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Facing the Challenge of Liberalism[1,2]

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Setting the scene

We live in difficult and dangerous times for the Church of England. This church—raised up and so often preserved by God's hand; doctrinally, liturgically and historically a beacon to the nation and beyond; confessionally faithful to his sufficient and unerring word—is now facing its most difficult problems, its greatest dangers, since it began. The problems and dangers come in different ways and from different directions.

The Church of England, and all that it stands for, is under attack *doctrinally* from those who (deliberately or not) seek to undermine God's unchanging truth. It is under attack *morally* from those who (knowingly or not) choose to set their own standards or follow those of the world. It is under attack *constitutionally* from those who (for whatever reasons) want to break its links with the state and thus its influence over the nation; and from those who (often with good motives) aim to increase the power of the bishops, synods and bureaucratic structures at the expense of the parishes and the people. These attacks on our church can be blatant or subtle. They come from those who intend to cause damage, and from those who want the church's good.

Historically the greatest dangers to the church have always come from within: heresy, unbelief and moral degeneracy among God's people are far greater problems than pressure or persecution from outside. This is equally true today: the enemy is within. What is more, because we are all sinners and very prone to err, we have to count ourselves, as much as anyone else, as potentially the enemy of God's church. It was to the believing Peter, after all, that Jesus had to say 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men' (Matthew 16:23). So if we find ourselves criticizing others, or pointing a finger of accusation, we must do so with great caution and humility, fully aware of the precariousness of our own position.

There is another danger too: that those who want to stand against the attacks on the church will be too reactionary and thus block proper movement and progress. God does continue to shed new light from his word; the church does need to change its ways to address the changing world; even the best liturgies and confessions can become dry shibboleths and corrupt (as both the *Preface* and the introductory *Concerning the Services*

of the Church in *The Book of Common Prayer* remind us. Those whose resistance to wrong change becomes a stand against all change are damaging their own cause and the church they love.

But we underestimate the danger we face if we see it simply as human, or even demonic, attack, or as over-reaction to such attack: I am convinced that the Church of England, like the nation itself and the Royal Family, is under God's judgment and that this explains many of its problems. This is far worse than anything else we could face. If God stands with us his church will stand, and even the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). But if God is against us we are lost: not we as individuals, for his saints are secure for ever, but we as the Church of England.

To say that we are under God's judgment may seem a bit strong to some, ridiculous to others. There is not time now to justify the assertion fully. I can only point to the fire at York Minster and its timing, the disastrous royal marriage saga of last year and the fire at Windsor, the resignation of the Bishop of Gloucester this year, the financial problems facing the Church Commissioners, and the 15% decline in the number of Church of England worshippers during the 1980s. Perhaps these and other matters can all be explained without reference to God or judgment: but I think not.

This pessimistic view does not mean that we should immediately abandon the sinking ship. God's judgment does not operate without his mercy; when judgment is announced, even after it begins (I am not talking here about the last judgment yet to come but about temporal judgment here and now) there is always opportunity to repent. Repentance is not of course being or saying sorry, but is turning away from what is wrong and back to God. I believe that our duty today as faithful Christians and Anglicans is to call the Church of England to repentance, to show actual areas and ways in which it can and should repent, and to give a lead ourselves by actions as well as words.

Understanding liberalism

I am going to include all the attacks on the church under the single heading of liberalism. Some may find that too sweeping or simplistic: I hope to justify it before the end of this paper. I have seen no better brief introduction to liberalism than J.I. Packer's outstanding article, 'Liberalism and conservatism in theology' in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP, Leicester, 1988). Packer says there all that needs to be said by way of definition. I cannot better him, so I am going to quote at length from him:

> 'Liberal' as a self-commending description, implying readiness to welcome new ideas and freedom from the restraints of obscurantist traditionalism and irrational bigotry, has been adopted at various times over the past 150 years by 1. French Roman Catholics who favoured political democracy and church reform; 2. Anglican Broad Churchmen who desired some doctrinal loosening-up; and 3. Protestants world-wide who held Post-Enlightenment

views stemming from Schleiermacher and Ritschl in theology, Kant and Hegel in philosophy, and Strauss and Julius Wellhausen . . . in biblical study.

