

Challenging Why We Believe:
***How the Churches Are Redefining
the Christian Faith***

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Letting Go: *Liberal Christianity Retreating from the Faith*

“I know what you are *against* — what are you *for*?”

-- Emile DeBecque (Rossano Brazzi), in *South Pacific* (1958)¹

Beginning about 250 years ago, liberalism -- a view of the Bible as a purely natural book that gutted Christianity of its historic beliefs -- began developing and growing in influence. Today it is culturally and politically the most influential form of Christianity, even as the actual membership in liberal churches continues to decline. Although theologians are beginning to speak about “postliberalism” and other theologies supposedly departing from liberalism, in reality such approaches to the Bible assume the general validity of the liberal paradigm.

Liberalism has many facets, but for the purpose of this chapter we will focus on the following defining distinctives of the liberal tradition. (1) A “literal” approach to the Bible

is rejected. (2) The miraculous or supernatural aspects of the biblical history are denied or reinterpreted to fit a naturalistic world view. (3) The Bible is said to endorse an archaic and backward morality. We will consider each of these liberal claims in order.

Liberalism and Literalism

According to liberalism, “literalism” — interpreting the Bible literally — is dead. Ironically, liberals are typically unclear as to what it is they are rejecting and why.

Often, liberals criticize literal interpretation as if it were some new and strange way of reading the Bible invented by twentieth-century fundamentalists. John Shelby Spong, the liberal Episcopal bishop of Newark, for instance, maintains that fundamentalists are *abusing* the Bible by “literalizing” it.² It is often claimed by liberals that the fundamentalist view of the Bible as “literally” true is a novelty in history. Presumably, the error of “literalizing” would occur when a person interpreted a statement as literal that was not intended to be taken that way by its author. For example, to interpret the psalmist’s cry, “Praise him, sun and moon! Praise him, all stars of light!” (Ps. 148:3), to be a request for astronomical bodies to verbally honor God would be to take words literally that were meant *figuratively*. Of course, fundamentalists recognize that there are many such statements and expressions in the Bible, and they also warn against literalizing the Bible in this sense.

What liberals are really criticizing, and what in some cases they plainly admit to be criticizing, is the practice of reading the Bible in the traditional fashion. When orthodox and conservative Christians (“fundamentalist” or not) speak of taking the Bible literally, what they mean is to interpret the texts of the Bible according to ordinary canons of

interpretation — reading the words of the text in their proper literary and historical contexts. In this sense, to interpret the Bible “literally” means that one accepts its historical narratives as descriptions of actual past events and its statements about God as conveying meaningful truths about God’s nature, actions, and moral standards. For example, on this method one accepts the biblical assertions that Jesus really was born in Bethlehem, that he really did rise from the dead, that God really does know everything, that God really is in control of the number of hairs on our heads, and that God really does disapprove of adultery.

Interpreting the Bible “literally” in this way is said by many liberals to be a backward, unenlightened approach to the Bible. Obviously, this criticism is incompatible with the claim that taking the Bible literally is a modern novelty of American fundamentalism. On this view, it is liberalism that offers a new way of reading the Bible. The historical or factual claims of the biblical records and doctrines, we are told, simply cannot be believed today by modern, educated people. Besides, liberals say, whether the miracles of the Bible actually happened is completely unimportant and irrelevant. (Why, if this is so, liberals feel it important to call the Bible’s historicity and factuality into serious question is something of a mystery.) What is important is the underlying message, which must be found by peeling back the layers of miracles and other objectionable aspects of the text. (This peeling away is called *demythologization*.) In order to find anything of value in the Bible at all, they insist, then, we ought to give up on the “literal” meaning and look for a meaning that in some way goes “beyond” or “behind” the literal.

This call for the abandonment of the “literal” meaning of Scripture for a demythologized meaning has many problems, but one that is especially fatal. If the Bible is no longer believable as it was written and as it has been understood for millennia, then why try to hold onto it at all? Why not simply admit that they don’t believe the Bible and move on with their lives?

