

# **Protestant Christian Traditions**

***RVS Notes***  
***(Part 2)***

**National Presbyterian Church**  
**Adult Nurture**  
**Winter-Spring, 2022**

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# Welcome

Welcome to this survey course on Protestant Christian Traditions. This course is part of the Adult Nurture ministry of National Presbyterian Church (NPC) designed to help you grow in your knowledge of the Christian faith and in your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

This survey course is one of two courses that attempt to give our fellow pilgrims at NPC a helpful overview of Protestant traditions. These courses seek to clarify the significant similarities and differences between these traditions and to examine both what unifies and differentiates us. We hope to adopt a spirit of theological generosity in this journey through various Protestant traditions and to recognize and encourage the better angels of our Christian identity.

## Taking This Class

This class can be taken in at least three different ways:

- As a regular Sunday School class where advance preparation by class members is not expected. The course notebook provides the content for each lesson. While advance preparation would be helpful to understand the content of each lesson, it is not necessary.
- As a class with some advance preparation. The syllabus that follows enables you to prepare for each class by reading the class notes and referring to the supporting text as appropriate. This preparation is not burdensome. The normal weekly reading load will be 4-5 pages of class notes.
- As a class akin to our Guided Tour of the Bible classes. The syllabus details assignments in the notebook as well as a related text:
  - W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

This book is available on Amazon.com, or through a book distributor like the Christian Book Distributors (1-800-247-4784).

# Syllabus

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# Protestant Christian Traditions—Part 2

## VIII. Dispensationalism

“There are social and pastoral problems concerning which a preacher should be instructed, but these are secondary compared to his call to minister the truth of God.”

“Simply put, the basic unifying issue for all dispensationalists is that Israel is not the church.”

### A. Historical background

**§8-101. In general.**—Dispensational history can be traced through four generations:

- Formulative era—This period began with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and flourished with the Plymouth Brethren movement in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Crystallization era—This period was comprised of the generation of the Bible and prophecy conferences in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the work of C.I. Scofield (1843-1921), and reaching its conclusion in ministry of Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952);
- Traditional era—This was the period between Chafer and the 1980s, including such figures as John Walvoord (1910-2002), Dwight Pentecost (1915-2014), and Charles Ryrie (1925-2016).
- Progressive era—This period began in the 1980s and continues today.

**§8-102. Formulative era.**—The movement started with Darby in the 1830s. A priest in the Church of Ireland, Darby abandoned its ranks for what he perceived to be its apostasy and joined a movement known as the Plymouth Brethren. He developed a distinct understanding of the church. He did not think the church should be identified with any institution, but was a spiritual fellowship. He saw a radical discontinuity between the church and Israel in the Scriptures, asserting that God had two separate peoples and two separate programs He was working out. This discontinuity made it essential to “rightly divide the Word of truth”. This understanding of the church combined with a futurist view of biblical prophecy and a doctrine of the pretribulational rapture of the church provided the initial structure of dispensationalism.

Darby saw successive periods in the Scriptures in which the principles governing the relationship between God and humanity seemed to change. These periods or dispensations all had some leading principle or condition God had sanctioned in which humanity was placed. These dispensations provided structure to view the sweep of redemptive history, but Darby's teaching itself was fundamentally concerned with a proper understanding of the church and its character of life. He saw the institutional church as fundamentally apostate, and came to view the genuine church as “heavenly”, distinct and separate from the corrupted earthly church. It was the nation of Israel that constituted God's earthly and visible people.

Darby carried dispensational ideas far beyond England. His efforts as an itinerant preacher and the publishing efforts of early Brethren leaders gained a hearing for dispensationalism, particularly among Presbyterians and Baptists in America. Plymouth Brethren developed an emphasis on the priesthood of the believer and thus the responsibility of the laity in ministry, which sparked an interest in personal

Bible study and devotional and expository literature.

The Bible and prophecy conferences began in 1876 designed to promote premillennial eschatology, but also gave a significant boost to dispensationalism generally. The promoters of these conferences insisted on the absolute authority of the Scriptures, the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (in Israel, not the church), and the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. The last significant conference of this ilk was held on Niagara on the Lake in 1897. These conferences effectively introduced and promoted dispensationalism to American Protestantism.

**§8-103. Crystallization or confessional era.**—The Bible conference movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century spread dispensationalism widely and popularized premillennialism as an eschatological system. However, dispensationalism as a single, cohesive system only came to the fore with the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909 and its revision in 1917. Scofield was in sync with Darby regarding the literal interpretation of the Bible, the basic structure of dispensations through which to view the sweep of redemptive history, the approach to end times events, and the distinction between Israel and the Church and the prophetic futures of both.

The Scofield Reference Bible attained an informal confessional status within dispensationalism. The most prominent feature of dispensational understanding in this period was that God was pursuing two different purposes, one earthly (with Israel) and the other heavenly (with the church). God's purpose on earth was to release it from the curse and restore humanity to freedom from sin and death. This would be accomplished in the millennial kingdom and continue throughout eternity. The church was God's heavenly people and as such was to adopt an attitude of disengagement from the political and social structures of the world.

Early dispensationalists saw the church as a parenthesis in the history of redemption, essentially unrelated to God's purpose on earth. These early dispensationalists also distinguished between the kingdom of God (God's moral rule over the hearts of believers) and the kingdom of heaven (referred to only in Matthew and allegedly related to the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant for the kingdom inaugurated upon Christ's second coming). Scofield popularized dispensational eschatology and Clarence Larkin charted it. Larkin was a mechanical engineer turned preacher and developed and published numerous charts seen as indispensable to understanding God's Word among dispensationalists of the era.

**§8-104. Dispensational traditionalism.**—Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in the 1930s and soon became the most noteworthy institution in the Dispensational tradition. Lewis Sperry Chafer was the seminary founder and first president and played a significant role in developing dispensational theology. In a phrase, what Scofield popularized, Chafer systematized. He taught the upcoming generation of dispensational teachers, including John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, and Charles Ryrie.

The New Scofield Reference Bible (1967) and Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (1965) marked changes in dispensational thinking from the 1950s and 1960s on. The eternal dualism between Israel and the church, so central to early dispensationalism, was abandoned and in its place came an understanding that God had two purposes in history but a single people in eternity. They had a unified view of salvation by grace across the various dispensations and moved away from previous distinctions between the "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God".

In addition, pastoral concerns came to the fore in the movement. While continuing to understand the church as a spiritual entity, and not involved with the world, the community aspects of the church and its “body life” and the need to encourage and build up one another emerged in dispensational teaching. In expositing the Scriptures, Ryrie and others insisted that the literal hermeneutic belonged to the essence of dispensationalism and disavowed the heavy indulgence in typology (a type of spiritualizing that attempted to interpret many parts of the Old Testament as predictive images of New Testament truth) that characterized early dispensationalism. Another shift came with the increasing agreement among dispensational scholars that the distinction in early dispensationalism between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven was a forced one, fundamentally driven by dispensational presuppositions regarding the dualism between Israel and the Church.

**§8-105. Progressive dispensationalism.**—In the 1980s, a group known as progressive dispensationalists came to the fore. This was a group that began to critique dispensationalism from within the tradition. They emphasized the progressive fulfillment throughout the dispensations of God's redemptive work. Earlier dispensational models had posited multiple purposes in God's redemptive plan but failed to integrate them in unfolding salvation history. The progressive dispensationalists also focused on continuities between God's peoples, Israel and the Church (still seen as separate communities in God's redemptive purposes). The eschatological kingdom was indeed promised in both the Old and New Testaments, but its focus was always on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

## B. Distinctive beliefs

**§8-201. In general.**—The earnest desire to rightly interpret the Bible is at the heart of the dispensational tradition. In addition, from the outset of the tradition, there was an accompanying vigilant pursuit of holy living. Darby himself was greatly burdened about the moral purity and spiritual holiness of those who would name the name of Christ. Separated, holy living was to accompany and be in accord with biblical teaching.

**§8-202. Bible exposition.**—The dispensational tradition has been characterized by a strong commitment to biblical exposition. Dispensationalists see their theological method as simply the unfolding exposition of the Bible. The Bible is understood as the verbal, infallible, and inerrant revelation of God to His people, the church. The Bible provides the sure foundation for Christian life and practice. The inspiration and authority of the Scriptures is assumed; it is dispensationalism's “watershed presupposition”.

There is little attention given to theological traditions. This has given rise to tensions with other traditions, particularly the Reformed. Dispensationalists see the Reformed tradition as distorting Scriptural teaching in various ways because of too great an adherence to confessional loyalties and scholastic reasoning. Likewise, since rational extrapolation and a dependence on experience are not to be sources for theology, a natural suspicion of contextual theologies follows. The role of experience is not to reveal theological truth to us, but rather to be the arena in which Biblical truth finds its expression and impact.

Dispensationalists believe in the perspicuity of the biblical text. What that means is that those things relating to salvation which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, are clearly communicated in Scripture. The Bible can be understood by the ordinary believer using the ordinary

means of study. Scripture is not the preserve of theological scholars or members of various ecclesiastical hierarchies.

**§8-203. Biblical interpretation.**—Dispensationalists see the sixty-six books of the Bible as marked by a divinely inspired unity. Many follow in the footsteps of people like Scofield and find that unity focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Biblical unity is seen as soteriological and Christological.

In addition, dispensationalists are insistent on a “literal” hermeneutic. This literal interpretation strives to give the words of the Bible their normal, ordinary, and customary meaning and usage. Especially early on in this tradition, the “literal” hermeneutic and its common sense application often opened the door for viewing the biblical text apart from its historical context. With the “mellowing” of the tradition, particularly among “progressive” dispensationalists, the plain literal sense of earlier generations has gradually moved to a thoroughgoing historical-grammatical approach more in line with other Protestant traditions. Progressive dispensationalists have sought to integrate their theologizing with the diversity of the Bible. They have advocated a more complementary hermeneutic between the Old and New Testaments than dispensationalism has historically exhibited, emphasizing the progressive nature of revelation.

**§8-204. Characteristic beliefs, generally.**—Some distinctive dispensational beliefs include the following:

- Distinguishing between Israel and the Church;
- Inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures;
- Literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic;
- Progressive character of revelation;
- Recognition of distinct economies or dispensations in redemptive history;
- Pretribulational, premillennial eschatology, including the imminent return of Christ;
- Exposition of biblical covenants, but with a different perspective than in Reformed circles.

**§8-205. Dispensations.**—Dispensationalism understands God as looking on the world as a household over which He is superintending and working out His purpose and will. This purpose is worked out in stages or economies whereby God deals with people in particular ways. These stages or economies are called dispensations.

There is no universal agreed upon scheme of dispensations among dispensationalists. The most commonly recognized one is that of the Scofield Reference Bible, consisting of seven dispensations:

- Innocence (humanity before the Fall);
- Conscience (humanity to the Flood);
- Human government (humanity until the call of Abraham);
- Promise (until the time of Moses);
- Law (until the death of Christ);
- Church age (now);
- Millennium (inaugurated at the return of Christ).

Rightly dividing the Scripture is key to properly understanding it in this scheme. Practically speaking, the entire Old Testament was given to Israel and applies to that period of divine administration. The

bulk of the New Testament was given to the church and is governed by the dispensation of the church age. In other words, all the Bible was written for Christians, but not all of it is addressed to Christians.

Modern dispensationalists are particularly sensitive to the charge of teaching different bases of salvation in different ages. Some even grant that Darby and the very early dispensationalists were open to this charge. Modern dispensationalists insist that salvation is always by grace through faith founded on the atonement of Jesus Christ. It is the content of the revelation to be trusted by individuals in various stages that changes, not the means or basis of salvation.

**§8-206. Israel and the Church.**—The respective character of and distinction between Israel and the Church repeatedly comes up at the heart of the dispensational tradition. It is the central idea of the tradition's eschatology (the Old Testament promises to Israel will be fulfilled literally in national Israel). Early dispensationalists believed there were two separate and distinct peoples of God, each with their own eternal sphere. Covenant theology expressed in the Reformed tradition understand both testaments as speaking to one people of God. Gradually the emphasis on extreme discontinuity fell away and dispensationalists today see Israel and the Church sharing in the same messianic kingdom of salvation history, but still distinct. All of God's Old Covenant promises to Israel will be fulfilled in and through Israel. Dispensationalists insist that this distinction must be emphasized so that biblical principles and promises intended for Israel are not misapplied to the Church. The church is understood as originating with Pentecost, is based on the death and resurrection of Christ, and is blessed and energized by the Holy Spirit.

**§8-207. Covenants.**—Many dispensationalists see the Old Testament covenants framing the outworkings of God's purpose with humanity on earth and in history. They define covenant as a declaration by God concerning His gracious and voluntarily assumed responsibility toward an individual, family, nation, or humankind as a whole. Dispensationalists place special emphasis on the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenant and see them as the heart of the God's unfolding redemptive plan. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is understood as progressive over the course of redemptive history and entailing promises pertaining to a land, descendants, and spiritual blessings. The Davidic Covenant amplifies the Abrahamic, promising a ruler for this distinctive people with a lineage and kingdom that will be without end. The New Covenant deals with the problem of covenant infidelity seen throughout the Old Testament, promising new hearts to God's people which will obey and trust the Lord God. Early dispensationalists saw these covenants as exclusively geared to Israel. The Church may be a beneficiary of some of these blessings, but Israel is front and center. Progressives understand these covenants as have a progressive fulfillment through redemptive history and being fulfilled in both Israel and the Church.