'Liberalism' ordinarily signifies the thought-pattern found in the second and third groups. Developed by academic theologians who were very much men of their own time and critical of Pre-enlightenment thinking, liberalism has everywhere displayed most if not all of the following features:

1. A purpose of adapting the substance of faith, however conceived, to current naturalistic and anthropocentric viewpoints, abandoning traditional dogmas when necessary.
2. A sceptical view of historic Christian supernaturalism; an unwillingness to treat anything as certain just because the Bible or the church affirm it; a positivist penchant for making 'objective', 'scientific', anti-miraculous assessments of biblical and ecclesiastical teaching; and bold readiness to elevate the culturally moulded opinions of latter-day scholars above the received tradition.
3. A view of the Bible as a fallible human record of religious thought and experience rather than a divine revelation of truth and reality; doubts, more or less extensive, about the historical facts on which the Bible writers base Christianity; insistence that the churches should be undogmatic in temper, tolerating a plurality of theologies, and seeing personal and social ethics as their main concern; and a belief that seeking society's renewal rather than evangelizing individuals is the primary Christian task.
4. An immanentist, sub-Trinitarian idea of God as working chiefly in cultural developments, philosophical, moral and aesthetic; a non-incarnational Christology that conceives of Jesus as a religious pioneer and model, a man supremely full of God, rather than as a divine saviour; and an optimistic, evolutionary world-view that understands God's plan as perfecting an immature race rather than redeeming a fallen one.
5. An optimistic view of cultured humanity's power to perceive God by reflecting on its experience, and to formulate a true natural theology; a belief that all religions rest on a common perception of God, and differ only in details and emphases according to where each stands on the evolutionary ladder; and a hostility towards any exclusive claims for the Christian faith.
6. A denial that the fall of a primitive pair brought guilt, pollution and spiritual impotence upon our race, in favour of a vision of mankind moving spiritually upward; a denial of penal-substitutionary views of the atonement, and of Christ's imputed righteousness as the ground of justification, in favour of moral-influence and representative-trailblazer accounts of Christ's death for us, and thoughts of God forgiving on the ground that penitence makes us forgivable; and a denial of Christ's personal return, in favour of the hope that universal moral progress will establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Liberalism dominated European protectionism for half a century till the First World War shattered its optimism and the lead passed to the existentialist biblicism of the neo-orthodox genius Karl Barth. In the English-speaking world, reconstructed forms of liberalism, often at odds with each other, still make sure of the running in academic theology.

Packer's description is well worth reflecting upon, though we cannot do

that now. You may well find, as I have done, clear challenges to ensure that your own ministry and that of your church remain on fully biblical lines. Packer gives us the background to liberalism, and spells out its main consequences for Christian theology. But before looking at the details of its impact on the church we need to see a broader picture of the significance of the movement. Philosophical and theological liberalism is nothing less than a massive assault on the two fundamental pillars of Christianity (and indeed of the world as we know it): truth and authority.

One of the great themes of the Bible is Scripture itself as the living and powerful word of God. But it is tragically common for God's people to fall into a dead orthodoxy where they mouth the teachings of Scripture but show none of its transforming power in their lives. In the early chapters of John's gospel we see an insistence that God by his word is in the transformation business: changing people's lives. John 1:33 tells us that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit; in 1:42 Simon is given a new name as the sign of his new nature, in 1:50–52 Nathaniel and Philip are told that their belief and perception of Jesus himself will be changed. In 2:7–9 Jesus transforms water into wine, causing his disciples to believe in him; in 2:15–16 he literally overturns the situation in the temple; in 2:19 he speaks of how he will renew his own body. In chapter 3 he insists that no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless first born anew by God's sovereign power. And so it goes on. God by his word is in the transformation business.

But have you noticed a strange and important contrast within chapter 2 of John? In v. 11 we read that by his first miraculous sign Jesus 'revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.' Then v. 22 tells us: 'After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.' They put their faith in him during his early ministry, but they did not believe the Scripture or his words until after his resurrection: and we know from elsewhere in Scripture that they were not really changed men until at least the resurrection and probably Pentecost. There is a sort of faith in Christ which is less than the ideal because it is not a matter of believing the Scriptures. This is faith in Christ, who is the promise of God, but not trust in the promises as promises. The gospel begins, according to Mark 1:1–2, with prediction, promise.

