

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 80

The Age Of Reason – Part 2

Last week, we got our toes wet in the Age of Reason and the effect of “rationalism” on the church. We discussed the emphasis on “reason” as the ultimate trump card for any belief system. It was a sometimes subtle (Locke) and sometimes blatant (Paine) shift from the orthodox view that the Word of God and the Spirit of God work to deliver and reveal truths to the “modern” view that reason and rational thought were the deciders of truth, both as to Scripture and life.

This is a third major thought system. The first we associate with Catholicism. The Catholic view set the Church as the authority for orthodoxy and life. The Church determined what was scripture and how scripture was understood. Hand in hand with this was the tradition of the church that taught and undergirded the church through historical wisdom and the Holy Spirit’s guidance. The Protestant Reformation followed a thought system that established Scripture alone as the basis for orthodoxy and belief. Tradition had dubious value and believers had their own opportunity and obligation to read scriptures (albeit to refuse to follow the teachings of the designated leaders was often criminal in certain areas!) So in the Reformation, we see Scripture as the ultimate authority rather than the church. In the Age of Reason, for many “modernists” Scripture is relegated to the backseat and reason becomes the driver. This third thought system sets out reason as the ultimate authority. It is often called “modern thinking.”¹

Like most every trend, there are those credited with “starting” the trend, even though the actual roots may be lost in obscurity. But, it is the students or successors to the “starters” that flesh out the thoughts and analysis and build the final structure associated with the belief system. It is worth remembering that the next generation will often take an idea that has careful limits and burst those limits by taking the idea to its logical conclusions. We will see that in this lesson.

So if last week we dabbled our toes in the effects of modern thought on the church, this week we dive headfirst. We do so by considering the lives and teachings of certain key personalities that have stirred particularly strong currents on issues of faith throughout the centuries of modern thought.

¹ While all such labels are helpful in a “macro” grouping ages of civilization into comprehensive chunks of understanding, the labels do not always function as well on a “micro” level. Still, we use them to follow consistent themes or undercurrents of thought that pervade our culture. Today, most recognize that since the 1960’s we live in yet another thought system or culture. It is labeled, appropriately, “post’ modernism,” but that is for another class!

JOHN LOCKE (1632-1704)

Last week, we mentioned John Locke and his decision to apply pure reason as a measuring yard to matters beyond simply science. Locke applied his emphasis on reason alone as a judgment card on matters of philosophy, politics, and faith. It is on the faith issue that we need to spend a bit more time.

Locke published his major religious work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, in 1695. In this work, Locke defends the basics of Christian belief to his readers on grounds that the beliefs are consistent with the best of modern rational thought. A number of readers were alarmed that Locke was comfortable, and even advocating, the use of reason as a means of measuring and defining the accuracy of Scripture and religious dogma. “Instead of natural reason serving as a tool in the hands of faith, for Locke it became the ultimate judge of revelation itself.”² This was bothersome in itself as it became the parent to many children who would use reason to analyze Scripture and the faith and come to very different conclusions. Even beyond Locke’s assertion that human reasoning alone (without the aid of God’s Spirit) can divine and judge God’s truth, there were more subtle issues seen in Locke’s work.

Locke’s writings neglected a number of Christian doctrines often to the point where those doctrines disappear. One is hard pressed to find any consideration by Locke of the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus. While Locke claimed to write a rationale justification of Christian belief, many church historians see Locke as turning religion into a matter of intellectual belief. Jesus is a Messiah in the sense of a unique prophet of God, but not necessarily God incarnate who has atoned for the sins of mankind. Locke was certainly concerned about a religion that taught people to believe in God, to repent, and to try and live a moral life. He was not, however, attuned to the idea of an eternal relationship between man and God that was redeemed by the blood of God incarnate through the life and work of Jesus on Calvary.

JOHN TOLAND (1670-1722)

The Irishman John Toland was a “Lockian” who would claim Locke as his intellectual and spiritual mentor (though Locke would never agree to have been such!). Toland is the classic illustration of a successor taking one’s teaching to its logical extremes. Toland published his major work one year after Locke wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Toland entitled his writing, *Christianity Not*

² Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology, Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (IVP 1999) p. 526.