The problem is easier to see if we consider another book. No one today believes that Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (in which he developed the earth-centered view of the universe into a system that was not seriously challenged until Copernicus and Galileo) provides a true explanation of the movement of the heavenly bodies. While we may read Ptolemy for historical interest, we would never think of claiming to “believe” Ptolemy or of using his book as a textbook of astronomy.

Or, let’s consider another religious book. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (whose members are more popularly known as Mormons) have a book called the Book of Mormon which they regard as a collection of ancient prophetic writings originating from the pre-Columbian Americas. If I do not accept the Book of Mormon for what it claims to be, and for what Mormons throughout their history have claimed it to be, why should I claim to believe in the Book of Mormon at all? Why try to find some “positive value” in a book that I consider to be historically fraudulent?

The answer, of course, is that such efforts to salvage books we believe to be basically false make no sense. Why, then, would anybody do it? The answer is not hard to find. Some astronomers in the decades after Copernicus continued to use Ptolemy’s *Almagest* even though they knew its geocentric system was wrong because they were part of

an establishment that had not yet admitted that fact. A few Mormon scholars defend a “liberal” view of the Book of Mormon as a pious nineteenth-century fiction with valid religious insights because they can’t bring themselves to leave the Mormon church. Bishop Spong and many, many people like him stay in the mainline churches and develop their liberal reinterpretations of the Bible because they don’t wish to give up their positions of power and influence in the church.

The real question that must be answered is whether these liberals are right in claiming that the factual truth of the Bible cannot reasonably be affirmed. If they are right, then we should close up the churches or convert them into lecture halls (or maybe movie theaters). We should certainly not continue to “play church” if we no longer believe that the foundational beliefs of the church are true. On the other hand, if there is no sound basis for the liberal rejection of the Bible’s teachings, then we should insist that the church continue to uphold the Bible and to interpret it “literally” — and to ask those who reject the church’s beliefs to admit that openly and honestly.

Christianity — Without Miracles?

As has already been indicated, one of the main objections liberals have to a “literal” (that is, ordinary) interpretation of the Bible is that the Bible is full of accounts of miracles. Underlying liberal theories about the origins of the Bible and liberal reinterpretations of the Bible is the assumption that miracles are unbelievable.

The assumption has worked itself throughout the biblical scholarship of liberal seminaries and colleges throughout Christianity. The whole account of the Exodus, the

deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage to Egypt, is rejected, since it contains miracles from beginning to end (most notably the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea). The references to God speaking to the patriarchs and the prophets throughout the Old Testament cannot be allowed to stand. The miracles performed through Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Daniel, are viewed as legends. Isaiah's book is partitioned to circumvent his clear predictions of the Babylonian Exile and the return of the Jews. Daniel is dated in the second century BC rather than the sixth century BC because it too obviously predicts the rise of the Greeks. The first three Gospels are dated after AD 70 (or Mark perhaps just before that date) because in it Jesus predicted the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus is allowed to perform exorcisms and healings (since these can be explained as psychosomatic cures), but the Gospel accounts of Jesus walking on water, changing water into wine, feeding thousands of people with one boy's lunch, and similar miracles are interpreted in naturalistic terms or as later legends. His resurrection is interpreted as the ongoing life of his spirit or the embodiment of his ideals in his disciples. The book of Acts is dated as late in the first century as possible because (among other reasons) it reports such dramatic miracles through the apostles.

Why this systematic questioning of the miraculous in the Bible? Liberals rarely explain the reason in a straightforward manner, but it is very simple. The thinkers who pioneered this way of reading the Bible for the most part simply *did not believe in God*. I do not mean that they were all atheists — in fact, very few of them were — but that they did not believe in the kind of transcendent, all-powerful, Creator God of which the Bible speaks. They were mostly deists (according to whom there is a Creator but he does not or

cannot do miracles), although some of them were pantheists (according to whom God is a divine reality that undergirds or pervades the cosmos).

In short, the liberal reconstructions of biblical history and literature assume that the God of the Bible does not exist. This was the *premise* of the investigation, not its *conclusion*. A hundred years after liberalism gained control of most of the major theological institutions in the United States, the order has been forgotten. Liberals now sometimes appeal to their theories of two (or more!) Isaiahs, a second-century BC date for Daniel, the legendary development of the Gospels, and so forth, as evidence that the miracles of the Bible did not literally occur. But these theories in large measure were inspired by a disbelief in miracles and logically assume that miracles do not happen.