Liberalism is very similar to this. It is in fact the same old heresy, recycled but newly legitimized and strengthened by enlightenment and existentialist philosophy. This heresy has always been popular with those who find biblical faith difficult, which is why it has a subtle appeal to new or immature Christians. It focuses on their experience of Christ, or their partly perceived relationship with him, and declares that to be Christianity. Nothing else matters: the new believer can retain his evolutionary worldview or her amoral lifestyle, he can reinterpret the Ten Commandments for today, she can contextualize away the New Testament restrictions on

women's ministry. A relationship with Christ is all-important, but a specific view of or attitude to Scripture is wholly unnecessary. No wonder that Bible believers who fall away to liberalism say they feel liberated; from then on they can do as they please, for conscience is so withered that they have no scruples about disobedience to God's word.

The appeal of liberalism is not just to new or immature believers, but to Christians or non-Christians who know that traditional Christianity demands biblical holiness, but themselves prefer darkness to light. The grip of sin is so strong, whether it be intellectual or sexual or financial or whatever kind of sin, that men and women will gladly accept a liberalism which claims to be Christian but allows them to hold on to sin. At first they know that the liberal gospel is no real gospel, just a kind of halfway house, but before long they come to believe it, to rely on its compromise, and to despise true biblical Christianity.

What they have done by this stage is to reject the very ideas of truth and authority as enshrined in Scripture. Truth has become what is convenient or comfortable to believe. Authority has become the feeling of what is right to do. But this is not just a matter of disobedient Christianity, because truth and authority are not just presuppositions held by the human authors of Scripture. Truth and authority are basic to Scripture because they have their origin in God himself. The word is truth because God is truth, Jesus is the truth, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. The Bible is authoritative because God is almighty, Jesus is Lord, the Holy Spirit is sovereign. Take away or reinterpret truth and authority as religious concepts and you abolish God, you replace him with another false and lesser god, an idol whose very existence is a lie and a sham. Many who say 'Our Father', who call Christ 'Lord' with their mouths, who speak of the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit, are not worshipping the true trinitarian God of the Bible but the false god of liberalism.

Liberalism is actually a perversion of the way we see truth. Bible truth consists of true, real, historical, geographical and spiritual facts, what Francis Schaeffer called 'brute facts', things that really happened as and when the Bible claims that they happened: but these facts have significance, they change reality today, they explain God and they are meant to transform us. Jesus attacked dead orthodoxy (acceptance of the facts without allowing them to transform the believer), by insisting that the word is powerful and alive and that faith must include submission as well as credence. Liberals attack orthodoxy (dead or alive) by separating experience from Scripture and history: so it does not matter whether Jesus really rose or not, as long as you feel his life today; it does not matter whether Abraham or Moses did what we read of them, as long as you have your own personal covenant with God; it does not matter what Paul thought about women or homosexuality or repentance or justification, as long as you feel good about yourself and the way you are.

So David Jenkins and Don Cupitt (both claiming conversion experi-

ences) can air, exercise and develop their doubts, the one about the historical facts of Christ's birth, death, resurrection and ascension, the other about the very existence of a personal God, and still claim to be Christians, to have an authentic, contemporary and meaningful relationship with the living Christ. Obviously on a theological level liberalism has many expressions, from classical nineteenth century German liberalism, through early and mid twentieth century neo-orthodoxy, to modern full-blown existentialism; but in every case, however strong or weak the apparent faith in Christ, belief is characterized by a complete disjunction, an unbridgeable gap, between faith and any historical brute facts. A new truth is invented, theological or religious truth, which simply means 'If it feels true to me today then it is true; there is no need to relate this to historical events, and no point in doing so, because those events are irrelevant unless I feel them to be relevant.'

It seems paradoxical, but is in fact an integral part of the way liberalism works to destroy true human personality, that it both blunts and sharpens the conscience. People who succumb to it tend to lose the distinct biblical sense of right and wrong, because the Bible is no longer their authority; but they develop a definite new set of priorities, which are recognizable though somewhat twisted. Human life becomes sacred, even above the claims of truth or justice, thus excluding capital punishment and insisting on pacifism (unless there is some vague notion that quality of life is impaired, in which case euthanasia or abortion may well be acceptable). Lip service is given to the importance of truth and integrity, but the white lie and the cover-up of bad news are seen as appropriate because they are perpetrated for the best of motives. Marriage is held in great esteem, so much so that an unhappy or difficult relationship is better terminated by divorce. Tolerance is preached as the greatest good, with other religions, cultures and points of view seen in a very favourable light (except for traditional biblical Christianity with its so called fundamentalism which is abhorred; the most mild-mannered and likable liberal theologian sees red when confronted by a believer who knows right from wrong, fact from fiction, truth from heresy—or who presumes to have assurance of salvation).