### **§8-208. Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism Compared.—**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Covenant Theology</b>	<b>Dispensationalism</b>
<b>Integrating theme</b>	God mediates His saving program through covenants. The central one is the covenant of grace or of redemption. This is an eternal covenant within the Godhead whereby (1) the Father chooses a people to be His own; (2) the Son agrees to pay	God looks on the world as a household over which He is superintending and working out His purpose and will. This purpose is worked out in stages or economies whereby God deals with people in particular ways. This stages or

	<p>the penalty for their sin; and (3) the Spirit agrees to apply the benefits of the work of the Son to the chosen people. The covenant of grace is worked out in history through subordinate covenants: Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the new covenant. These covenants build on each other and culminate in the new covenant.</p>	<p>economies are called dispensations and, since the time of the Scofield Reference Bible, have usually been designated as seven: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and kingdom.</p>
<b><i>God's people</i></b>	God has one people, including those from both the Old and New Testament times.	God has two groups of people: Israel and the Church.
<b><i>God's plan for His people</i></b>	God purposes to call out His people into one body in both the Old and New Testament times.	God has separate plans for two distinct people: Israel and the Church. He plans an earthly kingdom for Israel, which has been postponed until Christ comes again in power. During the present Church age, God is calling out a heavenly people. There is disagreement whether these two groups will remain distinct in the eternal state.
<b><i>God's plan for salvation</i></b>	God's plan for salvation is one of grace, being worked out through the covenant of grace and comes through faith in Jesus Christ.	Most dispensationalists believe that salvation has always been by grace through faith. Some early dispensationalists seemed to have wrongly believed that the Old Testament believers were saved by works and sacrifices.
<b><i>Birth of the Church</i></b>	The Church existed prior to the New Testament era, including all those redeemed throughout time. Pentecost was not the beginning of the Church, but the empowering of the New Testament manifestation of God's people.	The Church was born on Pentecost. The Church, the body of Christ, is not found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament saints are in a different category.
<b><i>First Coming of Christ</i></b>	Christ came to die for the sins of the elect and establish the New Israel of God. The New Testament manifestation of God's people placed the Church under a new and better covenant. However, this is just a new manifestation of the underlying covenant of grace. The Kingdom that Jesus taught about and offered is present, spiritual, and invisible.	Christ came to establish the messianic kingdom. However, His saving purpose always placed the cross before the crown. Most dispensationalists understand God's saving program as an unlimited atonement, but a limited redemption. His kingdom program comes first in an invisible form in which the Church participates, while the earthly kingdom awaits the Second Coming.
<b><i>Second Coming</i></b>	Christ's coming will be to bring final	The Rapture will occur first, removing

<p><i>of Christ</i></p>	<p>judgment and the eternal state. In the current era, most Reformed people are amillennialists. In earlier eras, most were postmillennialists. Both of these groups understand the Kingdom as present now and do not think that a millennial era will precede the final judgment. The amillennialists are pessimistic about the current era, which the coming of Christ will end, while postmillennialists are optimistic and see the age as improving and actually welcoming its coming King when Christ returns. A few Reformed people are premillennial of the post-tribulational variety.</p>	<p>the true church from the great Tribulation which will come unto the earth and precede the coming of Christ in power. That will be followed by a thousand year millennial reign, and final revolt, and then the final judgment and the eternal state. All dispensationalists are premillennials, although not all are pre-tribulational premillennialists.</p>
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**§8-209. End Times teaching.**—During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in both England and America, apocalyptic movements gained attention and focused expectations on the imminent return of Jesus Christ to establish His kingdom. The premillennialism of this period was characterized by historicism, that is, the attempt to correlate biblical prophecy with contemporary events. The era featured many predictions for the date of Christ's return, most notably by William Miller's predictions for 1843 and 1844. These failures discredited historicism. The rise of dispensationalism was in this era and revived premillennialism by avoiding historicism and advocating a strict futurism to biblical prophecy.

Prophecy is treated in a more literal manner than in other Protestant traditions. Most other traditions see the promises in the Old Testament to Israel as being fulfilled in the church. This is not the case with dispensationalism. In early dispensationalism, the literal hermeneutic applied to many graphically descriptive prophetic texts led to a fascinated fixation on future events that was highly expectant, and at times, sensationalistic. That spirit has mellowed, especially among so-called progressive dispensationalists, but is still very much an aspect of this tradition.

**8-210.—Futurist premillennialism.**—Dispensationalists are premillennialists, an understanding that Christ will personally return and rule as the Davidic king over the entire earth for a literal period of 1,000 years. Unlike historic premillennialism, dispensationalists generally have held to pretribulational premillennialism, believing in the rapture or removal of the church prior to a tribulational period where God will pour out His judgment on the evil that is being institutionalized in earthly structures. Those who are truly Israel will be saved through this period, while the church is removed prior to it. Once again, one sees the implications of the radical distinction between Israel and the church in dispensational thought. However, modern dispensationalism has “cooled the jets” on date setting that characterized kindred prophetic spirits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### C. Contemporary setting

**§8-301. In general.**—Dispensationalism is essentially encompassed within evangelical and fundamentalist circles. There is not a substantial dispensational presence in mainline churches. Baptist

and independent churches (particularly “Bible” churches) are the most common ecclesiastical affiliations of dispensationalists. Dispensationalism has also helped assert the primacy of Scripture and have focused on Bible teaching ministries helping regular folk understand the Scripture (a process one minister described as “putting the cookies on the lower shelf”).

See the *Dispensational Tradition Chart—Buschart, p. 211*—for a helpful overview of the emergence and growth of the Dispensational movement.

**§8-302. Active in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy.**—Historically, dispensationalists supplied many in the coalition that countered the onslaught of modernism in America by publishing such works as *The Fundamentals* and by founding many Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries making numerous contributions to contemporary evangelicalism. Theologically, it has played a major role in fostering evangelical ecumenism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its focus on the universal church and its de-emphasis on denominations as well as the its strong support for the para-church movement.

**§8-303. Biblical prophecy as double-edged reality.**—Dispensationalism's insistence on eschatology in many respects revived the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ in Protestant traditions and made it meaningful in the churches. That doctrine had languished from neglect. This interest has proven to be a double-edged sword—fueling evangelistic and missionary activities with the hope of salvation prior to the rapture while contributing to the withdrawal of people from worldly occupations, politics, and institutions, and largely abandoning the public forums of the nation.

## D. Observations and concluding thoughts

**§8-401. In general.**—Dispensationalism is a tradition driven by the desire to be scriptural and a recognition that infallibility is what the text possesses, not its interpreters. Throughout its history, dispensationalists have striven to open the Bible and rightly divide and discern the meaning of the Scriptures.

**§8-402. Literal hermeneutic.**—This emphasis often plays out in the broader dispensational community in naive and simplistic stances pitting the Bible against all other claims of understanding. Dispensationalism generally has moved beyond the naive literalism to a more consistent application of the historical, grammatical method of interpretation. However, there are still significant amounts of suspicion of serious scholarship in the ranks of this tradition.

**§8-403. Ignoring portions of Scripture.**—The phrase “rightly dividing the Word of truth” that characterized early dispensationalism's interpretative approach has led some to ignore portions of Scripture on the basis that they were “not written to us”. Even such portions as the Sermon on the Mount have been relegated by some to inapplicability to the church.

**§8-404. Apocalyptic view of history.**—This emphasis can obscure the redemptive core of the gospel with its focus on vivid apocalyptic imagery and can lead to speculation rather than concentration on readiness for Christ's return as emphasized in the gospels.

**§8-405. Lack of focus on the local church.**—Dispensationalism places its emphasis on the universal church, rather than local or denominational structures. In many regards, this feature of

dispensationalism has been the “glue” for many aspects of American fundamentalism and evangelicalism. This has also been a factor in the birth of numerous para-church ministries, evangelistic organizations, faith missions, and discipleship ministries in American evangelicalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, critics point to a lack of emphasis on the church as a visible and local institution and there is some substance to that claim.

**§8-406. Dispensational influence in America.**—Dispensationalism has become very popular with American evangelicalism, especially among nondenominational Bible churches, Baptists, and Pentecostal and charismatic groups. It has served as a type of ecumenical glue for fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals and figures prominently in the formation and support of many para-church organizations. Conversely, Protestant denominations that embrace covenant theology as a whole tend to reject dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism's prophetic stance looms large in its support of the nation of Israel. Dispensationalists typically endorse the modern state of Israel, consider its existence as a political entity as God revealing his will for the Last Days, and vigorously reject anti-Semitism.

## **IX. Pentecostals and Charismatics**

### **A. Historical background**

**§9-101. In general.**—Pentecostals are a Protestant Christian movement that emphasizes direct personal experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The term *Pentecostal* is derived from the Pentecost event in Acts 2, an event that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon early followers of the Lord Jesus. That event was accompanied by speaking in "foreign" languages previously unknown to the speakers. Pentecostals and charismatics earnestly believe that the common experience of the ancient author and modern reader lies in their shared faith in Christ and in their walk in the Spirit, whom the exalted Lord poured out at Pentecost. They vigorously contend that there is continuity in Christianity back to its origins in the operation of the Spirit of God and the manifestation of His gifting.

Pentecostals believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the necessity of the new birth—repentance of sin and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They believe in the baptism in the Holy Spirit that enables a Christian to live a Spirit-filled and empowered life. This empowerment includes the giving and use of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and divine healing. These two realities tend to be defining characteristics of Pentecostalism. Because of their commitment to biblical authority, spiritual gifts, and the miraculous, Pentecostals tend to see their movement as reflecting the same kind of spiritual power and teachings that were found in the early church.

**§9-102. Pentecostal roots.**—Pentecostalism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon rooted in the Wesleyan Holiness and the Higher Life movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was in the Holiness movement that the idea of the second blessing, a crisis experience after conversion that resulted in purity of heart and power for Christian living, flourished. It was in that movement that the idea of entire sanctification and of Christian perfection was taught.

Initial leadership for this emphasis came from a Presbyterian minister, Edward Irving (1792-1842), in the early 1830s. He established the Catholic Apostolic Church which allowed and encouraged New Testament gifts such as speaking in tongues and a "word of prophecy" (meaning a revelation rather than a preaching experience). In the 1870s, a number of Higher Life movements (like the Keswick movement in England) promoted the idea of a second work of grace. However, those movements emphasized the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and did not teach the removal of the old nature in the believer so blessed. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the Holiness movement grew increasingly fragmented, largely due to disagreements over the normative pattern for sanctification.

**§9-103. Movement's birth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**—In 1900, Charles Parham (1873-1929) founded the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. Studies in the Book of Acts lead him and others to conclude that speaking in tongues was part of the normal Christian life and was the evidence for the second work of grace popularized by the Holiness movement. Later, he came to the conclusion that Spirit baptism, evidenced by tongues, was actually a third work of grace, distinct in time and nature from the second work of grace or the crisis experience of entire sanctification.

In 1906, one of Parham's students, William Seymour, was invited to speak at a mission in Los Angeles.

During those meetings, Seymour and others experienced the onset of the gift of tongues. This launched what has been described as the Azusa Street revival, the event described as the “Grand Central Station” of the Pentecostal movement. It marked the tremendous enthusiasm of the movement and also a number of other characteristics. Demographically, early Pentecostalism in America consisted of what one writer has characterized as “black birth, interracial infancy, and segregated childhood”. The Azusa Street revival lasted from 1906-1909 and crossed racial boundary lines. That wouldn’t last. Through the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pentecostal divisions resulted in a white Pentecostal experience and organizational reality and a parallel one in the black community.

**§9-104. Divisions over the normative course of sanctification.**—There were also divisions over beliefs about the normative course of sanctification—the “three-step” versus the “two-step” approaches. The three-steppers followed Parham’s journey. Conversion was followed by the crisis experience of entire sanctification, which was followed by the baptism of the Spirit evidence by speaking in tongues. The two-steppers did not deny the importance of sanctification in the Christian life, but did deny the crisis aspects of entire sanctification as normative. This came to be known as the “finished work” view, understanding sanctification as included along with justification at the time of conversion on the basis of Christ’s completed work at Calvary. The baptism of the Spirit was the second work of grace. This framework was embraced by most Pentecostals who came to the movement from backgrounds other than the Wesleyan Holiness tradition. This “sanctification schism” resulted in numerous new Pentecostal denominations.

**§9-105. Trinitarian divisions.**—Another divide occurred a couple of decades down the road. A number of Pentecostal preachers began to question traditional Trinitarian teaching, one God in three persons. A number of them concluded that Jesus was the name for God, and references to “Father”, “Son”, and “Holy Spirit” were simply ways of referring to different roles or functions of God. This “Jesus Name” or “Oneness” movement not only caused divisions but spawned the first efforts in Pentecostalism for creedal development. Until then there had not been the perceived need to develop a full-orbed theology because the background that most Pentecostals came from affirmed Christian orthodoxy and was fully committed to a thoroughly Bible-based theology. The Oneness movement caused such divisions because it challenged the orthodoxy so commonly accepted.

**§9-106. Problem of theological reflection.**—That creedal development itself caused problems among a group focused on experiential Christianity. Many Pentecostals had little taste for the scholastic elaborations that contributed to the “cold definitionalism” they professed to see in other branches of Christianity. They did not want to see their denominations go the way of Protestant scholasticism. Many desired to be theological minimalists to avoid this tendency of doctrinal elaboration and the equation of vital Christianity with statements of correct belief. However, by the 1930s, texts with comprehensive Pentecostal beliefs, such as Pearlman’s *Knowing the Doctrines of the God*, began to appear.

**§9-107. Charismatic movement.**—In the 1960s and 1970s, the Charismatic movement arose. It did not require speaking in tongues as evidence of initiation into a deeper Christian life, but it did focus on the person and power of the Holy Spirit. In addition, the Charismatics did not separate into their own denominations but remained from whence they came, be it Protestant or Roman Catholic. Here was an ally for bringing an emphasis on the work and experience of the Holy Spirit to an increasing number of Christians, but also a challenger to the cubbyholes where Pentecostalism had comfortably landed. The Charismatics brought an ecumenical sense that challenged Pentecostal suspicion of ecumenism. Most

Pentecostals were firmly rooted in an experiential faith that was committed to historic Christian orthodoxy. They were not seeing much of that in the ecumenical movement as it progressed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1980s, Charismatics also were contributing to the “evangelicalization” of Pentecostalism. Charismatics and Pentecostals were increasingly recognizing the rootedness in historic orthodoxy that they shared with evangelicals. The election of a Pentecostal as president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 2003 symbolized this growing collegial relationship with evangelicals.

## B. Distinctive beliefs

**§9-201. In general; Fourfold gospel.**—Classical Pentecostalism is characterized by a “constellation of motifs”, sometimes referred to as the “fourfold gospel”:

- Salvation as proclaimed in John 3:16, usually understood in the framework of Wesleyan-Arminianism;
- Baptism of the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts 2:4, evidenced by speaking in tongues (this opens onto the distinctive Pentecostal understanding of sanctification);
- Ready availability of divine healing as seen in James 5:15. Pentecostals emphasize the gifts of the Spirit, but particularly healing. Once again, this reflects the Pentecostal emphasis on God's continuity in His dealings with the world. You see healing in both the Old Testament and in Jesus' ministry in the New Testament;
- Imminent return of Jesus Christ according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, understood in the framework of pre-tribulational premillennialism.