Mysterious.³ In it, Toland sets out the Lockian principle bluntly. As quoted by Olson, Toland writes, “whoever reveals anything...whoever tells us something we did not know before, his words must be intelligible **and the matter possible**. This rule holds good, let God or Man be the Revealer.”⁴

Toland could be no clearer in setting out the reasoning of the age. One should judge the Bible with the same cynicism and approach as any other writing claiming authority. Pure reason makes the determination of what is credible and believable. Any claim in the Bible that does not meet rational and observational validity, is not a claim to be believed. In this light, Toland then argues that if reason alone dictates what revelation is believable and worthy of attention, then one must recognize that reason exists apart from revelation. Therefore (again taking Lockian thought to its extreme⁵), since we have had reason from time immortal, while Christianity is a faith found only in the last two millennia, the faith in reason supersedes that of Christianity. Reason imparts eternal truths while Christianity imparts a historical interpretation of those truths. In reason, one can find the basics that will last eternally. Reason can discard the temporal claims of the Christian faith that have since become outdated.

It is not too surprising what happened with Toland’s book. It was an idea that came before Europe’s educated elite that were eager to show themselves “cutting edge” able to grasp all the new knowledge and be a part of the latest intellectual understanding. I term these folks, “enlightened sheep.” By that phrase, I am referencing the mentality that they would embrace the newest “enlightened” thinking, basking in the pride of being some of the few smart enough and bold enough to dare to believe these incredibly advanced ideas. Yet in reality, they were sheep who had not the intellectual independence to examine these teachings with the cold hard rationalism they claimed to espouse and worship. They were merely followers of the latest intellectual fad.

³ One can tell from the title, Toland was not too plugged into Pauline thought where Paul wrote in Ephesians that God “made known to us the **mystery** of his will” (1:9); “the **mystery** made known to me [Paul] by revelation” (3:3), where by reading Paul’s letter one would “be able to understand my [Paul’s] insight into the **mystery** of Christ” (3:4), a “**mystery**” that brings together Gentiles and Jews (3:6), a “**mystery**, which for ages past was kept hidden in God” (3:9), a “**profound mystery**” of Christ and the church (5:32) for which Paul sought prayers so he would “fearlessly make known the **mystery** of the gospel.” (6:19). Of course, that is without considering the many other cites of Paul on the issue of the mystery of Christ throughout his other writings!

⁴ Olson at 527.

⁵ We must remember that Locke himself never went this far. Locke was not a fan of Toland, at least publicly.

From Toland and others like him, a “Christian” (and that word is *not* used in its orthodox sense) movement was underway. The intellectual movement began a congregation of similar believers in 1774 called Essex Chapel in London. The congregation claimed to unite on reason in ways that went beyond the particular doctrines of the Christian faith that was too limiting. The Essex chapel was one of a “Unitarian” belief. The keys were natural reason that embraced eternal truths rather than specific matters outside reason. Gone were any ideas of atonement and incarnation. In were ideas of logical moral living for the good of society. This movement found its first congregation in the United States in 1785 with King’s Chapel in Boston. A number of U.S. churches that began as congregational expressions of the pilgrims and other puritans took this new rationalism and embraced its teachings. Many of the congregational churches became “Unitarians” as did the major U.S. divinity school, Harvard.

IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)

Into this picture we now consider Immanuel Kant. Born in Prussia (now part of Russia), Kant grew up in a Pietist family that taught not only intense religious devotion, but also a literal reading of the Bible. Kant’s schooling brought him to study the latest writings of those enlightened philosophers and scientists like Descartes, Leibniz, and Newton.

Kant spent much of his life writing in effort to bring a coherent meaning to two aspects of his world: that which has meaning and value (normally considered “matters of faith” by the Church) and that which has scientific validity, matters open to science, investigation, and measurement. Kant would use reason in both aspects, but the aspects were clearly delineated from each other. For example, in the world of faith, Kant believed that one could never *know* whether there was a God or an afterlife. By the same token, one could never know with certainty that there was no God or no afterlife.

Kant’s teaching and worldview placed Christianity on a stage to teach morals and values that would help society progress. Faith played the role of defining duty for life, but teachings of faith that intersected the nature of the world, of humanity’s existence and purpose, of revelation and God working in history, these were not concerns that could have “rational” answers. The rationality of faith was really just a well-reasoned moral duty. For Kant, reasoning would produce a life of discipline, duty and good moral judgment, with or without revelation.

Kant laid the groundwork for Germany’s great liberal theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher.

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768-1834)

In Schleiermacher, we find Kant's teaching on the role of faith as providing a moral framework, and on the inability of anyone to know whether God was there or not taken to its next logical level. Schleiermacher viewed his faith as totally apart from science or the world of things known by observation and measured science. For Schleiermacher, faith was strictly a matter of its own, found in the nuances of personal experience and thought rather than the natural world of science and logic.

Schleiermacher was not too concerned with the certainty of Christian doctrine or faith. Schleiermacher believed and taught that "God" was a recognition of an inner link to something outside of every man to which man is connected. We "experience" God through some inner connection that nudges us to depend on something else for life. Schleiermacher's faith is "Christian" in that he finds the life of Jesus as the supreme and perfect example of one recognizing and experiencing "God consciousness." Schleiermacher believed the Christian followed Jesus in the sense that we seek to live aware and tuned into the "God consciousness" available to each of us.