Observing liberalism

It will be helpful now to look at the way liberalism manifests itself in different types of church. This will show something of its pervasive nature, its chameleon-like subtlety, and its awesome destructive power. Liberalism as we know it began in German protestantism, and quickly spread to all the protestant denominations and seminaries with the exception of exclusively evangelical groups—though even they are now beginning to be affected. Its first real impact on theological teaching came with the birth of one of its most powerfully destructive children, the so-called higher biblical criticism. That very title, with its implied denigration of the noble earlier discipline of textual criticism, is an affront to all right-

minded Bible students; but what higher criticism (I shall simply call it biblical criticism from now on) has done to the church almost defies belief.

Presuppositions are all-important here: the essential presupposition of biblical criticism is that Scripture as we have it is not God's word, but at best a compilation of different people's accounts of how they perceived God to have been at work. So the scholars say that we cannot accept the text at face value. We must determine (by so-called scientific means) how it came to reach its present form, and then look behind it at the events or people or ideas which shaped it. The revelation, the message from God (if there is one) will not lie in the text but behind it, in an event to which the text bears imperfect and distorted witness. The futile search for significant events behind the text, usually getting no further than postulating early drafts or manuscript sources, occupies the whole working lives of many Bible scholars and university teachers. It contributes nothing to our understanding of Scripture, and it weakens or destroys the faith of many a theology student forced to study it. Biblical criticism, which is the true mother of modern liberal protestantism, is at best a tool of the devil.

Many protestant theologians have been so put off the study of Scripture by the sheer dry tedium of the critical method, that they have taken the understandable but ultimately futile step of trying to find God and his word without direct reliance on the text of Scripture at all. Kart Barth's neo-orthodoxy is not really a reaction against liberalism, but a development of it. Barth's great breakthrough was his idea that the Bible is not in itself the word of God, but becomes that word if and when we hear God speaking through it. This may seem a halfway house from liberalism to evangelicalism: not so. It remains truly liberal because Barth insists that Scripture may be, indeed is, full of errors and mistakes—but this does not matter to him because the text itself is not the revelation, merely an imperfect tool in the hands of a great God. Barth does bring God back into the equation, and a great God; he rehabilitates Scripture in the sense of encouraging people to read it without too much critical study; but he remains totally liberal with his insistence that God's message is not necessarily what the text of Scripture actually says.

Protestant liberalism now encompasses a third school as well as biblical criticism and neo-orthodoxy. This comes in various guises and under various names, but is best summarized as political or liberation theology. Basically the line is that salvation is largely a matter of improving society. Many expressions of this are very left-wing politically. It is not just found in Latin America or in liberal social gospel teachings, but has strongly influenced the kingdom emphases in much British evangelicalism and in the social teaching of men like Ron Sider and John Wimber. In practice most European liberal protestants today live somewhere in the confused area bounded by biblical criticism, neo-orthodoxy and liberation theology. Like the Bermuda triangle this area is mysterious, vaguely defined, and deadly.

Liberalism also has its footholds in the Roman church, with biblical criticism largely accepted, liberation theology very widespread (though frowned upon by the present pope), and neo-orthodoxy less welcome. We should not be surprised at biblical criticism's success here: its offence to us is that it moves the point of revelation (if it allows one at all) away from the text of Scripture to an unreachable event behind Scripture—so the way that Roman dogma destroys the integrity of the text makes little or no difference. Liberation theology can again be encompassed by Rome to an extent, in the same way that other political and religious movements are baptized when they bow to Rome; where John Paul II is right to be worried is that ultimately its revolutionary anti-authoritarianism will defy pope and curia. Neo-orthodoxy looks much more biblical and protestant, and speaks of the word of God rather than the sacraments as the main agent of salvation; it will thus always be unwelcome in Rome and its closest Roman followers, like Hans Küng, will have a hard time. Ultimately, Romanism is about authority: the church must control the interpretation of Scripture, the political life of its members and the state, and in particular the liturgy and every expression of worship.

