

Appendix B—Protestant Christian Traditions

Part 2 Takeaways

Introduction—The groups we studied in part 1 of this course emerged as separate denominations or movements. The groups in this second part of the course did have the effect of birthing new denominations and movements, but largely played within the existing structure of Protestantism. They had a tremendous effect on those existing denominations. In some ways they enhanced points of unity. However, to a large measure, they became sources of fragmentation.

Dispensationalism—

Bible exposition/literal interpretation—Dispensationalism has asserted the primacy of Scripture and has focused on Bible teaching ministries helping regular folks understand the Scripture. There is an emphasis on a literal hermeneutic, which initially played out in some parts of the dispensational community in simplistic stances pitting the Bible against all other claims of understanding. Dispensationalism generally has moved beyond a naive literalism to a more consistent application of the historical, grammatical method of interpretation.

Dispensations/rightly dividing the Word of truth—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. The most commonly recognized system of dispensations 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 a proper understanding in this scheme. Practically speaking, the entire Old Testament was given to Israel and the majority of it applies to that period of divine administration focused on Law. The bulk of the New Testament was given to the church and is governed by the dispensation of the church age.

Israel & Church—The distinction between Israel and the Church is the central idea of dispensational End Times teaching. Early dispensationalists believed there were two separate and distinct peoples of God, each with their own eternal sphere. 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.

End Times teaching & function of Christian hope—Dispensationalism's focus on eschatology (End Times teaching) 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. However, that latter reality was primarily a legacy of fundamentalism, of which dispensationalists were a part, but only a part.

Local church/Ecumenical player on conservative end—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 20th 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. Darby and many early dispensationalists saw what they perceived to be apostasy in many of the denominations of their day. Darby developed a distinct understanding of the church. He did not think the church should be identified with any institution, but was a spiritual fellowship. That de-emphasis on the institutional aspects of the local church had the effect of neglecting any number of pastoral concerns. As dispensationalism matured and grew, those 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, its “body life”, and the need to encourage and build up one another emerged in dispensational teaching.

Impact on American evangelical scene—Dispensationalism has become very popular with American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, especially among nondenominational Bible churches, Baptists, and, in its eschatology, among Pentecostal and charismatic groups. There is not a substantial dispensational presence in mainline churches. Community and Bible churches are the most common ecclesiastical affiliations of dispensationalists. Dispensationalism 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.

Its 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.

Pentecostals and Charismatics—

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 speaking in tongues and gifts of 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 (e.g. dispensational) premillennialism.

Needed emphasis on the Holy Spirit—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. The emphasis on the Spirit's work and his distribution of spiritual gifts has caused disruption in Protestant denominations. However, it has also flagged a neglect of the Spirit in Protestant teaching and practice.

Sanctification—Most Pentecostals find their heritage in the Wesleyan holiness tradition or in movements heavily influenced by that view of sanctification. As a reminder, the Wesleyan tradition taught the view of entire sanctification or a version of spiritual perfectionism. I am not of that view. I am in accord with the general Protestant view of a gradual sanctification in this life that will be completed in glory. However, that gradualism in Protestant circles of today sometimes seems quite complacent.

The earnest commitment of many Pentecostals, whether they be second work of grace people or third work of grace people, brings a needed emphasis on a sanctified lifestyle. They should serve as a spur to our own commitment to “go on to maturity”.

Praise as getting faith airborne—My experience in Pentecostal settings has been a wonderful rich one in praising God. Too often in my own experience, I go too quickly to my concerns or to the concerns of a community that I'm involved with and neglect and short-sheet praise to God. Sustained and heartfelt praise is what often gets our faith airborne. We start afresh in seeing almighty God for who He is and begin to place our concerns in their proper perspective. Pentecostals, with their emphasis on praising God, have much to teach their evangelical cousins.