**§9-202. Teaching principles and observations.**—

- Pentecostals attempt to be thoroughly biblical. They were born of evangelical Wesleyanism and display a full-fledged biblicism in the genes of their movement. They understand Scripture as inspired, the final, fully trustworthy rule of faith. The Protestant canon is accepted, but many groups view certain leaders as prophets with authoritative messages from God. The best of these look to see these messages confirmed by Scripture, but there are many examples in which these messages and messengers are viewed as independently authoritative.
- Pentecostals emphasize experience. For example, the central doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is richer in Pentecostal experience than in Pentecostal explanation. Sometimes, this has caused concern than experience is given priority over the biblical text. They are committed to *sola scriptura* as a concept, but sometimes struggle to overcome the temptation to elevate spiritual experience to the same level of authority as the Bible.
- Pentecostals believe in a second work of grace akin to Methodism's belief in entire sanctification. This second work of grace is evidenced by speaking in tongues. Other Pentecostals, often describing themselves as charismatics, accept tongues speaking as a gift for today, but do not view the gift as the initial and necessary evidence of the second work of grace.
- Pentecostals do not regard reason or tradition as significant sources for theological reflection. Early Pentecostals were particularly impatient with and suspicious of both tradition and creeds. That has had lingering consequences.
- As for biblical interpretation, Pentecostals are pragmatic and intuitive in their approach. Two principles underlie this approach. First, there is a confidence that the Holy Spirit will illuminate and guide the interpreter. Second, Pentecostals believe in the continuity of God's presence and work in the world from the time of the Resurrection to the Second Coming. This can be clearly

seen in the way Pentecostals take certain passages from the Book of Acts as normative for Christian experience throughout the ages.

**§9-203. Baptism.**—Pentecostals identify three distinct uses of the word “baptism” in the New Testament:

- **Baptism into the body of Christ:** This refers to salvation. Every believer in Christ is made a part of his body, the Church, through baptism. The Holy Spirit is the agent, and the body of Christ is the medium.
- **Water baptism:** Symbolic of dying to the world and living in Christ, water baptism is an outward symbolic expression of that which has already been accomplished by the Holy Spirit, namely baptism into the body of Christ.
- **Baptism with the Holy Spirit:** This is an experience distinct from baptism into the body of Christ. In this baptism, Christ is the agent and the Holy Spirit is the medium for a fuller, sanctified life.

**§9-204. Healing.**—Pentecostals cite four major reasons for believing in divine healing: (1) it is reported in the Bible, (2) Jesus' healing ministry is included in his atonement (thus divine healing is part of salvation), (3) "the whole gospel is for the whole person"—spirit, soul, and body, and (4) sickness is a consequence of the Fall and salvation is ultimately the restoration of the fallen world. In the words of one Pentecostal scholar, "Because sin leads to human suffering, it was only natural for the Early Church to understand the ministry of Christ as the alleviation of human suffering, since he was God's answer to sin ... The restoration of fellowship with God is the most important thing, but this restoration not only results in spiritual healing but many times in physical healing as well."

For Pentecostals, spiritual and physical healing serves as a reminder and testimony to Christ's future return when his people will be completely delivered from all the consequences of the fall. However, not everyone receives healing when they pray. It is God in his sovereign wisdom who either grants or withholds healing. Common reasons that are given in answer to the question as to why all are not healed include: God teaches through suffering, healing is not always immediate, lack of faith on the part of the person needing healing, and personal sin in one's life.

**§9-205. Spiritual gifts.**—Pentecostals believe that all of the spiritual gifts, including the miraculous or "sign gifts", found in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 12:27-31; Romans 12:3-8; and Ephesians 4:7-16. These gifts continue to operate within the Church in the present time. As gifts freely given by the Holy Spirit, they cannot be earned or merited, and they are not appropriate criteria with which to evaluate one's spiritual life or maturity. Just as fruit should be evident in the life of every Christian, Pentecostals believe that every Spirit-filled believer is given some capacity for the manifestation of the Spirit.

**§9-206. Speaking in tongues.**—A Pentecostal believers may "speak in tongues", a vocal phenomenon is believed by Pentecostals to include an endless variety of languages. These languages may be an unlearned human language, such as the Bible claims happened on the Day of Pentecost, or it might be of heavenly tongue of angelic origin. In the first case, tongues could work as a sign by which witness is given to the unsaved. In the second case, tongues are used for praise and prayer when the mind is superseded and "the speaker in tongues speaks to God, speaks mysteries, and ... no one understands him".

Within Pentecostalism, there is a belief that speaking in tongues serves two functions. Tongues as the *initial evidence* of the second or third work of grace, baptism with the Holy Spirit, and in individual prayer serves a different purpose than tongues as a spiritual gift. All Spirit-filled believers, according to initial evidence proponents, will speak in tongues when baptized in the Spirit and, thereafter, will be able to express prayer and praise to God in an unknown tongue. This type of tongue speaking forms an important part of many Pentecostals' personal daily devotions. When used in this way, it is referred to as a "prayer language" as the believer is speaking unknown languages not for the purpose of communicating with others but for "communication between the soul and God".

Besides acting as a prayer language, tongues also function as the *gift of tongues*. Not all Spirit-filled believers possess the gift of tongues. Its purpose is for gifted persons to publicly "speak with God in praise, to pray or sing in the Spirit, or to speak forth in the congregation". There is a division among Pentecostals on the relationship between the gifts of tongues and prophecy. One school of thought believes that the gift of tongues is always directed from people to God, in which case it is always prayer or praise spoken to God but in the hearing of the entire congregation for encouragement and consolation. Another school of thought believes that the gift of tongues can be prophetic, in which case the believer delivers a "message in tongues"—a prophetic utterance given under the influence of the Holy Spirit—to a congregation.

**§9-207. Oneness Pentecostals.**—In the early 1900s, the Finished Work Pentecostals split into two camps over the nature of the Godhead, those who accepted the Trinity and those who viewed the doctrine of the Trinity as polytheistic. The majority of Pentecostal denominations believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, which is considered by them to be a matter of Christian orthodoxy. Oneness Pentecostals are non-Trinitarian believers. In Oneness theology, the Godhead is not three persons united by one substance, but one God who reveals himself in three different modes. Thus, God relates to humanity as our Father within creation, he manifests himself in human form as the Son in the incarnation as Jesus Christ, and he is the Holy Spirit by way of his activity in the life of the believer. The Oneness doctrine is a form of modalism, an ancient teaching considered heresy by the early church.

In contrast, Trinitarian Pentecostals hold to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, the Godhead is not seen as simply three modes or titles of God manifest at different points in history, but is constituted of three completely distinct persons who are co-eternal with each other and united as one substance. The Son is from all eternity who became incarnate as Jesus, and likewise the Holy Spirit is from all eternity, and both are with the eternal Father from all eternity.

## C. Contemporary setting

**§9-301. In general; helpful chart.**—Comprising over 700 denominations and many independent churches, Pentecostalism is highly decentralized. No central authority exists, but many denominations are affiliated with the Pentecostal World Fellowship. The movement is growing rapidly in many parts of the world, especially the global South. Since the 1960s, Pentecostalism has increasingly gained acceptance from other Christian traditions, and Pentecostal beliefs concerning Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts have been embraced by non-Pentecostal Christians in Protestant and Catholic churches through the charismatic movement.

Estimates place the number of worldwide Pentecostals and Charismatics in the hundreds of millions. While the movement originally attracted mostly lower classes in the global South, there is a new appeal to middle classes. A number of these are three-steppers, born out of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition. Distinct from and subsequent to conversion is a second work of grace, a crisis of entire sanctification in which the sin nature in the believer is abolished. Subsequent to this experience is the third work of grace, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues. Groups like the Pentecostal Holiness Church and the Wesleyan Pentecostal Church are representative of this approach.

Other Pentecostal denominations are two-steppers. They view sanctification as positional and progressive. At conversion, the believer is positionally sanctified and this first work of grace begins a lifelong process of sanctification wherein the believer is actually transformed. Somewhere along this trek, the believer is to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit (the second work of grace), which may be evidence by speaking in tongues. The Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Gospel groups are representative of this approach.

Jesus' Name or Oneness or Apostolic Pentecostals affirm a Christological unitarian understanding of God. They believe there is one God, who is Jesus. References to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reflect Jesus' various roles. Most Oneness Pentecostals are two-steppers, believing the finished work view of sanctification. This approach is represented by a number of "apostolic" churches.

Among the over 700 Pentecostal denominations, 240 are classified as part of Holiness Pentecostalism. There are 390 denominations that adhere to the finished work position. There are 80 Pentecostal denominations that are classified as Oneness or Apostolic Pentecostals.

See the *Pentecostal Tradition Chart—Buschart, p. 238*—for a helpful overview of the emergence and growth of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

**§9-302. Reality of racial divides in Pentecostal origins and development.**—Assemblies of God (historically white) and the Church of God in Christ (historically black) are the largest Pentecostal communions in the United States. The initial inter-racial reality of Pentecostalism sadly gave way to a significant divide.

#### D. Observations and concluding thoughts

**§9-401. In general.**—The Pentecostal emphasis is on God's continuity in dealing with the world. The way God works through His Spirit, the way this work manifests itself in the lives of His people, and the way His people experience this work in their lives remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. The God-produced experiences of the early church, particularly those recorded in Acts, provide patterns for God's activity in this age and every age.

**§9-402. Pentecostal theological development; making peace with the academy.**—Pentecostals have not devoted much energy to theological development. Worship, evangelism, and Christian service have generally taken precedence over theology in their communions. With their increased exposure to and involvement with other Christian traditions, there are increasing calls for "informed Pentecostalism" that ask Pentecostals to "make peace with the academy" and understand that Jesus is Lord of learning too.

Pentecostal theological development can be viewed in four stages: definition, inculcation, defense, and reflection. Pentecostalism formulated its distinctives through the sanctification and Trinitarian controversies. After this defining period came a inculcating period. This was a time for theological writing primarily geared for Pentecostal pastors who had received little formal training. As Pentecostals interacted with others on a broader basis, they were increasingly pressed to defend their distinctive views. This defensiveness continues today but is also joined with Pentecostal thinkers going beyond inculcation and defense to a more full-orbed reflection, including thinking about hermeneutics.

#### **§9-403. Controversies.—**

- Too much attention to mystical manifestations—Particularly speaking in tongues often in dramatic manifestations (falling to the ground, moans and cries during worship services, etc.)
- Prosperity theology--A particularly controversial doctrine in the evangelical circles in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, mainly involving charismatic televangelists. This doctrine is centered on the teaching of Christian faith as a means to enrich oneself financially and materially, through a "positive confession" and a contribution to Christian ministries. Pentecostal pastors adhering to prosperity theology have been criticized by journalists for their lavish lifestyle (luxury clothes and vehicles, big houses, private aircraft, etc.).
- Faith healing—This practice has been associated with a wide variety of shenanigans and false claims. Some churches, in the United States and in Nigeria, have advised their members against vaccination or other medicine, stating that it is for the weak in the faith and that with a "positive confession", they would be immune.

#### **§9-404. Ongoing issues.—**These are issues for the Pentecostal movement as it matures in our day:

- Tension between experience and the Bible as the governing authority;
- Neglect of, if not hostility toward, reason and tradition;
- Pragmatic and intuitive hermeneutic;
- Spiritual dimension of the biblical interpretive process (the Holy Spirit illuminates, so don't think too much about the process of interpretation).

## X. Classical Liberalism

### A. Historical background

**§10-101. In general.**—Classical liberalism was an attempt to salvage Christianity from the fires of the Enlightenment. It saw itself as arising from within the Church as an effort to retain the essence of Christianity by surrendering the accretions and features of the faith that were considered no longer defensible in the modern, rational world. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century religious leaders were raised in pious Protestant homes but educated in universities strongly influenced by attitudes critical of traditional Biblical studies and very receptive to the secular bent of modern science and philosophy. A number of these leaders felt scarred by their well-intentioned, but austere Puritanical upbringing. They desired a faith that was more relevant, intelligent, and authentically livable.

The popular 20<sup>th</sup> century American preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, stated that the central aim of liberal theology was to make it possible for a person to be both an intelligent modern and a serious Christian. These efforts tended to rest its case on the twin towers of Christian experience and trends in modern thought.

**§10-102. Coming to terms with modern science.**—*Liberals believed that Christian theology must come to terms with modern science* if it ever hoped to hold the allegiance of intelligent people. Faith had to pass the test of reason and experience. They accepted the modern attitudes that the world was a grand and harmonious machine. The point was unity, harmony, and coherence. Biblical creation seemed to press the point of “orders” in the universe that characterized earlier beliefs – inanimate matter, plants, animals, people, God. Liberals pressed for continuity and coherence – between revelation and natural religion, between Christianity and other world religions, between the saved and lost, between Christ and other men, between God and people.

#### 1. As Rooted in the Enlightenment

**§10-106. In general.**—For Enlightenment thinkers, reason was the ticket. They thought it possible to reason their way to understanding all reality. It was a modern reincarnation of the Tower of Babel with all the hubris that implies. The Enlightenment gave birth to much of the modern mindset we recognize today:

- Any truth must justify itself before the bar of reason;
- Nature is the primary source of answers to fundamental human questions;
- Necessity of freedom (meaning no limits) to advance progress and human welfare;
- Necessity of literary and historical criticism to determine the legitimacy of our historical legacy;
- Need for critical philosophy;
- Ethics as separate and independent from religious authority and religious knowledge;
- Suspicion of any truth claim grounded in any thing other than reason (e.g. tradition or revelation);
- Supreme value of science by which humanity can find truth.
- Toleration as the highest value in matters of religion;
- Continuation and expansion of the humanism of the Renaissance.

The Enlightenment attacked the supernaturalism of historic Christianity in general and doctrines like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection, and the hypostatic union (Jesus as the God-man) in particular. They spoke of a type of universe operating exclusively by natural law.