Schleiermacher was never too concerned over the validity of Scripture in measured rational terms. Rational examination like that belonged in the sphere of science rather than experiential faith. For Schleiermacher, the Bible was not a supernaturally inspired authority. It was simply a recording of the God experiences of a number of people throughout time.

To put Schleiermacher into the system of thought analysis we started this class with, for the Catholic Church, Church reigned Supreme; for the Reformation, Scripture reigned supreme; for the Enlightenment, logic reigned supreme; for Schleiermacher, experience reigned supreme in matters of faith, logic, in matters of the world.

So, we follow the stream of the Age of Reason through waters of faith, waters of unbelief, and disturbed waters that find peace only in dividing reason from faith.⁶ What was the reaction to this? We will consider two veins of reaction. Scholars term these veins: "Neo-orthodoxy" and "conservatism."

⁶ In an effort to keep this lesson to a teachable section of Church history, we have of necessity left out many critical personalities in the development of these issues. The Dane Soren Kierkegaard (who would set out the need for a "leap of faith" to believe), the German Bible critic Julius Wellhausen (who would take criticism of the biblical text and would challenge its inspiration/accuracy in new ways) and many others are undoubtedly worthy of significant sections, but they will have to wait for another class!

NEO-ORTHODOXY

We will likely consider several neo-orthodox theologians in a later lesson, but we need to include them here to bring the Age of Reason full circle. The teachings of Schleiermacher and his progeny did not bring about world peace and acceptance of God consciousness! It never gave birth to evangelistic fervor either! Why would anyone seek to impose his or her God consciousness over another's? The biggest legacy of Schleiermacher to the church was one of doubt as to validity of doctrine and authenticity.

In response came a movement termed "neo-orthodoxy." The term comes from "neo" meaning "new" and "orthodoxy" referencing the old accepted basics of Christian faith and belief. The principal neo-orthodox theologians were Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in Europe and the brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr in America.

In its essence, Barth and others decided that the liberal theology of Schleiermacher and his progeny had led to an emptying of the real basics of Christian faith.⁷ Yet, Barth would not deny the rational problems that liberal theologians set out to challenge the inerrancy of Scripture. Rather than using those challenges as a basis to find faith apart from Scripture, Barth and the neo-orthodox took another tact. They accepted the Scripture's testimony to Christ and the orthodox basics of the Christian faith and recognized that the Bible was a human product that God used to convey his message. In other words, the Bible as messenger was fallible and fallen, but the message itself was accurate. Barth believed that God had always used fallen and fallible vessels to convey his message. Paul himself was a great example. In Barth's mindset, why should the writings of Paul be any different than Paul himself?

The Bible was not the "Word" of God in and of itself. Jesus was the Word of God. The Bible became the "Word" of God only when it pointed to and delivered Jesus in some aspect or fashion.

This left Barth and others able to write strong profound works on the depravity of man, the atonement of Christ and the need for salvation, even while embracing the criticisms of the Bible. To hold the Bible to a position of inerrancy was seen to place the Bible in place of the perfect Christ. The Bible becomes the item of worship rather than God. The Bible was even termed, the "paper pope" in the way some used it.

⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr referenced liberal theology as one where "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper & Row 1959), p. 193.

The conservative response to neo-orthodoxy was a grudging respect to many of the doctrinal writings, yet a wariness that without the Bible as a perfect revelation, the claims of neo-orthodoxy have no real foundation. Meanwhile, the liberal theologians looked with disdain on neo-orthodoxy considering it “fundamentalism with good manners” or “fundamentalism in suit and tie.” In this vein, we consider the conservative response.

CONSERVATISM

Some also labeled the conservative response to liberalism (and neo-orthodoxy) the “fundamentalist” response, although like all other labels (including “liberal” and “neo-orthodox” it is not too precise or defining). We will consider the conservative response in light of two 20th century individuals: J. Gresham Machen and Francis A. Schaeffer.