On the basis of this anti-supernatural presupposition, liberalism rejects not merely the occurrence of miracles per se but the whole world view and basic belief system of orthodox Christianity. We may again refer to Bishop Spong as an example. Spong claims to have discovered “that our central Christian affirmations make assumptions based upon a literalized view of the biblical narrative that are no longer believable.”³ The list of Christian affirmations Spong explicitly says are no longer believable is quite long:

- God as the creator distinct from the creation
- Adam as a special creation and historical figure
- The Devil as an actual entity
- The historical fall of humanity from innocence into sin
- Israel as ever having been God’s chosen people

- The doctrine of the Trinity
- Christ as preexisting in heaven before his human life
- Christ as the incarnation of God, as the God-man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Christ performed miracles
- The bodily resurrection of Christ
- The ascension of Christ
- The Atonement — Christ's death as delivering human beings from sin
- Salvation through faith in Christ alone
- Eternal punishment for the unbelieving or the wicked⁴

The obvious question is, what's left? Take all these doctrines away from Christianity, and you have nothing left that distinguishes Christianity from humanism. Indeed, at the end of his book Spong makes his adherence to humanism explicit:

Religion is but one more mask that insecure people put on to cover their sense of personal inadequacy. The call of Christ is an eternal call to the affirmation of what is. In the words of a popular commercial, it is a call to be all that one can be. . . . True Christianity ultimately issues in a deeper humanism. . . . To be a humanist is to affirm the sacredness of life.⁵

It is astonishing that this interpretation of the Christian message is endorsed by a bishop of an orthodox Christian denomination. Bishop Spong believes virtually nothing that he professed to affirm when he was ordained in the Episcopal church, whose ministers are required to uphold the creeds of the early church as well as the Episcopal church's own

quite orthodox confession. His beliefs are far, far closer to Buddhism or even secular humanism than to Christianity. So what is he doing in the church? And this question can be asked of thousands of ministers and professors in most of the mainline denominations today.⁶

Again, those who wish to reject Christian beliefs have the freedom to do so. But then they ought to be honest enough to admit that they aren't Christians.

Is Biblical Morality Out of Date?

Liberals regard much if not most of the Bible as unacceptable morally. They are scandalized by the biblical doctrine of eternal punishment, by the Old Testament claim that God commanded Israel to destroy the Canaanite peoples, by alleged anti-Semitism in the New Testament, by biblical toleration of slavery, and so forth. In short, they believe that we ought to regard ourselves as having advanced (or “evolved”) beyond the morality and spirituality of the Bible.

A complete refutation of these criticisms of the Bible is obviously beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, there are four important points that need to be made about the reasoning used by liberals in the course of making these criticisms.

First of all, liberals make their moral sensibilities the standard by which they judge the Bible. That is, they assume that their moral judgment is superior to that of the Bible. That would be all right if they had some other good reason to deny that the Bible was revelation from God. If there was no good evidence for the Bible's inspiration, or if there was substantial evidence against it, then there would be no reason to accept its moral

guidance. On the other hand, if there is good evidence that the Bible does communicate revelation from God, then it is hazardous to reject that evidence because of the Bible's moral standards. After all, one of the major claims made by the Bible is that our moral sensibility is out of whack — that we deceive ourselves in matters of right and wrong to justify our sinful desires. If there is good reason to believe the Bible is a revelation of God, it is irrational to set aside such evidence because the Bible doesn't agree with our preconceived notions of what is morally acceptable or proper.

The point can be put another way. Suppose the Bible is right and our inner moral compass is misaligned, as it were. If that were true, and if it were also true that in the Bible the God who made us tells us what is right and what is wrong, we would *expect* the Bible to disagree with our moral beliefs at least on some points. Unless we assume that our moral sensibility is perfect, we should be suspicious of any allegedly inspired book that merely confirms our own moral intuitions.

