable than Christianity, and therefore any criticism of Islam will be labeled as intolerant to such an extent that the western evangelical church will redefine its opposition to Islam. The change in definition of tolerance will water down many of the doctrines many evangelicals hold dear, such as only one way to salvation. Culture will put increasing pressure on the western evangelical church to accept all religions as not just viable options to achieve salvation, but also any criticism as such of them is a matter of Islamophobia.

While the previous three situations will lead to the ultimate demise of the American Church, the last major question culture will raise will lead to diminished confidence in the biblical message. How the church handles the growing cultural emphasis on science will determine whether science leads to the diminished confidence. The scientific developments have grown steadily in theology over the latter half of the twentieth century and will ever increase moving forward in the twenty-first. We already see these developments playing out in the debate over the doctrine of creation. In 2013, when literal creationist Ken Ham debated Bill Nye the Science Guy, the discussion following was not we vs. them, but of a minority opinion vs. them. Eventually the Church will choose not to fight the battle any longer, and will evolve their doctrine into a more science-inclusive creationism.

The root of these four problems culture will bring up and the Church's response to them roots back to the Tillich methodology. The Tillich methodology is a reactive methodology, not a proactive methodology. Therefore, by naturally responding to the growing pressures of culture, the Church will diminish in influence. For the western evangelical church to remain the prominent source of religion and spiritual truth, a new methodology must emerge that is proactive in nature. Even if the Tillich model produces the typically conservative evangelical responses, the model is self-defeating. In order for theological progress to live on effectively during these dynamic changes forthcoming in the twenty-first century, a new methodology must be developed by which the church proactively addresses the aforementioned issues in a way that defeats them while also maintaining biblical theology.