Two thinkers, Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel were particularly influential with the liberalism that emerged from Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**§10-107. Immanuel Kant.**—Before Kant, philosophers speculated about how human beings know things and divided into two camps—rationalists and empiricists. Rationalists understood ultimate reality to be in the mind and that knowledge arose from the mind itself. Empiricists saw ultimate reality in the physical universe and argued that all knowledge came to us from outside of us. Kant asserted that neither was entirely right. Human knowledge arises from an interplay of incoming sensory data (through the five senses) and innate categories in the human mind that possesses this data and makes it knowledge. He asserted that reality is divided into two realms, the phenomenal (the created world in which we live and which is open to us to experience) and the noumenal (spiritual or metaphysical reality). Kant thought that there were no human categories by which we can receive data from the noumenal world. Since humans are blind to noumenal reality, they cannot know the thing in itself. All that can be known are things as they are experienced. Thus, attempts to know God by reasoning is a vain project doomed from the outset. God inhabits the noumenal realm and cannot be experienced by humans.

Kant was not an atheist. He believed God existed but denied the possibility of any true knowledge of Him. Since God surpasses the phenomenal realm (space and time), Kant's analysis detached faith from reason. For Kant, Christian faith was not about metaphysics derived from revelation from the Scripture. It was about practical reason or ethical decisions that guide one's life. Religion reduced to outward morality. People were to live by the categorical imperative summarized as (1) acting only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law and (2) acting as if the aim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature. In other words, every action should be regulated in such a way that it would be morally profitable for humanity as a whole if it were elevated to the status of a law.

Much of 19<sup>th</sup> century theology was Protestantism's relationship with the Enlightenment, that is, to make sense of the new intellectual landscape after Kant. Nineteenth century liberal theologians agreed that the faith was not about dogma, actual historical events, or rational formations and belief structures based on ancient documents. Influenced by the Romantic movement, they based faith on the experience: the feeling of one's ***absolute dependence on a reality beyond oneself*** or the formulation of one's ***sense of moral value***. The two most influential spokesmen for "Christian experience" were Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albecht Ritschl (1822-1889).

**§10-108. Georg Hegel.**—We cannot leave classical liberalism's philosophical forebears without considering Hegel. Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) came on the heels of Immanuel Kant. Kant had argued that reason can never tell us about God or the reality behind ordinary experience. The way we know can never grasp the thing in itself.

Hegel followed a very different path from Kant. He sought to build a magnificent system of eschatology to go beyond the skepticism of Kant. He denied that anything was beyond the mind's

ability to know and emphasized human history as the stage for the drama of human reflection. Hegel claimed that there is a great deal we can know about both God and natural reality, which he believed was ultimately rational and spiritual. God, or as Hegel described Him Spirit, Reason, or Absolute Mind, is not other than the world, as Christianity had always held. It is the fundamental reality of which all things, ourselves included, are manifestations. All activity is essentially activity of Spirit, and rational thought is the Spirit seeking to understand itself.

For Hegel, all reality was the outworking of spirit/mind, what he called Absolute Spirit. History is the objectification of spirit; it is the spirit/mind working itself out in the historical process. He posited a continual progress in history by means of a dialectic. There is a thesis, followed by its opposite (an antithesis), which is resolved in a synthesis that becomes a new thesis in the progressive pull of the historical process. This philosophical backdrop was adopted by the emerging schools of biblical criticism and cast an optimistic light on that endeavor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Progress became the watch word of the age. The governing assumption of this progressive spirit was that humanity was perfectible. In addition, there was a key shift in philosophy. Until this time, philosophy had been traditionally occupied by the concept of being. Hegel replaced the focus on being with one on becoming. This will have tremendous impact on variants of Process thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

Within this framework of a philosophy of history, Hegel reinterpreted Christianity, seeing it as the culmination of the unfolding of the Spirit. He rejected the rationalists' idea of a universal natural religion. All religions do reveal the ultimate nature of reality in the unfolding of the Spirit. However, this process culminates in the Christian religion.

## 2. As Emerging From Germany

**§10-111. Schleiermacher, father of Liberalism.**—Schleiermacher' thought proceeded from three premises:

- The Enlightenment's critique of scholastic Protestantism was valid;
- Romantic idealism was a better locus for understanding Christian faith than the shallow rationalism of the Enlightenment;
- Christian theology could be reinterpreted along romantic idealistic lines allowing a person to be both Christian and modern and at the same time, intellectually honest.

The new seat for theology that could not be touched by Enlightenment criticism was feeling (*gefühl*). This feeling was not just mere emotion, but “God-consciousness”. Schleiermacher did not start with objective revelation. Religion was subjective to the core. Experience gave rise to doctrine, rather than doctrine to experience. Christian doctrines are just accounts of religious affections set forth in speech. Humans are by nature in a state of “God forgetfulness” from which they cannot save themselves. Redemption can only be found through the experience of Christ in the corporate life of the church. This redemption was mystical, centered in a personal communion of the believer with the fully God-conscious man, Jesus Christ. Jesus displayed the “veritable existence of God in him” by his uninterrupted God-consciousness.

Schleiermacher posited three levels of human consciousness: (1) animal grade where there is no distinction between self and the world; (2) human consciousness which begins as a distinction between self and the world and continues with an increasing sense of freedom vis-à-vis the world (i.e. that we

have the ability to affect the world); and (3) God consciousness where we become aware that both self and the world are absolutely dependent on a reality beyond either of them.

Christianity was superior to other religions because of Jesus. Jesus could be thought of as divine because he experienced God-consciousness in such a complete and powerful way that it can only be explained as a result of divine intervention. Jesus communicated his pure awareness of God to his disciples, and the Church he founded continued to inspire this God-consciousness in new generations. Schleiermacher argued that theology should focus on the meaning and dynamics of religious affection (this God-consciousness) rather than on the doctrines and external features of religion. Indeed, those doctrines only have significance to the extent that they dealt directly with and focused on God consciousness.

Thus, for Schleiermacher, the proper realm of religion is neither knowledge nor morality, but feeling. Religion is the feeling of unity with the Whole. It is “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God”. It is the constant, profound awareness of the Other whose presence is the source and basis of all that is. Schleiermacher discussed traditional doctrines like regeneration, justification, conversion, repentance, faith, forgiveness, adoption, sanctification, and perseverance from the point of view of God consciousness. Through the transformation of the self to which these various terms refer, Christians became active instruments within the world through which the redemptive activity of Christ was brought to others.

The historical aspects of redemption history all drained away along this line. The cross was not a substitutionary atonement, but an example of Jesus' willingness to enter misery sympathetically. Redemption was not the personal embrace of an atoning sacrifice on one's behalf but the transformation of people from God forgetfulness to God consciousness. Schleiermacher could claim that his thought was christocentric, but that christocentricity was utterly unlike previous orthodoxy.

**§10-112. Ritschl and theological agnosticism.**—Albert Ritschl (1822-1889) saw religion not in mystical terms (God-consciousness) but in terms of morality, much like Kant. Religious truth involved moral-ethical judgments subjectively determined by the individual. He attempted to separate religion and theology. Theology without metaphysics was the watchword of the day. Human knowledge was strictly limited to personal experience and verifiable history. Since God was in His essence outside the possibility of human experience, nothing of His nature and attributes could positively be known. Religious truth could not be known in objective verifiable propositions, but only in the realm of subjective experience (for Ritschl, in value judgments). God was seen as personal yet unknowable in any real sense. He was mediated through the person of Jesus Christ as he appeared in history. Looking beyond this was a vain, doomed exercise. Any contact with God was not in mystic rapture but in moral effort to corporately promote His kingdom on earth.

Ritschl believed that any form of metaphysical speculation must be expelled from theology. The locus of religion is not metaphysical knowledge but moral value. Ritschl in many ways represents a return to Kant. He insisted that true religion was concerned with practical living that was freed from sin, selfishness, fear, and guilt.

This practical faith needed to look to the true, historical Jesus. The great Christian fact was the tremendous impact Jesus has made upon the church and people through the centuries. Nature spoke ambiguously of God and the Bible was not credible to moderns. Therefore, the task of theology was to

turn again to Jesus. If biblical criticism denies Jesus' miracles, his Virgin birth, his pre-existence, it does not make Jesus less valuable to us. Jesus' divinity doesn't rest on any traditional religious proofs but solely on the fact that he is the source of a value-creating movement. He lead people to find the God of values. Jesus' life was the embodiment of such high ethical values that we are inspired to live as he did. Jesus is divine in the sense that he can do for us what God does – he makes us conscious of the highest in life.

In *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, he states that Christianity is like an ellipse with two foci: redemption and the kingdom of God. The redemption of Christ is not based on an objective act of the expiation of our sins, but rather that the consciousness of guilt for not fulfilling the moral destiny for us set by God loses its power to separate us from God. Ritschl rejects the "objective" theory of the atonement for a modern version of a "subjective" theory of the atonement. It's like a one-sided version of Luther's "imputed righteousness" – i.e. God's imputes his righteousness to us but has no wrath to deal with since the central divine attribute is love. Vengeance, wrath, and punishment just aren't part of God's make-up.

Reconciliation implies more than justification because the latter idea only speaks of the forgiveness of sins, whereas the former refers to a new life based on that forgiveness. It is here that the kingdom of God comes in, for the new relationship with God ushered in by reconciliation is not purely individualistic. The kingdom is a corporate state of life in which spirit rules over nature and there is a loving and free mutual service among human beings.

Ritschl reflected the direction theology took in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

1. He emphasized the love of God to the point of rejecting divine justice and wrath.
2. Both sin and grace are significantly reduced in importance. Sin originates in ignorance and consists of acts rather than a state of being. Grace is little more than our awareness of God's love.
3. The best approach to the study of the essential nature of Christianity is through historical study, rather than biblical study.
4. His emphasis on judgments of moral value and on the application of such judgments to the kingdom of God led to the Social Gospel of the likes of Walter Rauschenbusch as well as to other attempts of applying Christianity to the reordering of society.

Ritschl's influence was felt throughout Europe and the United States where humanitarian concerns about the conditions caused by industrialization and urbanization gave rise to a number of Christian movements that considered social responsibility as part and parcel of the gospel message (some would say, as the gospel message). In the United States, the most important of these was the Social Gospel movement.

**§10-113. Comparative religions/History of religions school.**—Within the context of the growth of liberalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the birth of the study of comparative religions. Romantic philosophy of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was curious about other religions which European colonization was bringing more and more to light. New knowledge of competing cultures and their religions was becoming available and archaeology was allowing the Bible to be studied in the backdrop of its cultural milieu. Two presumptions framed this endeavor:

- That all religions, in their most basic form, led to truth about the ultimate (God);

- That all religions promoted a common ethic of love for one's neighbor.

In the highly critical environment of German academia, the comparative religions school took the form of a history of religions that concluded that the Israelite religion had taken elements of the surrounding pagan beliefs and placed them within a structure of monotheism. This school concluded that biblical faith in both Old and New Testaments was not a distinct faith as a result of supernatural revelation, but represented humanity's syncretistic and evolving concepts of God and religion.

**§10-114. Adolf von Harnack.**—Von Harnack probably represents the apex of liberal theology. He saw the pristine purity of the gospel as having been corrupted in the New Testament era, transforming a religion of Jesus to one about Him. The faith was further corrupted as Christianity moved out of a Jewish context into an Hellenistic one. Hellenistic philosophy twisted the pure gospel and the task of the theologian was to extract the kernel of the gospel from its Hellenistic husk.

Harnack (1851-1930) wrote *History of Dogmas* in the vein of Ritschl and his followers. He believed that the development of Christian dogma involved the gradual abandonment of the original teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus could be summarized in three points: (1) the kingdom of God and its coming; (2) God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul; and (3) the higher righteousness and the commandment of love. He called for a return to the simplicity of original Christianity and urged Protestants away from the dogmatic, liturgical, and ecclesiastical results of he called the Hellenization of the faith.

The gospel really didn't have anything to do with the Son, it was all about the Father. Jesus' preaching did not demand any particular belief in Himself, but focused on keeping the commandments. Paul (primarily) introduced modifications to the faith where the simple gospel of Jesus was replaced by adherence to doctrines relating to His person. Paul was understood as investing the death and resurrection of Christ with redemptive significance. With redemption being traced to a proper understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the formulation of correct knowledge about Christ threatens to assume the chief position of importance and to pervert the simplicity of the original gospel message.

### 3. As Experienced in America

**§10-116. Social gospel.**—The Social Gospel was the liberal Protestant attempt to apply biblical principles to the problems associated with emerging urbanization and the social upheaval caused by the Industrial Revolution. The poverty, injustice, and oppression that people like Walter Rauchenbusch witnessed in the slums of New York City caused this rethinking of the gospel. Key to this was that the kingdom was seen as a social and political entity. Sin was seen primarily in evil social structures. The task of the church was understood as working to end human suffering and establish social justice.

**§10-117. Modernism.**—This term was applied to the radical edge of liberal theology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American religious scene was besieged with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. It progressively affected almost every Protestant denomination. Modernism embraced the Enlightenment and a very optimistic view of history based on the radical immanence of God. The Holy Spirit was seen as an wholly immanent power perfecting both nature and human culture. It emphasized autonomous human reason, humanity's freedom and self-determination,

and saw humanity perfecting itself by its own efforts based on humankind's innate goodness. The radical power of sin and evil was virtually denied on the individual level and only operated on the social level in which the liberals saw themselves as bringing in the kingdom. As a movement, modernism understood religion as helping people make sense of their environment. Theology was viewed as transcendentalized politics arising out of the church's interaction with its culture. These ideas would once again find a receptive audience during the radicalism of the 1960s and beyond.