Too much attention to mystical manifestations—Pentecostals emphasize experience. The stress placed on the gifts of the Spirit, particularly speaking in tongues and healing, tend to highlight the spectacular gifts over the others. Pentecostals are generally committed to *sola scriptura* as a concept and to being servants of the Lord. However, they sometimes struggle to overcome the temptation to elevate spiritual experience to the same level of authority as the Bible and deem the flashy spiritual gifts as more important than the others.

Speaking in tongues—Pentecostal believers "speak in tongues", a vocal phenomenon believed by Pentecostals to include an endless variety of languages. These languages may be an unlearned human language, such as happened on the Day of Pentecost, or it might be of heavenly tongue of angelic origin.

Within Pentecostalism, there is a belief that speaking in tongues serves two functions. First, tongues serves as the *initial evidence* of the second or third work of grace, the baptism by the Holy Spirit,

and in individual prayer. 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".

Second, besides acting as a prayer language, tongues also function as a spiritual gift. 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".

Prophetic voice vs Montanus waywardness—Pentecostals understand Scripture as inspired, the final, fully trustworthy rule of faith. The heralds of that Word need to speak forcefully to the situations in the Church finds itself. The “prophetic voice” is that which takes on the unpopular theme that the Church is neglecting and deliberately “meddles”. That is, it insists that the people of God develop ears to hear instruction they have been neglecting to obey.

However, more than a few Pentecostal 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. This is particularly a phenomenon of concern in the Global South today.

The Church may be revisiting the Montanus controversy of the Second century of our era. Montanus was a preacher claiming to have new and unverified revelations from God. He wasn't denying the Word so much as ignoring it because the new revelations seemed so much more interesting and provided him with so much more clout.

Avoiding trinitarian foibles—In the early 1900s, 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 in 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.

Health and wealth—This is a danger in preaching that is broader than just in Pentecostalism, but it does seem to be particularly a problem in Pentecostalism. The assumption is that God wants us to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Well, at least healthy and wealthy. This has gained a large hearing in materialistic America as well as in the destitute regions of the Global South.

Prosperity theology is a particularly controversial doctrine involving charismatic preachers and 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 material contribution to Christian

ministries. Pentecostal pastors adhering to prosperity theology have been criticized by journalists for their lavish lifestyle and their overt commercialism.

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 growing 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.

Classical Liberalism—

Richard Niebuhr's characterization—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 20th century: “A God without wrath brought [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

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 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.

Lack of doctrine of personal sin; insight to corporate nature of sin—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, societal evils and social structures were the target. As a result, personal 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.

Rise and effects of biblical criticism—Liberals made a wholesale assault on the *sola scriptura* foundation of 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 in both scholarly and worshiping communities.

Loss of uniqueness of Christ; search for historical Jesus and the great reversal—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, 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 contemporary liberal 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.

Social activism as “kingdom politics”—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 secular political systems, often making these agendas indistinguishable.

Neo-Orthodoxy—Neo-Orthodoxy made a number of contributions moving towards traditional orthodoxy in their critique of classical liberalism.

Transcendence of God—Karl Barth once said “You cannot speak about God by speaking about man in a loud voice”. God is the wholly other, absolutely transcendent. This flew in the face of the prevailing liberalism of the day that focused on God's immanence in the world almost to the exclusion of his transcendence. Barth went so far as to deny natural revelation. In that denial, he went beyond the biblical witness. It has been quipped that, for Barth, God got lost in outer space!

Reality & depth of sin—Neo-Orthodox dons rejected liberal denials 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.

Centrality of Christ—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. However, there were a number of other ways that Neo-Orthodoxy went in a different direction than traditional orthodoxy—

Truncated understanding of revelation—Neo-Orthodoxy rejected the traditional Protestant understanding of revelation as propositional and opted for an existential understanding of revelation in personal encounter. For Neo-Orthodoxy, the Bible serves as a witness to revelation, a sort of literary burning bush, if you will. God revealed Himself to the authors of Scripture, as he did to Moses at the burning bush, who then recorded their encounters with Him. Reading these recorded encounters can

and often does serve as an occasion for the reader's own encounter with God.