A second and directly related point is that liberals underestimate the moral and spiritual depravity of humanity. The liberal credo is that human beings are basically good, and it is on this basis that liberals reject much of the biblical revelation. For example, the doctrine of eternal punishment makes no sense if human beings are basically good — but it makes fine sense if fallen human beings are incorrigibly depraved and rebellious against God in their hearts apart from the transforming grace of God in Jesus Christ. God's command to destroy the Canaanites makes a lot of sense when you realize that the whole culture was permeated with such gross evils as bestiality and child sacrifice (which is also why the Israelites were repeatedly warned not to engage in such practices).

Third, liberals inconsistently appeal to those parts of biblical morality they like to criticize the parts they don't like. The ethical principle of the essential equality of the sexes and races, for example, was learned by the liberals from the Bible (e.g., Acts 17:26; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), and liberals will often quote such passages and pit them against those they imagine teach sexism or racism. Liberals almost invariably elevate love as the supreme ethical value and on that basis criticize Old Testament morality, quoting Jesus to back up their argument — but fail to notice that Jesus was *quoting the Old Testament* when he said that love of God and neighbor were the greatest commandments (Mark 12:29-31; cf. Deut. 6:4-5).

Finally, liberals fallaciously criticize biblical ethics by pointing to its abuses. This is perhaps one of the most common errors in the misinterpretation of biblical teachings. The use of passages in which God commanded Israel to kill Canaanites by people seeking to justify wars of aggression against neighboring nations is an obvious abuse of those passages. Never is anything said in the Old Testament that would encourage such a generalized application.

The fact that some white Southerners in the nineteenth century quoted the Bible to justify the enslavement of blacks does not mean that the Bible actually endorsed that practice. In fact, the Bible forbids kidnapping human beings as well as buying or selling stolen or kidnapped persons (Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). Thus, the Old Testament clearly condemns the slave trade in which African people were kidnapped from their homes and villages and sold in America.

Yet another example has to do with the alleged anti-Semitism of the New Testament. Virtually everything said about the Jews in the New Testament of a critical nature had some precedent in the Old Testament. All of the New Testament authors were Jewish except for Luke. The New Testament authors did blame the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus (along with the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate), but they do not encourage violence or hatred against the Jews. Indeed, the apostle Paul expressed deep dismay over their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah and instructed Gentile Christians to regard the Jews as beloved despite their opposition (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1-4; 11:28). Gentiles who use the New Testament as a pretext for their hatred and violence toward Jews (or anyone else, for that matter) are in clear violation of New Testament teaching.

Again, in some cases we may continue to puzzle over the reason for isolated statements or specific ethical teachings in the Bible that run against the grain of our own moral intuition — even for those of us who take biblical morality seriously. These difficulties remind us that our moral sense, even as Christians, remains imperfect, as does our knowledge of the Bible. But in general those who submit their minds and values to the Bible and accept its evaluation of the human condition find its moral teachings far superior to anything that human philosophies or other religions have devised.

The Challenge of Liberalism

The problem of liberalism has been complicated in our churches by the fact that it has gained acceptance in varying degrees. There are many mainline church members who accept some of the biblical miracles and some of the church's distinctive beliefs, but who

take an essentially liberal view of the Bible and who do not accept all of its historical and doctrinal claims. There are not two neatly divided camps with clearcut differences, but instead something more like a spectrum of views from thoroughly conservative and orthodox to thoroughly liberal and heretical. Thus, one of the ongoing challenges in the mainline churches as we enter the third millennium of the history of the church is to make the issues clear to the laity in the mainline churches. Many Christians simply do not understand what is at stake in the liberal revisionist interpretations of the Bible and of Christian faith.

Notes to Chapter 7: Letting Go

¹A Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II play and film.

²John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 3, 35, 64, 72, etc.

³*Ibid.*, 35.

⁴*Ibid.*, especially 17-20, 33-35, 81-82, 104-5, 123-33, 141-46, 180-83, 204-7, 217-24, 232-36, 241-42.

⁵*Ibid.*, 242.

⁶See further Robert M. Bowman, Jr., “A Summary Critique: *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*,” *Christian Research Journal* 14 (Fall 1991):36-38.