## B. Distinctive beliefs

### §10-201. In general; Liberalism's views charted.—

<i>Topic:</i>	<i>Description:</i>
<i>Central themes</i>	Liberalism seeks to articulate Christianity to modern, contemporary culture and thinking. Liberals attempt to maintain what they assert is the essence of Christianity in modern terms and images.
<i>God</i>	God is immanent, not transcendent. He dwells within the world and is not above it or apart from it. Thus, there is no distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Liberalism is usually unitarian, not Trinitarian, recognizing only the deity of the Father. The Father does not work supernaturally, but through human culture, philosophy, education, and society.
<i>Christ</i>	Christ was neither God nor savior, but merely God's representative. Jesus was a man "full of God", but was not God incarnate. He gave a moral example for humanity and expressed God to us. He did not die to pay the penalty for sin and does not impute righteousness to us.
<i>Holy Spirit</i>	The Holy Spirit is the activity of God in the world, not the third person of the Godhead who is equal in essence to the Father and the Son.
<i>Revelation</i>	The Bible is a fallible record of the religious experiences and thoughts of a particular people. The historical validity of the Bible is problematical and doubted (and should be). Modern scientific assessments prove that miracles do not occur and are simply religious expressions of a pre-scientific culture.
<i>Salvation</i>	Liberals have uniformly denied the fall of humanity, original sin, and the substitutionary nature of the atonement. People are not innately sinful. They possess a universal religious sentiment and interest. The goal of salvation is not personal conversion but individual and societal improvement. Christ is the ultimate example of what humanity is striving for and will ultimately become.
<i>Future events</i>	Christ will not personally return. His kingdom will come as a result of universal moral improvement of humanity.

**§10-202. Universal fatherhood of the immanent God.**—God is a loving, immanent Father in constant communion with His creation and working within it to bring it to perfection. As a loving Father, He corrects His children (i.e. everybody), but is not retributive in His punishment.

### **§10-203. Universal brotherhood of human beings and the infinite value of the human soul.—**

People are not radically sinful and in need of redemption. Humanity is in communion with God. There is no infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings. God can be known in some measure by analogy to human personality.

**§10-204. Jesus Christ, the supreme example.**—Liberal theology emphasized the humanity of Jesus to the neglect of His ontological deity. Instead of the incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ becomes the perfect man, who attains divine status (of sorts) by His perfect piety (or God consciousness). He is the supreme example of God indwelling people, more full of God than other people.

**§10-204. Religious authority, salvation, and the kingdom.**—Liberalism made religious authority wholly subjective, based on individual experience. The Bible is merely the record of people's religious conceptions. Salvation is by following the teachings and example of Jesus. Substitutionary atonement, repentance of sin, conversion, and the like are concepts of traditional orthodoxy that moderns can't accept. God's kingdom is a moral kingdom with God ruling in the hearts and minds of His people. It is also manifested in society by the establishment of justice and righteousness in the political sphere.

## **C. Contemporary setting**

**§10-301. In general.**—The optimism that drove classical liberalism died in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That certainly doesn't mean that theological liberalism died, but that it migrated. Existentialism and process theology are where most liberals migrated to.

**§10-302. Existentialism as a carrier of post-Liberal theologizing.—**

<b><i>Theme</i></b>	<b><i>Description</i></b>
Central themes	To demythologize Scripture. This is not to reject Scripture or the Christian message but the worldview of a past historical epoch. This means that everything supernatural is explained as myth. It is a way of speaking of the transcendent as being of this world, the beyond as if it were here and now. Indeed, when the Bible is demythologized, it speaks not of God, but of humanity. The important part of Christian faith is the subjective human experience, not an objective truth underlying it.
God	Objective knowledge of God's existence is impossible. "God" was an aid for primitive people to understand themselves, but moderns can see beyond these myths. "God" is our statement about human life, about ourselves. The Trinity is a myth relating to the supernatural content of the Bible about a supreme being. God talk is really a statement about human life. If God does exist, He works in the world as if He doesn't exist at least not in ways we can know anything objectively about.
Christ	Jesus was an ordinary man. We do not know much at all about the "historical Jesus". The picture of Jesus unadorned with "divine" elements is a meager one. The cross carries no import for some vicarious bearing of the sins of humanity, the Resurrection is inconceivable as an historical event, and the

	Virgin birth and the other miracles of Jesus are primitive and gullible embellishments that obscure the real person Jesus was.
Revelation	The Bible is not a source of objective knowledge about God. In order to understand themselves better, early people created myths (all the supernatural content) around the person of Jesus. If we can strip the Gospel of these myths, we can find the original purpose behind these myths and find guidance for our lives today. The Bible transforms people, not by conveying actual knowledge of God, but by being an occasion for encounter with God.
Salvation	Salvation is to find your “true self”. This is done by choosing to believe in God and that choice will change our view of ourselves. Salvation is a change in our outlook on our lives and in our conduct built on an experience of God. This is a finding of ourselves, not a change in our nature.
Holy Spirit	What we “know” about the Holy Spirit comes from those parts of the Bible full of supernatural myths. The way to understand the “holy Spirit” is to see it as some sort of force immanent in and cascading through the natural world.

**§10-303. Process theology as a follow-on to Liberal theologizing.**—Process theology is a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement teaching that God is bipolar, both transcendent and integrally involved in the endless processes of the world. In His transcendent nature are the timeless perfections of His nature and character. In His consequent or worldly immanent nature, He is part and parcel of the cosmic, evolving process of the world. The attributes of God are His divine qualities that are necessarily true of Him regardless of circumstances. However, His concrete nature are those particulars which He has gained by His interaction with the world. In His concrete actuality, God is a living person in process. Thus, He is necessary and supremely absolute in His abstract, divine nature but dependent and supremely relative in His concrete nature. God is more than just the world in its totality (contra to pantheism) because He has His own transcendent self-identity. Yet God includes the world within Himself (contra to classical theism) by His perfect prehension or participation in the creative, evolving events of the world. This view has been labeled as panentheism (all in God-ism).

**§8-227. —Representatives.**—Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) was the foremost exponent of Process theology in America. Beginning with the doctrine of God, Process theologians sought to show that Process thinking was more in accord with the Biblical view of God as dynamically related to the world and human history than the more traditional Christian theism. Such people as John Cobb, Stuart Ogden, and Norman Pittenger were involved in this endeavor.

#### D. Observations and concluding thoughts

**§10-401. In general.**—Many Christians were critical of liberalism and the biblical criticism it spawned. These critics characterized the end result of liberalism much the way Richard Niebuhr did later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “a God without wrath brought [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

Liberal Christianity seemed too willing to accommodate modern thought and to forsake or reformulate doctrines that had for centuries been central to the Christian faith. Others asserted that liberal culture,

with its belief in the natural goodness of people and the inevitable progress of society toward a better world, encouraged an easy, undemanding Christianity that bore little resemblance to the authentic faith of earlier days.

**§10-402. Divine immanence over transcendence.**—Liberals de-emphasized the transcendence of God, the reality of God apart from the world. They believed that concept was unacceptable to moderns. So they tended to identify the supernatural with the interior spirituality of people and then to link the spiritual with human consciousness, the intellectual and emotive side of people. The life coursing through the world (they were very comfortable with traditional ideas of God's immanence in the created realm) and in human consciousness was "God". Their view of God's immanence seemed to fit well with scientific studies. God worked entirely through natural laws. Many agreed with the popular characterization: "Some call it evolution, and others call it God."

The liberal emphasis on divine immanence did not represent a return to the orthodox idea of God's omnipresence. The orthodox idea emphasizes the distinction between God and the world, whereas the liberal idea of immanence implied an intimate relationship that the universe and God are in some sense truly one. This thoroughgoing idea of immanence led liberal Protestants to functionally deny the supernatural as classically understood. There were not two realms – natural and supernatural, and miracles didn't happen in the sense of God breaking into the natural order. Indeed, God was not understood as being "out there" to break into the natural order. The term "miracle" was watered down. All was miraculous for God was all in all.

**§10-403. Lack of a doctrine of sin.**—Human position was elevated at the same time as divine transcendence was denied. Humans were not seen as inherently sinful and separated from God. Sin on the individual level was seen as a minor peccadillo rather than a radical evil that necessitated the incarnation and atonement. When the liberals lathered up about sin, it was always societal evils and social structures that were the target. As a result, conversion becomes a non-issue. Liberal salvation was a moralistic one and fundamentally a societal and corporate one. Redemption was seen as a mystical communion with Christ in the community of the church working to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

**§10-404. Rise of Biblical criticism.**—Liberals made a wholesale assault on the *sola scriptura* foundation on traditional Protestant faith. The rise of textual criticism shook the confidence of many in the inspiration, accurate transmission, and preservation of the biblical text. A thoroughgoing anti-supernaturalist presupposition undermined the traditional understanding of the authorship of the biblical books, their proximate dates, their milieu, and their historical accuracy. It served to undermine the unique character and authority of the Bible both in the scholarly and worshiping communities.

**§10-405. Loss of the uniqueness of Christ; quest for the historical Jesus.**—With the attack on the supernatural content of the New Testament, came the denial of the "Christ of faith" and a resulting search for the "historical Jesus". Since the history of the Bible was essentially relegated to myth or fabrication, this "search" was long and arduous and ultimately unsuccessful. It has been described as liberal Protestantism looking back through many centuries of Catholic darkness only to find a Jesus that was the reflection of a liberal contemporary Protestant scholar. The Jesus of liberalism bore little resemblance to the church's historic understanding of Jesus as having both a human and a divine nature joined together in one person. Jesus was seen as fully human but only human. He was not so much as Savior as an example. He was the founder of a religion who embodied in his own life what he taught

concerning God. This God-knowledge flowed naturally from him and was unique to be sure, but it was not an ontological reality. This unique God-knowledge constituted him as the Son of God and was the source from which his vocation flowed. But this was not the Jesus of the Council of Chalcedon orthodoxy, the hypostatic union of God and man in one person.

**§10-406. Social activism.**—Liberalism, particularly in America, took on an activist cast. The social gospel sought to right social injustice but at the expense of a recognition of personal sin and the need for personal piety. There was a blending of the church's agenda with the agenda of secularly dominated political systems, often making these agendas indistinguishable.

## XI. Neo-Orthodoxy

### A. Historical background—

**§11-101. In general.**—World War I shattered the optimism that fueled the drive of Protestant liberalism. Belief in the essential goodness of people and in a progression to an ideal society took a direct hit in a gruesome war among the world's "civilized elite nations". The aftermath of that war only heightened this effect as the world witnessed the rise of genocidal ideologies and totalitarian extremism on both the political right and left.

In 1933, one author observed that "the most important fact about contemporary theology is the disintegration of liberalism". Even such an ardent spokesman as Harry Emerson Fosdick, who argued that Christianity took "the intellectual culture of a particular period and adjusted Christian teaching to that standard", changed his tone. Liberalism had wedded itself to the culture of an earlier age which had collapsed with World War I and Fosdick himself would later confess to liberalism's failure. In his way, he acknowledged that the liberals had abdicated their prophetic voice by embracing modern culture so whole-heartedly: "We have been all things to all [people] long enough. We have adapted and adjusted ... long enough. We have at times ... talked as though the highest compliment that could be paid to Almighty God was that a few scientists believed in Him."

Neo-Orthodoxy arose out of the dustbin of liberal optimism and as a powerful corrective to liberal theology. Neo-Orthodoxy is a reaction against classical liberalism and saw itself as striving to retain the essence of the Reformation while adapting to contemporary culture and modern issues. Neo-Orthodox thinkers stressed the rooted sinfulness of human beings, scorned liberal ideas of the inevitability of the progress of the human condition and society, and rejected liberal ideas of fundamentally finding God in our own consciousness, in nature, and in messianic efforts to create an ideal society. They emphasized the otherness or transcendence of God, looked to the Scripture to find Him revealed, and saw "crisis" points when humans must choose to believe and encounter the One who is infinite and eternal. This last tendency lent Neo-Orthodoxy its pseudonym – "crisis theology".

**§11-102. Post-Kant milieu.**—A radical change in worldview and thinking took the place in the wake of Immanuel Kant. Kant's thought cut humanity off from any rational knowledge of God. Until then theology had been centered on rationality. Now, following in the steps of Schleiermacher and others, the center became feeling, or God consciousness, and the task was an exposition of humanity's religious experience.

In addition, Hegel's dialectic had worked its way into both popular and scholarly thought. The notion of progress, and a dialectical version of that as well, was the order of the day. Humanity was not encumbered by such ideas as depravity. Indeed, they were perfectible, for God Himself was working Himself out in history.

**§11-103. Marginalization of the Bible.**—The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a radical reinterpretation of Biblical history at the hands of many vehement anti-supernaturalist critics. The traditional authorship and even the unity of many Old Testament books was denied. In the New Testament, the Christ of faith so mythologically presented was rejected and a century long search for the "historical Jesus" began in order to get to the real human Jesus behind all supernaturalist accounts. Hegel's dialectic was variously

applied. For example, F.C. Baur posited a thesis, Petrine Christianity, followed by an antithesis, Pauline Christianity, and resolved in a synthesis, Johannine Christianity. The apostles were at loggerheads, a development only obvious to the brilliant scholars some 19 centuries after the fact. As a document, the Bible lacked divine authority, historical reliability, and provided no normative basis for doing theology. Indeed, it wasn't the "word of God" at all, but the evolving religious thinking of the Old Testament Jewish people and the early church. The new norm was posited in the person of Jesus (fully human and only human) and his teachings (which the Bible had distorted, but the critics would get it right). Jesus, the perfectly God-conscious man, was the only continuing authority for religious thought and affection. The Bible was lost to theology, for 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism reduced theology to philosophy and anthropology.

**§11-104. Theology at loggerheads: Liberalism vs. Fundamentalism.**—David Hume was something of a fountainhead of Enlightenment skepticism. Indeed, Kant credited Hume as awakening him from his dogmatic slumber. Hume also caused another reaction of a very different type, that of Scottish common sense movement. Thomas Reid was influential in this development. This development emphasized that the mind could indeed objectively know reality outside of itself. When applied to theology, as it was particularly at the Princeton school in America, it emphasized rationality and made a strong apologetic for a God inspired word that formed a solid basis for an inductively built theology about God, people, the world, salvation etc.

**§11-105. Neo-Orthodox reaction against liberalism.**—The devastation of World War I exploded the naive bubble of liberal optimism. With millions dead in the trenches of the Western Front, killed by representatives of the very nations who liberals presented as the apex of human progress, the innate goodness of people and their natural brotherhood rang hollow. It was against this backdrop that the Neo-Orthodox protest against the theological climate of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe began. Karl Barth led the way, joined by the likes of Brunner, Niebuhr, and Bonhoeffer, pioneering what was variously called dialectical theology, crisis theology, neo-orthodoxy, or even Barthianism.