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. They deny that the Bible is inerrant and assert that such a belief falls 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 in personal encounter.

The Neo-Orthodox understanding of the Scripture was an attempt to steer a course between the liberal view of the text as 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.

Implicit universalism—An implicit universalism based on the radically objective idea of the atonement runs through Neo-Orthodox thinking, at least that of Barth. Thus, for example in Romans 5, the analogy between Adam and Christ works this way—all fell in Adam and all are redeemed in Christ.

Existentialism as theological carrier—As Neo-Orthodoxy progressed, theology seemed to become the handmaiden of philosophy rather than vice-versa. Neo-Orthodoxy is heavily contextualized in existentialism. It arose in the portion of the 20th century that was existentialism's heyday and it, as a theological school, reflects that reality. This was particularly problematical when such theologians as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich seemed overly infatuated with the atheistic existentialism of Martin Heidegger.

Liberation Theology—

Group anthropology rather than theology—My candid take on liberation or contextual theology is that it is postmodern anthropology dressed up in theological garb. It starts with a social and very ideological agenda and aims to implement that agenda with the Bible (and God himself) as tools to accomplish the desired result. Its presuppositions are decidedly postmodern.

Postmodernism is, in essence, an anti-worldview. Large scale theoretical interpretations of reality capable of universal application don't exist according to this view. Worldviews claiming to be foundational to understanding reality are oppressive structures implemented by the dominant cultural group. There is a vital need to deconstruct ideas of reality based on these constructs. Reality is whatever individuals or communities make it out to be. Basic tenets include:

- ***Truth, meaning, and morality do not exist objectively***—They are constructs of individuals and/or communities. What constitutes truth is relative to the individual or community holding the belief.
- ***Cultural forces completely shape individuals***—Culture determines who we are; language determines how and what we think. This is neither right nor wrong; all cultures and language forms and patterns are equally valid. There is no objective truth and all human practices are reducible to cultural or linguistic patterns that are not themselves either right or wrong.
- ***Individual identity undermined***—Postmodernism sees people as existing primarily as members of groups. The idea of American individualism is an illusion, a mere creation of the middle class

cultural values of independence and introspection. Identity is primarily collective and group identity sets an individual's plate. Thus, under the mantra of "diversity", what really emerges is a new tribalism.

- ***Humanism undermined***—There is no universal humanity; each culture constitutes its own reality. Traditional humanistic values or values derived from an understanding of human beings as created in the image of God and charged with a cultural mandate with respect to the created order are really canons of exclusion and oppression of the natural environment. Groups must empower themselves to assert their own values and take their place with other planetary species.
- ***Transcendence rejected***—There are no absolutes and even if there were, we would have no access to them. We are bound to our culture and circumscribed by our language. Society is not subject to overreaching moral law, it makes its own law. Moral values are simply expressions of preference and power.
- ***Reason undermined; objective truth undermined***—Reason and objective truth are illusions, masks for cultural power games. Postmodernism not only rejects the possibility of any worldview ("metanarrative" in postmodern terms) but also in any belief in coherence itself. Belief in a worldview that is foundational to reality and providing an integrating coherence is seen as inherently oppressive.
- ***Power games are what it's all about***—All human institutions and relationships, all moral values, all human creative endeavor are just expressions and masks for the desire for control. There is no truth, value, or overriding concern other than what certain cultural groups assert. Reduced to its essence, it involves the inner drive to get what you want and to overcome the oppression of others.
- ***Deconstruction of the present reality is a necessary step***—Modern society, with its rationalism, order, and unitary concept of truth, must be replaced by a true cultural pluralism. Society must be segmented into its constituent groups for this to happen. Paradigms of the past must be dismantled and previously marginal groups brought to center stage.