J. GRESHAM MACHEN (1881-1937)

Machen was a Presbyterian professor of New Testament at Princeton seminary in the early 1900’s. The Presbyterian Church was walking a path into liberal theology when Machen took his stand. Machen was a firm believer in the absolute authority and accuracy of the Bible. He taught and believed the truths of the Westminster Confession of Faith (see Lesson 65) and stood on it to fight against the modernist revolt at Princeton Seminary. When it became apparent that Princeton would not adhere to the conservative principles of its Presbyterian roots, Machen pulled out of the seminary and started the Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.⁸

Machen had come about his rejection of modern theology after a first hand view. In 1905, Machen studied theology at the feet of Wilhelm Herrmann⁹ in Germany. Machen was convinced that liberal theology had abdicated the truth of God for the comfort of man. In its efforts to exalt reason and still try to hold on to morality, liberal theology had created a house of cards. If there was no tie between faith and the world, if there was no external reliable authority for God and morality, then relativism could reign supreme. No one could ever justifiably tell another what was “good” or “right.” The truths of Scripture were to be held against all assaults. For Machen, once those truths were diminished in any degree, there was really nothing reliable left.

⁸ Machen and his cohorts also divided from the Northern Presbyterian Church and began the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

⁹ Herrmann was accomplished in his studies of Kant and the liberal German theologians including Schleiermacher.

FRANCIS SCHAEFFER (1912-1984)

Into this world comes Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer was a student of Machen's at Westminster Theological Seminary. From Machen, Schaeffer learned a strong doctrine of inerrancy. Another professor at the school, Cornelius Van Til, taught Schaeffer "presuppositional apologetics" (this was an approach of defending a belief in God based upon reasoning from life and the world.).

Many do not consider Schaeffer a "heavy weight" theologian,¹⁰ yet he took major ideas and principles and put them into digestible form for many searchers of truth. The world's academics never lauded Schaeffer, but Schaeffer found a following and influenced a generation through his writings and lectures.

Schaeffer was a missionary in Switzerland who had lost his faith. In wandering hikes through the Swiss Alps, he spent multiple days in solitude thinking through (with reason and logic) God, man, and scripture. It was during this time that Schaeffer came to the convictions that guided his life's work for thereon.

Schaeffer would take the teachings of liberalism and even neo-orthodoxy, and challenge them head on. For Schaeffer, the solution to most of the analysis seemed to come back to several common points. First, if something is asserted to be true, it should be tested. For Schaeffer, the test was two-fold: first take the asserted truth to its full logical extreme. Second, ask whether one can live consistent with the asserted truth in all its possible permutations. Once this was done, Schaeffer was convinced (as am I!) that *only the orthodox Christian worldview* makes sense of our world and of each person individually. Only the orthodox Christian worldview offers the world where one can live consistent with all the possible permutations.

For Schaeffer, if there is a personal God, it is most reasonable to think he would communicate with humanity. If God were to communicate, the communication would be precisely what God wanted it to be. The various complaints against scripture's accuracy merely needed more study and understanding to grasp. This God who made man never made man in the fallen condition man is today. Rather God made man for perfection. Man is depraved and fallen as a result of the sin of Adam. This same sin separates man from God. It leaves man in need of redemption, of a Savior. That is Jesus, God incarnate and fully human. Through his death, Jesus has paid for the sins of humanity, and through faith, one gets the

¹⁰ In an effort to make everything fit in a nice tidy order, Schaeffer at times forced certain understandings on philosophers, artists, etc. that were not necessarily as clear as Schaeffer taught!

righteousness of Christ. God has taught this through his written word and it is understood and confirmed by the Spirit of God.

To teach or believe otherwise, Schaeffer taught, was to teach a system that was shown invalid by our lives and the world. For example, if there is no God, then there is no objective morality. There must be a God who sets the definition of right and wrong. Otherwise, right and wrong is merely decided by the strongest force of people. So, there is no real reason to assert that the atrocities of Hitler were “wrong” unless one believes there is objective wrong.

Schaeffer taught evangelism to unbelievers was best approached through prayer, love, and logical discourse, forcing others to think their beliefs to their logical conclusions then seeing whether one could live with such conclusions.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Scripture makes bold claims for itself. “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16). Indeed, since that is true, then, we should study those scriptures and do our “best to present ourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15).
2. We should also see that there are snippets of truth in a number of the thinkers from throughout the ages. That is why we see the doctrines so readily embraced by many. Yet, many of these teachings also have dangerous implications that are wrong. We should always test what we read, not only for the truth of the matter itself, but also with an understanding of the world-view of the writer. When we understand the principles of the writer’s philosophy we better examine the validity of what is written. It is a shield to “see to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” (Col. 2:8). Furthermore, there is the element of being led by the Spirit and God’s Spirit communicating with our spirit (Rom 8:14-16; Galatians 5:16,18,25).
3. As we see the waves and trends of the “best current thought,” it is amazing how the eternal truths of Orthodoxy are never really replaced. This has been a constant lesson since the earliest teachings on Gnostic “answers” to the spiritual questions in the early centuries of the church. What has lasted is the orthodoxy. We are not surprised, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Heb. 13:8).