**§11-106. Karl Barth.**—Barth was educated in the reigning liberal theology of the day and in the historical-critical method, but felt that these were unsatisfactory because they did not grapple with the subject matter of the text. He went against the tide of his day and challenged the prevailing assumptions of liberal theology. After ordination, he took an intern pastorate and then a pastorate of a small church for the next twelve years. In his first publication in 1909, he noted that graduates of liberal seminaries were more averse to pastoral duties than graduates of more conservative institutions. In his full-time pastorate, he found that as he preached from week to week, he increasingly had nothing to say to his congregation. Under the demands of pastoral ministry, he came face-to-face with the need for and promise of Christian preaching.

The second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans in 1922 fell like a bomb on the playground of liberal theologians. Here was one of their own, incisively critiquing the system. He emphasized the infinite qualitative distinction between humanity and God, between time and eternity. All traces of the liberal continuity between God and humanity had disappeared from his thinking. Following this publication, Barth and like-minded theologians established a journal providing a forum for the exposition of biblical theology and the critique of liberalism.

The advent of Nazism led Barth to speak out vigorously against the new paganism. He and Bonhoeffer were major contributors to the Barmen Declaration of the German Confessing Church, which arose to

oppose Nazism. Refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the Fuhrer, Barth was removed from his teaching post and fled to Switzerland. He taught theology at Basel from 1935 until his retirement in 1962. Barth's master work was his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, which he worked on from 1932 until his death in 1968.

**§11-107. Emil Brunner.**—Brunner's thought developed separately from Barth's but followed a similar trajectory. His thought can be described as Christocentric and socialistic. He met Barth after Barth published his commentary on Romans. The two men studied Luther and Calvin together and agreed that the original reformers had recovered the insights of the biblical message that subsequent generations blurred, or even lost. In addition, Brunner was influenced by the Oxford group movement in noting the close connection between spiritual reality and the fellowship of community. Buber's ideas of I-Thou also influenced Brunner's anthropology. Brunner and Barth broke over a disagreement over whether there was a place for natural theology and whether there was a continuation of the image of God in fallen humanity. Brunner was insistent, throughout his career, that God can only be known through personal encounter. Truth about Christ is not to be discovered in discussion about His nature and work but in a living encounter with Him.

**§11-108. Reinhold Niebuhr.**—The most influential American Neo-orthodox theologian was Reinhold Niebuhr (1893-1971). Like Barth, he found that the liberal theology in which he had been trained was impotent to meet the challenges of pastoral ministry. His magnum opus was *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. He was an advocate of Christian realism. He repudiated his earlier notions of the essential goodness of humanity and argued that human beings and their social groupings were essentially self-serving. His method was dialectical and paradoxical. People were free and bound, limited and limitless, sinners and saints, subject to the social forces of history, yet shaped those same forces, creatures of the Creator, yet potential lords (lower case) of creation. He posited the radical evil in humanity and decried the “easy conscience of modern man”. People were an inherent contradiction, existing as the image of God and yet radical sinners. In God's image, people are tempted to “play God” and make themselves the center of all things. Even in people's regenerate state, they continue to display sinful and egotistical behavior.

Niebuhr believed that people in history stood before ever new possibilities of good and evil. There was something of the Renaissance optimism in Niebuhr. Yet, the power of sin was ever present to infect even the best of human efforts, very much reflecting the Reformation understanding of people. This synthesis of traditions led Niebuhr to his twin focus of tolerance and social justice as core values for human society. Humanity can achieve and should strive to achieve a society of law and justice while recognizing that any achievement of these virtues always falls short of the kingdom of God.

**§11-109. Dietrich Bonhoeffer.**—Bonhoeffer died so young that his thought many times seems enigmatic. What did he mean by such phrases as “cheap grace”, “worldly Christianity”, and “religionless Christianity in a world coming of age”. Those phrases from Bonhoeffer have taken on a life of their own. His provocative thinking fired the imaginations of many others that went off in various directions—ecumenism, liberation theology, death of God movement, and thoughts concerning Christian resistance to political oppression.

Like other Neo-Orthodox theologians, he was schooled in liberalism and eventually rejected it and espoused many of the themes trumpeted by Barth. He cooperated with Barth in composing the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church, opposing the Nazi program. Bonhoeffer had no use for

“religion” as such. He centered on the reality of the transcendent God in Jesus Christ and the church as the continuing presence of the revelation of God in the world by being the vehicle to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A Neo-Orthodox thinker at his core, his ultimate focus was on a personal encounter with God in Christ.

## B. Distinctive beliefs—

### §11-201. In general; chart on Neo-Orthodox distinctives.—

<i>Distinctive beliefs</i>	<i>Description</i>
God	God is wholly transcendent except when He chooses to reveal Himself to people. He is sovereign over His creation and free from it. Neo-Orthodox thinkers centered their system on God who is holy, absolute, sovereign, eternal, and wholly Other. This view of a transcendent, sovereign God is opposed to the immanent, subjective view of God held by liberals since the days of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Because of the discontinuity between God and people and history, people cannot know God by reason or sensation. He cannot be known by rational proofs or by objective doctrine, but only in encounter.
Christ	Christ as manifested in the Scripture is the Christ of faith, not the “historical” Jesus. Christ is the revelation of God, which can be experienced by individuals in encounters. The historical details relating to His person are unimportant. He is the symbol of the new being which dissolves all that estranges people from God.
Revelation	God's revelation to people is threefold: Jesus is the Word made flesh; Scripture points to that Word; and preaching proclaims the Word made flesh. The Word is revealed by the Spirit as the Bible and Christ are proclaimed. The Bible contains the Word of God but is a human and fallible document that is only reliable when God reveals Himself through encounter over the Scripture. The historicity of the Scripture is unimportant; encountering God through it is what matters.
Salvation	People are sinful and can be saved only by God's grace. The Word proclaimed produces a crisis requiring individuals to make a decision between rebelling in sin or accepting the grace of God. This saving grace can only be received by faith in an encounter with the Word revealed. However, salvation doctrine varies substantially from Reformation norms. There is no such thing as inherited sin or a sin nature in people. People sin by choice, not by nature. Sin is variously described – self-centeredness, social injustice, fear and dread. All humanity are elect in Christ. Salvation is a commitment to God in encounter with the Word revealed. A leap of faith in an occasion of crisis.
Judgment	Eternal punishment and hell are not realities.

**§11-202. Dialectic method.**—This method assumes the qualitative difference between God and humanity and this means that truth is posed in a series of apparently paradoxical statements. Out of these paradoxes, comes truth about God and ourselves. Truth about God is paradoxical; opposite aspects of truth must be held in dynamic tension. God is absolutely transcendent and yet immanent and self-disclosing; Christ is both divine and human and yet one person; faith is a gift and yet an act; humanity is sinful yet free and full of possibility; eternity enters time and is time's ground and destination.

**§11-203. God: the Wholly Other.**—Karl Barth once said “You cannot speak about God by speaking about man in a loud voice”. God is the wholly other, absolutely transcendent. Barth will go so far as to deny any point of contact within the created order. Revelation comes only at divine discretion.

**§11-204. Revelation and encounter.**—Neo-Orthodoxy rejects the doctrine of the verbal plenary inspiration of the Scripture. Scripture is the locus of divine revelation, not revelation itself. The Bible serves as a witness to revelation. Neo-Orthodox dons do not think that revelation is propositional. God revealed Himself to the authors of Scripture, who then recorded their encounters with Him. Reading this recorded encounter can and often does serve as an occasion for the reader's own encounter with God. This is the way the Bible becomes the Word of God to people. The Neo-Orthodox idea of revelation is actually quite close to the traditional Protestant idea of the illumination of Scripture. While Neo-Orthodox embraced biblical critical studies, they did not think that critical study of the provenance of the text destroyed the possibility of encounter and thus of divine witness.

Neo-Orthodox thinkers deny that the Bible is inerrant. They assert that to believe in inerrancy leads one to fall prey to docetism, that is in denying the essential humanity of the Scripture. The Bible is a human product and as such prone to error. God condescends to speak through the text of a human fallible document. The Bible is God's Word only to the extent that God causes it to be His Word. He does that when He speaks through it is in personal encounter. The Neo-Orthodox understanding of the Scripture was an attempt to steer a course between the liberal view of the text of a totally human account of humanity's evolving religious consciousness and the view of Scripture that sees it as God-breathed and without error in the original manuscripts.

**§11-205. Natural theology rejected.**—The transcendence of God as wholly other and absolutely free, along with the understanding of revelation as redemptive, made the idea of natural theology taboo to Neo-Orthodox thinkers. Later in life, Barth would allow that there were “lesser lights” within the created order that pointed to God, but he refused to describe these “lesser lights” as revelation.

**§11-206. Christology.**—Here, Neo-Orthodoxy falls within the bounds of historic orthodoxy. Jesus is the God-man, fully divine and fully human. Barth, at least, affirmed the virgin birth and maintained that the atoning death of Christ was objective, so objective that it contained the seeds of universalism. By His death, Christ secured the reconciliation of all humanity to God. Did Barth believe in a physical resurrection of Christ? Was it an actual historical event (*historie*) or did it just carry meaning and significance of the renewal of humanity (*geschichte*)? These are questions historians have and will continue to discuss.

**§11-207. Biblical realism.**—This is the Neo-Orthodox rejection of the liberal denial of the sinfulness of humanity. The early Neo-orthodox theologians thoroughly learned the lessons of World War I. There was a reassertion of the radical sinfulness of humanity in individual lives and in societal structures.

**§11-208. Revelation in history.**—Neo-orthodoxy saw revelation as history in the sense of encounter with God. Revelation was not propositional (as recorded in the Bible) but was an existential encounter (often occasioned by the Bible but not because of propositional content). They saw the historical-grammatical exegetical approach as inadequate to study the Bible for it set up “an iron curtain between the past and the present”.

### C. Contemporary setting—

**§11-301. In general.**—The breadth of the term *neo-orthodox* has led to its abandonment as a useful classification, especially after new emphases in mainline Protestant theology appeared during the 1960s. These included the Death of God movement, which attacked the linguistic and cultural foundations of all previous theology, and a renewal of interest among Biblical scholars in the historical Jesus, something Neo-orthodox theologians largely dismissed as irrelevant to serious Christian faith. Still, some of the movement's positions and worldviews did inform such later movements as liberation theology during the 1970s and 1980s and post-liberal thought during the 1990s and 2000s—in spite of theological and ethical differences from both.

**§11-302. Relation to fundamentalism.**—Neo-orthodoxy has been scathingly critical of liberal theology, which would seem to make it a natural ally of fundamentalism and conservative evangelism. However, from its inception, Neo-orthodoxy has largely been unacceptable to Protestant fundamentalism since it generally accepts biblical criticism and has remained mostly silent on the perceived conflicts caused by evolutionary science.

### D. Observations and concluding thoughts—

#### **§11-401. Contributions.—**

- Reassertion of the transcendence of God;
- Reassertion of the reality and depth of sin;
- Reassertion of the centrality of Christ—Liberalism viewed Christ as the perfectly God-conscious man, without any hint of ontological deity. Neo-Orthodoxy reasserted the historic Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human.

#### **§11-402. Critique.—**

- Radical transcendence—In his denial of natural revelation, Barth went beyond the biblical witness. It has been quipped that, for Barth, God got lost in outer space!
- Truncated understanding of revelation—Neo-Orthodoxy rejected the traditional Protestant understanding of revelation as propositional and opted for an existential understanding of revelation as encounter. Personal or propositional is a false dichotomy. It's ironic that Barth, arguing vociferously for a fallible Bible, would fill volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* with exegetical study treating the Scripture as if it were propositionally true.
- An implicit universalism based on the radically objective idea of the atonement runs through Neo-Orthodox thinking, at least that of Barth.
- Neo-Orthodox is heavily contextualized in existentialism. It arose in the portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was existentialism' heyday and it, as a theological school, reflects that reality.

## XII. Liberation Theology

### A. Historical background—

**§12-101. Orthodoxy versus Orthopraxis.**—The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of an approach to theology that was more sociological than theological, more centered on right practice (orthopraxis) than on right belief (orthodoxy). The *praxis* (i.e. how the gospel is to be lived in the world) of the church was all the rage in the theological journals of the day. It was an approach that focused on divine immanence (if it focused on divinity at all) in reaction to Barth and was, at the same time, a response to numerous forms of human oppression. The emphasis was on rectifying the realities of oppression rather than on human sin and redemption. Theology's task was to overthrow oppressive structures, by violent revolution if necessary. They wanted to create a theology that was vitally involved in the historical process, especially in the concrete experience of the downtrodden and oppressed. Two presuppositions are vital to point out:

- All theology is historically and socially conditioned. This presupposition played out can lead to a cognitive relativism that locks a person inexorably into his or her framework as is common fare in postmodern thought.
- Sin is more than personal, it is structural and institutional (in liberation thought, seemingly primarily so).

**§12-102. Moltmann's theology of hope.**—Moltmann's theology of hope was the inspiration for a host of politically-oriented theology/sociology or contextual theologies (liberation, black, and feminist theologies). The theme of hope came out of Moltmann's experience as a German prisoner of war in British prisoner camps in World War II. He came to see hope as essential for life itself. This hope is grounded not so much in the past as in the future, in the establishment of God's kingdom in glory. Moltmann combined this orientation to a human drivenness to overcome an inherent sense of alienation in human situations and to achieve a future made possible by the resurrection of Christ. Out of this matrix of understanding came the groundwork for liberation theology, with political praxis as the starting point for theological reflection.

**§12-103. Dehumanizing structures in society.**—Basic to liberation thought is that unjust structures and societal oppression have a dehumanizing effect contrary to God's design. In many places in this fallen world, God has been seen for centuries as aligned with the church in supporting these dehumanizing structures. In reality, God is for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. The route to a recovery from this dehumanization is the overthrow of these sinful structures and agencies, by violent political revolution if necessary.

**§12-104. —Latin American context.**—Liberation theology took root in the Latin American context of Roman Catholicism. The Spanish and Portuguese conquests in Latin America and the subjugation of the indigenous peoples took place with the tacit approval and full cooperation of the Roman Catholic Church. In this, the Church became an agent of oppression. Since the colonial days, the political system in Latin America has been one of a large, economically and politically oppressed minority held in subjugation by a small and incredibly wealthy minority.

Over the centuries, the oppression and injustice in Latin America grew systemic and pervasive. The very structures of society were designed to keep the poor in poverty and in their place. Anecdotes

abound in liberation accounts of people in desperate economic situations. People dying of hunger with opulent luxury right near by. The stories reflected the deadly realities in Latin America that called for holy anger and revolutionary resolve.