Practice (orthoproxy) precedes reflection (orthodoxy)—This became the mantra as liberation theology burst onto the scene in the 1970s and afterwards. We want action not a bunch of yak. It stokes the idealistic fires of youth. But how can one have right practice if one does not have a prior view of what is in fact right? Right praxis ultimately depends on right thinking. If orthodoxy does not precede orthoproxy, then all we'll doing is substituting our own ideology for bibliology. The basis for action is whatever the group says it is, rather than what God says it is. Indeed, the group punts altogether on hearing a coherent word from God.

Identifying dehumanizing structures—Racism, sexism, and oppressive economic structures present issues that parts of the Church have lived too comfortably with for far too long. Liberation theology does traditionalism the favor of making it face this reality. However, the framework of analysis offered by liberation thought is very seriously flawed and can lead to revolutionary and destructive results. In addition, the conceptual framework out of which liberation thought operates insulates the critic from any return serve criticism. Vulnerable interactive dialogue is destroyed and cultural criticism frequently becomes a sanctimonious harangue.

Hermeneutical challenge—Liberation theologies, in all forms, presents 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 an all-defining filter, and all biblical texts not addressing the issue are discarded and left aside. 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.

Structural social issues predominant—Liberation thought is so weighted to structural social issues that one wonders what place there is for personal repentance and faith.

Marxist economics—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 theologians, particularly of Latin America, have concluded that capitalism is inherently evil and Marxist socialism good. A key tenet of Marxist analysis is Marx's view of the person as a self-creation through his or her work, rather than the creation of God. Thus, economic alienation rather than human rebellion and personal sin, is the essential problem. Christian thought would see economic alienation as a structural effect of human waywardness that must be addressed, but not in ways that ignore the deeper issues of our waywardness. The tools used in theological reflection often have a way of directing or misdirecting the conclusions.

Cultural group experience as normative—This is another way of saying that liberation or contextual theology is really an exercise in group anthropology rather than in theology. Latin American liberation thought, black theology, feminist theology, and Asian liberation thought all start and end in the particular group's situation, concerns, and activist agenda. Each group seems to implode in ethnocentric thinking.

Fragmentation or Coherence—

Sources of fragmentation—Major sources of fragmentation in modern theology include—

Monergist-synergist divide—Monergism is the view which holds that God works to bring about an individual's salvation through spiritual regeneration, regardless of the individual's cooperation. In order for salvation to be completely of grace, monergists argue that the gift of salvation must not be freely or contingently received. Monergism contrasts with synergism, the belief that God and individuals cooperate to bring individuals salvation. This played out in The Calvinist/Arminian divide that can be seen throughout Protestantism and to some extent in the tensions between scholastic rationalism and Pietism.

Classical liberalism-traditionalism divide—At the dawn of the 20th 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 vehemently opposed modernism. They placed a strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the historicity of the biblical record, and the falseness of sophisticated 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.

Contextual theologies in postmodern environment—In the final decades of the 20th century, new “special interest theologies” sprang up. Various contextual, liberation theologies populate the landscape of the late 20th century: black theology, feminist theology, Latin and Asian liberation theology among others. These theologies have radically shifted the conceptual focus of theology away from the self-revelation of God to those created in His image and enabled by Him to understand that revelation. The shift is to an endeavor beginning and ending with the particular human situations of those engaging in “theological” reflection.

Candidates for coherence—Possible candidates around which Christians may unite include—

Evangelicalism—My candidate of choice. Traditional orthodoxy cohering around the ancient creeds and choosing to “major on the majors”. The spirit is to look for points of agreement to unite around rather than points of difference to debate.

Process thinking—I really think this is too ethereal to be a serious candidate. This is a highly philosophical system that seriously diverges from traditional orthodoxy.

Liberation thought—Christianity rewritten as group anthropology in a postmodern mode. I don't think this is a theological integrator because it really isn't theology at all. However, this will be a persistent viewpoint for the foreseeable future with tremendous implications for American Christianity and for the Global South.

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