Liberalism, especially in its existentialist forms, has had a great but subtle influence on worship even among ritualists; this is not just restricted to the Roman or Eastern Orthodox ritualism, but is very clearly seen in some charismatic worship. Let me quote to you from a 'worship tape' which I was recently sent unsolicited in the post.

> We genuinely believe that allowing yourself to be part of this worship experience can help bring you into the presence of our loving Father. We encourage folk to use our tapes . . . in their own praise and worship times and to be able to focus their attention on God, no matter what their situation.

But is it really music that brings us into the presence of heavenly Father? Can we expect God's presence or blessing when we approach him in ways other than the one way he gives us? Here we see, as so often today, the approach to worship controlled by atmosphere rather than controlled, as it ought to be, by Scripture. I am not knocking the sincerity of charismatics, catholics or the orthodox, but when ritual and the atmosphere engendered by ritual (whether it is a traditional atmosphere or a modern one) take the place of Scripture, then we are in serious trouble; and even on their own terms ritualists, who need to be authoritarian, will find the ground taken away from under their feet when they espouse existentialism. Consider the growing tendency among charismatic Anglicans to wear vestments and use icons. Look what happened to the Quakers.

Interfaith worship is becoming increasingly common. At an interfaith service in Newcastle Cathedral in 1984 the Hindu god Rama was repeatedly worshiped with the chant, 'Lord Rama, King Rama, Lord of All, King Rama, Lord Rama.' There was also worship of a Hindu idol and Moslem, Sikh and Bahai' deities. But the name of Jesus was totally absent. On 29th

September 1986 the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) celebrated its Twenty-fifth Anniversary with an interfaith service in the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Italy. The liturgy used drew on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism (including an invocation of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and reproduction), Judaism and Islam. The body that organized the WWF anniversary is the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture (ICOREC). Since 1986 ICOREC has organized similar events in various English cathedrals. Such activities are a clear blasphemy, and a slur on the Lord Jesus Christ; he insisted that he was the only way to God, and Scripture teaches that prayer to God can only be made through Jesus. They are also totally illegal in any Anglican church building, at least in England. But there are very few bishops who will act to stop them.

Perhaps the most disturbing interfaith events are those involving the Royal Family. Every March there is a Commonwealth Day Observance in Westminster Abbey (which comes under the Queen's direct control and not subject to any bishop or synod). In recent years her Majesty has insisted that the service reflect the worship of all faiths in the Commonwealth. Moslem leaders have chanted from the Koran, Sikhs have extolled their lord, Hindus have chanted about the god Krishna. And Buddhist readings have told of the steps needed to reach Nirvana. The services are carefully planned to avoid reference to Jesus so as not to give offence to other faiths. In 1991 the Queen received a petition from 77,000 Christians respectfully requesting an end to the multi-faith nature of the service. Buckingham Palace dropped a hint to *The Times* that Prince Charles's presence at the next service with the Queen 'provided an unofficial answer' to the petition.

It seems very likely indeed that the next coronation will be an interfaith service. The Prince of Wales is believed to be keen on the idea. The 1953 coronation included a promise by the Monarch to 'maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law'. But that is not being done at Westminster Abbey every March, and there is grave danger that a new wording will be found for the next coronation. We ought to be aware of the constitutional implications if a new monarch were simply to promise to 'maintain religion in the United Kingdom'.

Over 2,000 Church of England clergy signed a petition to the Archbishop of Canterbury asking for an end to interfaith worship and for the bishops to stand against the goings-on in Westminster Abbey. The tragedy is that the bishops will not stand up to the Queen's advisers, including the Prince of Wales, and tell them they are wrong. Of course we should respect people of other faiths, and we should deplore racist or inflammatory behaviour. We can also co-operate with other faiths over moral, social and political issues. But that is not the same as interfaith worship or prayer, which must compromise the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only saviour.

In the 1950s, '60s and '70s theological liberalism took hold of the Church of England in a frightening way. Men like Bishop John Robinson wrote books like *Honest to God*, denying the traditional understanding of the faith and compromising with the worldly philosophy which denies miracles and the supernatural. Despite complaints from the grassroots, theological colleges and universities continued to teach this nonsense, and may of those who believed it became bishops or senior church administrators. Now we have seen the failure of liberalism, both in the parishes and in the world of academic theology. The books are still being published, and some parishes still endure denials of the faith from their pulpits, but for various reasons there are more Bible-believing lecturers at colleges, more orthodox men being ordained, and more parishes asking for clergy who will exercise faithful biblical ministries.