Who are the poor in this thought framework? Liberationists identify two groups:

- Socioeconomically poor, consisting of those lacking the necessities of life, those unjustly poor because of the exploitation of labor, and those discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, and culture.
- Evangelically poor, consisting of those who have seen and identify with the suffering of the socioeconomically poor.

**§12-105.—20<sup>th</sup> century activist response.**—The birth of Liberation theology is generally seen as emerging from the 1968 gathering of Roman Catholic bishops at Medellin, Colombia. The conference condemned the church's traditional alliance with the Latin American political powers, describing the socioeconomic scene as "institutionalized violence". The primary text for Liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* followed in 1971. It seeks to bring the harsh realities of life into critical dialogue with the biblical text, often questioning the received interpretative tradition (the so-called *hermeneutic of suspicion*). This allows the community to discover Biblical texts and stories that provide answers arising out of the historical praxis of the community. The apologetic for this "new way of doing theology" is multi-pronged:

- Scripture portrays God as the giver and sustainer of life. By opting for the poor, the church imitates the Heavenly Father;
- Christ's example, who made the poor and the outcast the chief recipients of His message, is invoked;
- A twofold apostolic motivation is invoked—both the early practice of holding all things in common and the concern throughout the gospel to remember the poor.

**§12-106. Black Theology; origins.**—The black spiritual experience born out of slavery and the economic oppression that followed gave rise to a tradition that expressed its faith in themes that included the equality of all individuals, the reality of divine justice, and the ultimate triumph of the cause of the black community in spite of the experience of injustice and oppression. Jesus is the one who stands beside and with His people. He Himself suffered and therefore can enter into their suffering and lead them to freedom. Interestingly, a Neo-Orthodox thinker played a role in the emergence of black theology. A resurgence in the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his resistance to injustice in so-called Christian Germany provided both guidance and motivation. He demonstrated how the Christian concept of God could be relevant to the black community, which also was oppressed at the hands of those calling themselves Christians.

Black theology can be traced to the non-violent civil rights movement of the 1960s and the black power movement that arose beside it but advocated violent means to achieve its goals. It is a theology contextualized for the black community experience.

**§12-107.—Radicalization.**—Black theology radicalized with James Cone. Cone held that black theology put black identity in a theological context, allegedly showing that black power is not only consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ, but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. With Cone, ethnicity was elevated to a theological category and made the defining characteristic of black theology, indeed of

the gospel itself. Many, even within the black community, question whether this can be viewed as Christian at all. While it is startling to hear of Jesus as “black” (we all thought he was born and raised a Jew), what is meant is that black people find in the gospel of Jesus Christ a message of liberation. Black theology is an alternative framework of interpretation of Jesus' message which rejects the “white gospel” that blacks have experienced as dehumanizing. Cone argues that the core of theology is the assertion of the blackness of God, that is that God is involved in the struggle for justice wherever there is oppression. He goes so far as to say that the very nature of God is to be found in liberation. Likewise, the image of God as found in humanity is found in the liberation struggle against structures of oppression. Cone heavily emphasized the socio-political aspects of the gospel and was scathing in his analysis of white racism.

Black theology has its strident voice and its advocates of violence in securing change. But it also has had more moderate voices as well. Following the direction pointed out by Martin Luther King, a number of black theologians place Christian love front and center in the implementation of God's liberating actions for His people. “Blackness” is not identified with God Himself but with humanness and with blacks taking their rightful place as human beings. It is identified with human wholeness.

**§12-108. Feminist Theology.**—Feminist theology is a contextual theology born in the 1960s with the feminist movement, seeking to bring to women the rights and freedoms enjoyed by men in every area of life. Its intent was to actualize Paul's pronouncement in Galatians 3:26-28, that in Christ there are no class, ethnic, or gender distinctions at all. All are one in Christ. It looked at the perceptions of women in the Bible and in Christian traditions and heritage and discerned a threefold ideology:

- Women were seen as property in the Bible and in the earliest Christian sources;
- Later theologians saw women as polluting, sexually dangerous, and carnal;
- A romantic and idealized view of women later developed that viewed them as morally superior to men but in need of protection and therefore relegated to the private realm. As such they were excluded from full participation in the image of God and in participation in church leadership.

**§12-109. Critiquing the status quo—Hermeneutics.**—The starting point is the critique of the status quo—the androcentrism and misogyny of patriarchal theology. Several methods are suggested to overcome this:

- Liberationist—Following the mode of liberation theology, some argue for a “prophetic liberating tradition of biblical faith” found in certain biblical texts. These function as a norm for elevating other texts. In other words, they are setting up a canon within the canon.
- Re-examination of forgotten or overlooked texts is a method suggested. These have been neglected or twisted by patriarchal hermeneutics.
- Rejecting the canon—The Bible itself is a result of patriarchy and is filled with illegitimate ideas of female inferiority and subordination. The demand is for a new beginning, in which women are no longer at the margins, but at the center.

**§12-110.—Christology and anthropology.**—The historic maleness of Jesus is at issue here. Jesus' gender has been used historically to assert the maleness of God. Feminists want to refocus away from Jesus' gender to the radical inclusiveness of the marginalized elements of society in all aspects of His life and ministry. An area of diverse understanding among feminists is the nature of humanity itself. Some hold that, apart from biological differences, women and men are the same and the differences attributed to the sexes are culturally constructed and lead to the subjugation of women. Others assert

that women and men are indeed different and stress the importance of understanding physical existence and embodiment. Women's physical embodiment provides insight into humanity that has been overlooked and needs to be taken seriously in theological and ethical thought.

## B. Distinctive beliefs—

**§12-201. In general.**—Liberation theology inverts the traditional order of theological endeavor and sees action as preceding reflection. Theology is the critical reflection on praxis (how the gospel is to be lived in the world) in the light of the Word of God. It articulates the action of faith (our action) rather than the abstract understanding of God and His actions. God is not understood doctrinally or propositionally, but by entering obediently to God's own project in history, the poor. Commitment must precede understanding. There is no knowledge except in action itself, in the process of transforming the world through activist participation.

The Bible is the normative record of God's liberating activity for His people, albeit revelation is broader than that. The “deposit of faith” (in the Roman Catholic backdrop, normally a reference to the Bible and the authoritative Tradition) lives in the church community and rouses commitments in accordance with God's will (and His agenda for the poor) as well as providing criteria for judging that commitment.

In addition, liberation theologians have adopted a Marxist interpretation of history as a tool for social analysis. Capitalism is seen as inherently evil and socialism as the ideal form for economics. The goal is the overthrow (violent if necessary) of the unjust existing economic order and the establishment of a just society. Liberationists reject gradual reform. The goal is a social revolution, not merely better living conditions. As to their favored economic system, one wonders if this would indeed be the same if the liberationists' praxis environment had arisen in Eastern Europe rather than in Latin America.

Key themes include—

- Living and true faith must include the activist practice of liberation;
- God sides with the poor and the oppressed;
- God's kingdom project is in history and eternity;
- Jesus Christ took on oppression in order to set us free;
- The Holy Spirit, “the Father of the poor”, is present in the struggles of the oppressed;
- Mary is the prophetic and liberating woman of the people;
- The church is the sign and the instrument of liberation;
- The rights of the poor are God's rights.

Liberation's agenda is all-encompassing activism, professional, pastoral, and popular. You must get your message out there in every way possible and stay on message.

**§12-202. Central themes.**—Liberation theology has been described as the “liberation of theology”. It is not a system of doctrines about God, but a way to initiate social change for oppressed people. This is largely an endeavor by liberal theologians to wrestle with the social, political, and economic inequalities in a Christianity no longer based on a biblical worldview. This is not a classical theology concerned with such matters as the nature of God and human people, of how one can know God, how people can be saved, the nature of the church, matters pertaining to End Times, and the like. Liberation

theology is concerned with this world and how to change it for the poor and oppressed by social and political action. It is not a unified viewpoint, but closely related alternatives springing from common concerns. In its economic outlook, it tends to make the unlikely combination of Christianity and Marxism, particularly in its Latin American manifestation.

Black theology is a form of liberation theology, whose central theme is the oppression of the black race by the white race. James Cone describes the endeavor as the “need for black people to define the scope and meaning of black existence in a white racist society.” It claims to speak to the issues that black people must contend with on a daily basis.

**§12-203. God.**—God is socially active, always taking the side of the poor and oppressed and against their oppressors. God is immanent and totally concerned with the concerns of oppressed people. Liberation theologians are usually utterly silent about God's transcendence, His nature (other than being on the side of the poor and oppressed), His attributes (other than His passion for social justice), His eternal program, and the like. Theology is about the concerns of the poor and oppressed and how God relates to changing those conditions.

Black theology emphatically insists that Christian concepts of the “white man's God” should be disregarded or ignored. God's person, the Trinity, His supreme power and authority, etc., do not relate, or are even antagonistic, to the black experience. The Trinity is a non-subject. All these so-called truths are subtle indications of God's white maleness. For black theology, the dominant perspective on God is God in action, delivering the oppressed because of His righteousness. His immanence is stressed and, as a result, God is seen to be in flux, always changing.

**§12-204. Christ.**—Jesus is something of a political Messiah. He is God entering the struggle for social justice. He is not the Savior in the traditional sense. He did not die as a substitutionary atonement for human sin. Divine wrath does not exist against sin in general, but only against the oppression of the poor. The atonement, when even mentioned, is one of moral influence on human beings.

For black theology, Jesus is God, but in the sense of being God's visible expression of concern and of social deliverance. Christ is the One who works for social deliverance. He is the liberator, whose work for the emancipation of the poor and oppressed and His rejection by society, is parallel to the black quest for liberation. Christ's essential message is one of empowerment; in this context, of black power. Christ's essential nature and spiritual activity receives little or no attention. In some circles, His atoning sacrifice for the world's sins and His provision of eternal life is denied. Black theology is about tangible deliverance from social oppression now, not from spiritual oppression bye and bye.

**§12-205. Holy Spirit.**—The Holy Spirit is virtually absent in Liberation thought. The Spirit doesn't seem to have a role in human-centered political action.

**§12-206. Revelation.**—The Bible is not a book of eternal truths or a revelation from God. It is the story of a people in a series of often inaccurate accounts. However, a number of these texts, particularly from the Exodus account of the deliverance of Israel from their oppression by the Egyptians, are used to support this theology of the liberation of oppressed peoples. The Bible is used as an ethical exhortation to achieve the social and political ends of the liberation movement.

For black theology, the literal sense of the Bible is not binding. Revelation is seen and used in a

pragmatic sense. The experience of black oppression and deliverance from that oppression is the authoritative standard for thinking and action.

**§12-207. Salvation.**—Salvation is viewed as societal social change where justice for the poor and oppressed is established. In some liberation circles, any method of achieving this, even violence and revolution, is acceptable. Evangelism, if the word is even used, is the effort to create awareness to prepare people for social and political action.

In black theological thinking, salvation is freedom from oppression and pertains to the black experience in this life. The political and social aspects of salvation or deliverance is what matters. Salvation is physical liberation from white oppression rather than freedom from humanity's sinful nature and one's own sinful culpability. Black theology is not interested in heaven. That other worldly concern is seen as an attempt to dissuade black people from real liberation now.

**§12-208. Church.**—The Church is an agency to provide the means for changing society. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow from theological premises, but is an endeavor to be part of the social and political change through which the world is transformed.

The black church is the focus of social expression in the black community where black people can express freedom and equality. Church and politics are a cohesive whole, expressing the desire for, and drive toward, social freedom.

### C. Contemporary setting—

**§12-301. In general.**—The practical outworking of liberationist thought is in social activism. It is characterized by socialist and Marxist orientation. If there is a church association, it is not the kind of connection one normally associates with ecclesial organization. Below is a list of movements associated with liberation thinking:

- Catholic Workers Movement;
- Christians for Socialism;
- Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador;
- FSLN in Nicaragua—FSLN is Spanish for Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (e.g. Sandinista National Liberation Front);
- Landless Workers Movement (Brazil);
- Lavalas (Haiti);
- Liberationist Methodist Connexion;
- Movement of Priests for the Third World (Argentina).

### §12-302. Critique.—

- Many have found the Marxist association of liberation thought as compromising the Christian identity of the tradition and as having a socio-political (and potentially violent revolutionary) life of its own.
- Liberation theologies, in all forms, presents a profound hermeneutical question. Scripture becomes a tool to advance a cause rather than the Word of God with a coherent and encompassing message addressed to humanity.
- Liberation thought is so weighted to structural social issues that one wonders what place there is

- for personal repentance and faith.
- How can Orthopraxis precede orthodoxy? The truth is that there is an a priori to this call for action and its an ideologically driven one, rather than a biblically driven one.

#### **D. Observations and concluding thoughts—**

**§12-401. In general.**—Liberationists, by emphasizing context in which theology is done, operate from a perspective quite different than that of traditional theologians. Some have argued that it devolves into non-theology. It's really not about God at all, but about people's immediate social and economic concerns, be that in fulfillment or survival mode. Others assert that liberationists' concern to take biblical themes of justice and righteousness seriously has made them important forces in Christian practice.

**§12-402. Hermeneutics.**—Liberation theologies, in all forms, present a profound hermeneutical question. Bringing one's burning issues to the table and engaging in a dialogue with Scripture is indeed legitimate but there is danger here. First, the burning issue can become a procrustean bed, and all biblical texts not addressing the issue are cut off and left on the floor. Scripture becomes a tool to advance a cause rather than the Word of God with a coherent and encompassing message addressed to humanity. Liberation theologies of all stripes look for Scriptural texts and stories that mesh with their agenda. In so doing, they establish a canon within the canon, which becomes the controlling factor in their theology. The theologians hear what they want to hear rather than being confronted with the “whole counsel of God”.

**§12-403. The place Marxism plays in liberation thought.**—Liberation theologians have concluded that capitalism is inherently evil and Marxist socialism good. A key tenet of Marxist analysis is that of economic alienation, which is tied to Marx's view of the person as a self-creation through his or her work, rather than the creation of God. The tools used in the theological reflection often have a way of directing the conclusion. Many have found the Marxist association of liberation thought as compromising the Christian identity of the tradition and as having a socio-political (and potentially violent revolutionary) life of its own.

**§12-404. Practice precedes reflection in liberation thought.**—How can one have the right practice or action if one does not have a prior view of what is in fact right? Human ideology rather than Scripture becomes the ultimate norm. Right praxis ultimately depends on right thinking. Orthodoxy must precede orthodoxy.

**§12-405. Structural social issues predominant.**—One wonders if God does indeed exist outside of the historical now, if sin is anything more than oppressive structures, and if salvation has dimensions beyond participation in liberation. Is salvation anything other than social action on behalf of the socioeconomic benefit of the poor?

**§12-406. Black Theology; elevation of the black experience to being the final norm.**—We noted the problem of ethnocentrism above. In addition, there is the elevation of the black experience to being the final norm. Classical liberation had a similar problem of making human experience the ultimate norm. But with black theology, universal human experience is replaced with a much narrower one, the black experience of oppression.

**§12-407. Feminist Theology roots authority in feminist consciousness.**—Here, authority is rooted in feminist consciousness. Feminism is critical of the culture, but has no vehicle for self-criticism. One commentator observes: “When a theology becomes consciously ideological, as in some forms of feminist and liberation theologies, it is bound to lose sight of the transcendent divine criterion, the living Word of God, by which a theology can determine the validity of its social valuations.” Feminist theologians use the term “Christian” to mean whatever liberates women. That use leads straight to a relativism determined by one's own notions of what promotes the self-determined agenda. In addition, feminism has a proclivity to assume that hierarchy is patriarchy and inherently evil. Thus, referring to God as Father or as “he” becomes something of a critical issue sometimes leading feminists to identifying God or the goddess in some instances with the created order. Worshipers of the mother goddess are ultimately worshiping creation and themselves, rather than God.

## XIII. Concluding Observations and Thoughts

### A. Fragmentation and the quest for theological coherence

**§13-101. In general.**—At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal Protestant theology was triumphantly proclaiming itself a new kind of Christian theology for the new century announcing itself in works like von Harnack's *What is Christianity*. The two basic tenets of liberal theology were:

- the necessity of reconstructing Christian thought in light of modern culture, philosophy, and science; and
- the necessity of discovering Christianity's true essence apart from layers of traditional dogma that were either no longer relevant or believable in light of modern thought.

Reactions to this came from fundamentalism and neo-orthodoxy. The fundamentalists were committed to an intense form of orthodox traditionalism that strongly opposed modernism. They placed a strong emphasis on the inerrancy and literal truth of the biblical record and the falseness of modern skepticism, evolutionary science, and modern philosophy.

Neo-orthodoxy also opposed classical liberalism. They were willing to adjust some aspects of Christianity to modern thought, but they believed that liberalism had accommodated modernity too radically. H. Richard Niebuhr famously characterized this too radical accommodation: "A God without wrath brought [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a cross". In the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new "special interest theologies" sprang up. Various contextual, liberation theologies populate the landscape of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: black theology, feminist theology, Latin theology among others.

**§13-102. Watersheds among Protestants.**—One way of reading Protestant traditions after the Reformation is to delineate two great watersheds:

- Monergism and synergism (Calvinism vs. Arminianism). Most scholastic types remained monergists in the Augustinian-Calvinist mold. Protestant synergists protest this monergist exclusiveness. The divide was well-illustrated by the split between John Wesley and George Whitefield over predestination;
- The second divide is over the proper authority for Christian belief. For centuries, Protestants affirmed the principle of *sola scriptura* while using tradition and experience as tools of biblical interpretation. With the Enlightenment came the religious rationalists, claiming to be Protestant Christians of a "higher order". Modernity or the spirit of the age (*zeitgeist*) became the touchstone of truth, alongside, if not superior to, Scripture and tradition. Some developed as alternatives outside Protestantism. Unitarianism and Transcendentalism are examples. Many remained within the Protestant mainstream while becoming thoroughly modern and acknowledging the claims of modernity in attempting to transform Protestantism by reconstructing theology from the assumptions of modernity. This was the project of classical Liberalism.

**§13-103. Contemporary theology struggles with diversity.**—The tremendous diversity in contemporary Christian thinking draws different reactions. Some demand theology to be unified in order to be authentically Christian. They tend to forget that for a millennium and more, Christian theology was more or less unified by coercion. Others relish the diversity and seem to think that it

represents, in and of itself, a positive, almost utopian, development. They resist attempts to discover or even encourage unity as a new totalitarianism. For them, all meta-narratives (their term for overarching, integrating story) are necessarily totalizing. These meta-narratives silence the stories of the weak and marginalized and impose those of the strong and powerful. Perhaps these folks need to be reminded that anything that is consistent with everything is rather meaningless.

## B. Candidates for coherence

**§13-111. In general.**—In this cacophony of voices, a number of Protestant Christian theologies or movements have emerged in our time claiming kinship with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the apostolic witness to Him in the New Testament, and great Christian tradition through the ages. We will conclude by discussing four candidates for theological coherence jousting for popular hearing.

**§13-112. Evangelical theology.**—*Evangelical* has been used in various ways since the Reformation. It simply means “of the good news” or “gospel based”. The early Reformers used it as a synonym for “Protestant” as opposed to Roman Catholic. In our time, it is used in church or denominational names as a signal that the group means to base their teachings on an historically orthodox approach to the gospel. In various denominational settings, that takes on a particular hue. For example, in the Church of England, *evangelical* came to mean those who wanted to emphasize the Protestant aspects of the via media of Anglicanism. In addition, they tended to oppose certain teachings, like baptismal regeneration and support other activities like revivalism. Another use of the term arose across denominational lines is opposition to liberalism. Early fundamentalists were occasionally called evangelicals.

As fundamentalists grew ever more narrow and combative, many conservative Protestants wanted to distance themselves from that movement yet remain orthodox Protestants. These new evangelicals agreed with fundamentalists on the supernatural inspiration of the Bible, on the doctrinal particulars articulated in creeds like the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, on the need for conversion, an earnest piety, and the rejection of baptismal regeneration and universalism. However, they parted company with fundamentalists for their divisiveness over relatively minor doctrinal and church practice issues, over opposition to evolution in any and all forms, over litmus tests like verbal plenary inspiration, biblical inerrancy, premillennial eschatology, and various practices of separation. These new or post-fundamental evangelicals tended to blend pietism and orthodoxy with a dash of revivalism for good measure.

In our day, the evangelical coalition, if I can call it that, has at least two wings. One emphasizes Protestant orthodoxy, and tends to be suspicious and even critical of evangelism, revivalism, and pietistic spirituality. The other is their more experiential kin, who tend to be critical of their orthodox partners for an allegedly one-sided emphasis on the doctrinal content of the faith to the neglect of the rich spiritual experience and practical Christian living. The focus of the first group is the correct statement of the faith as the enduring essence of evangelical Christianity. The focus of the second group is authentic experience, including regeneration and sanctified living as the touchstone of evangelicalism. Their emphases may be somewhat different, but these groupings have much in common:

- Belief in God's transcendence and supernatural activity;
- Jesus Christ as the crucified Savior and Lord of all;
- Divinely inspired Bible as the norm for faith and practice;

- Conversion as the only authentic initiation into salvation;
- the necessity of taking the gospel to all people.

A major concern is whether Pentecostalism will be fully integrated into evangelicalism. Pentecostalism is exploding in the Global South. Will this movement settle contentedly in the experiential side of evangelicalism or veer off in some other direction (e.g. liberation thought, or in an ever growing cacophony of “prophetic” voices).

**§13-113. Process thought.**—Classical liberalism used philosophy as a valued and equal (some would claim superior) partner to revelation in the theological endeavor. Process theology follows along in that vein. It is an attempt to reconstruct the doctrine of God and all theology to be more in tune to modern beliefs about the nature of the world. They found this in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Modern thought about being is not static, but focused on everything being related to something else. Process thought replaces ancient philosophy's concern for being and chains of being with becoming and understanding reality as occasions of experience. Reality is a series of happenings rather than a great chain of being. Process theologians think that Christian thought needs to shed its outdated metaphysic of timeless and changeless perfection (of God) and reconstruct its understanding in a way that is viable in the modern world that places becoming above being.

God is understood as a great cosmic organizing principle. He is neither omnipotent or timeless. He both contains the world and is contained in it. He evolves with the world and is under its influence. God is bipolar. In His primordial pole, God's character consists of continuing ideals yet to be achieved. In this pole, He is abstract and potential rather than concrete and actual. In God's consequent pole, His actual lived experience is constantly changing. Here, the condition of the world affects Him and even constitutes His concrete existence. Likewise, God affects the world, feeding into it the ideals of His primordial nature, luring the world's actual occasions of experience to achieve the ideals of God's primordial nature in order to enhance harmony, beauty, and enjoyment.

Process thought attempts to move Christian theology from classical Christian theism.

- Instead of God's transcendence, they emphasize His immanence in the world. Instead of His absoluteness, they stress His personal nature.
- They reject monergism and any depiction of God's work in the world as coercive. God never forces anything; He persuades and influences. While traditional theology asserts that people proposes, but God disposes, process thinkers argue that God proposes and people dispose.
- They are naturalistic. Process thinking rejects the idea that there are supernatural interventions by divine power in the natural order.

Process theology is a uniquely 20<sup>th</sup> century version of liberal Protestant theology. It is highlighted by people like Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb. The United Methodist related Claremont School of Theology in California has become a center of process thought. Some of its appeal is its answer to the problem of evil. God is seen as “the fellow sufferer who understands”. He is the one who never coerces. He cannot coerce actual entities (meaning people) or societies of them to do good rather than evil.

The God of process thought would seem incapable of most of things proclaimed by classical Christian theology, including His creative and redemptive activity. The Process God did not create the world in

some beginning occasion. The world is God's body and He is its soul or mind. The two are always inseparable and interdependent. As for Christian eschatology, in process thought, God will never overcome the resistance to His vision of good. His activity is persuasive only.

**§13-114. Liberation thought.**—In the 1970s, groups of people in North and South America, seeing themselves as socially, economically, or politically oppressed, began to develop theologies of liberation. In North America, black theologians focused on the problem of racism and interpreted salvation as including (some would say as in being equivalent to) the liberation of African Americans from racial prejudice and exclusion. In addition, in the 1970s and 1980s, North American feminist theologians focused on the problem of sexism and patriarchy in both church and society. In Latin America, both Catholic and Protestant theologians began reflecting on extreme poverty and economic injustice. They increasingly interpreted salvation as abolishing structural poverty and unjust political orders.

All these liberation thinkers asserted that God is on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden and that people seeking salvation cannot remain neutral in the situation of racial, sexual, or economic oppression.

- They also agree that theology is not universally applicable salvation nor socially and political neutral. Theology must be contextualized in each and every socio-cultural situation (me/mine or we/our concerns) and made concrete (here and now reforms) that show forth justice in specific situations. Theology is not so much concerned with orthodoxy (right doctrine) but orthopraxy (right action). They tend to think of theology in historical and social ways and not individually. In this, they have a strong kinship with yesteryear's social gospel movement.
- Secondly, they agree that God is on the side of the oppressed and that the oppressed have special insight into God's will (the epistemological privilege of the poor).
- Third, they agree that Christian mission includes (some would assert consists of) participation by churches in political activism in liberation causes, whether from racism, sexism, or economic, social, and political oppression.

Primary liberation thinkers include James Cone (1939-2018), often considered the father of black theology, Gustavo Gutierrez (1928-), considered the seminal thinker of Latin liberation thought, and Rosemary Reuther (1936-), a leading voice in feminist theology. Liberation theology has sparked considerable controversy. Many critics reject their political activism and accuse them of dividing the church between men and women, rich and poor, and whites and blacks and of short-sheeting the theological endeavor to their own particular situation. They are accused of summoning God (and limiting Him) to their particular situation and their political, social, and economic beck and call.

These theologies vary widely, but have a number of common characteristics:

- They reject classical liberalism, seeing it as an expression of a particular time, culture, and social situation (isn't that exactly what they're doing?);
- There is a strong eschatological element in these theologies;
- The thought is radically incarnational. They see in Jesus Christ the heart of the Christian faith, but also draw on the doctrine of the incarnation to grapple with the nature of God's action in the world;
- There is a strong ecumenical emphasis;
- They attempt to reconstruct the entirety of theology from the perspective of their particular

concrete situation (social justice, Christianity and culture, women's rights, etc.).

**§13-115. Eschatological hope.**—Jurgen Moltmann and Christian Pannenberg stimulated a new interest in and appreciation for eschatological realism in mainstream Christian theology. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, belief in the coming kingdom of God on earth was relegated to mythology by liberal and neo-orthodox thinkers. When liberals spoke of the kingdom of God they meant a human social order rather than a literal return of Jesus Christ and the inauguration of His future reign. To speak of Christ's return smacked of a fundamentalist obsession that was dismissed by erudite moderns. Moltmann and Pannenberg sought to recover realistic eschatology wholly apart from fundamental speculation. Moltmann placed the kingdom of God at the center of his theological reflections and avoided identifying it with liberal notions of the perfection of human society. For Moltmann, history must end in God and Jesus Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of that.

For Pannenberg, God exists fully in and for Himself in all eternity, but for the world God exists in the future and presently only as the power of His lordship breaking into history. God actualizes Himself in and through world history without becoming dependent on it. In our finite, human experience, God appears to be “not yet” in that His lordship is future.

Eschatological theology seems to be a new paradigm for thinking about God-world relationship. Once God created the world and given it freedom, He must work with it without dominating it. Evil, like the Holocaust, happen because the world is not yet God's kingdom. God gives human history its own freedom and struggles with it and in it from His own powerful, futurity in the lure of love. God sends Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit into the world from the future to demonstrate His love and release spiritual forces of anticipation into human history. In the end, God will come to the world and cancel out all sin and evil and make it His own.

### C. Cacophony or Choir?

**§13-116. In general.**—Some see the pluralism of the contemporary theological scene and celebrate it. The margins are moving to the center or at least on the page. Others see the vacuousness of many “radical” theologies and think that they can hardly be considered “Christian” at all. Lacking from the scene is an overarching theme (or meta-narrative in our modern yak) which could serve to reunify contemporary theology. Is it a cacophony which some celebrate as a joyful noise while others cover their eyes and wince? Or will be prove to be a conceptual blending, bringing a chorus out of the cacophony and a blended choir out of the confusion?