Yet still the liberals dominate the House of Bishops and the staff at Church House in London, where General Synod's permanent bureaucracy works. Although these men and women have little direct influence in the parishes, they are the ones whose statements and reports are given so much media publicity and make the church look so stupid. The fact is that most orthodox clergy (whether evangelical or anglo-catholic) would far rather work in parishes than in the central bureaucracy, so Church House is bound to be top-heavy with liberals. These liberals are the ones who talk about 'gay lib' for clergy, homosexual 'marriages' in church, calling God 'mother', removing the distinctions between men and women in church, society and home, the resurrection as a myth, all religions being equal, the Bible being outdated—and so on. The parishes where they serve have seen dramatic falls in numbers of worshippers, whereas more orthodox clergy see their churches just about holding their own or even growing slowly in an increasingly secular and hostile climate. But still the liberals continue with their siren voices to call for the church to ape the world. Still they dominate synod boards and committees. Still they waste vast amounts of money on ridiculous schemes, publications and propaganda.

Liberalism is not always radical in appearance. It can take on traditional clothes as long as it achieves its aim. In many respects the *Alternative Service Book 1980* is very similar to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. Much of the argument about the *ASB* related to its use of modern language—which was a wholly right change to make. What many people failed to notice was the clear doctrinal shift away from definite beliefs to the vague hopes and woolly compromises so typical of liberalism. Two examples must suffice. In the funeral service, unsure of whether the dead believer is in heaven or not, the *ASB* 'commends' him or her to God—effectively (but not definitely) praying for the dead. In the Holy Communion, unsure of whether to pray with catholics for the bread and wine to change, or with the Prayer Book and evangelicals for the recipients to receive Christ, the *ASB* asks that the bread and wine 'may be to us his body and his blood'. That is pure compromise: it may be taken by

either group to mean what they want. It is also pure existentialism: actually meaning nothing at all.

You may have come across the new method of 'doing theology' popularized by a number of ministerial training courses and diocesan adult education courses. Although the Bible is often used, and many evangelicals are thus fooled into thinking the teaching is orthodox, what is actually offered is nothing less than spiritual poison. 'Doing theology' is no longer a matter of systematizing, laying out clearly, what the Bible says and then applying that to our lives: it is now a matter of reflecting on our experiences, feelings and relationships in the light of the Bible, the liturgy and other religious sources. Just about any conclusion is valid (absolutely any if the leader is a consistent liberal). The idea that God in his word tells us how and what to think as well as how to behave has completely disappeared.

The ordination of women is relevant here. I certainly do not want to claim that all those who support it are liberals. Many are simply rejecting unbiblical Victorian chauvinism and looking for a biblical ministry for women. There is a difficult judgment to be made as to whether the clear biblical prohibition on women exercising headship, teaching authority, in the church means they cannot be presbyters. I respect the view that they can—provided that it goes on to say that women cannot be incumbents. But that is not what has been envisaged by the recent General Synod vote, which is a clear victory for the liberal view that the Bible is out of date.

Lessons from liberalism

J.I. Packer's description of liberalism, which I quoted earlier, includes these words: 'readiness to welcome new ideas and freedom from the restraints of obscurantist traditionalism and irrational bigotry'. I hope that none of us would attack such readiness or think it out of place in the church. It was just such a readiness which (humanly speaking) led to the protestant reformation of the sixteenth century. Men read the Scriptures, knew that things were not right in the church, spoke and acted accordingly. They were ready to re-interpret Scripture, challenge long-cherished beliefs, change or abandon hallowed traditions. And they were right to do so. Liberalism and reformation do have something in common: they both stand against any fossilized, traditionalist or obscure elements in religion. Those of us who see ourselves as heirs of the reformation need to be very sure that while we stand against liberalism because of its destruction of truth and authority, we do not stand against its iconoclasm or become traditionalists ourselves. There is ample warning in Scripture and Prayer Book against both those positions.

The words 'liberal' and 'radical' are often used interchangeably in theology. Both describe scholars willing to jettison former categories of thought, to strike out boldly in new directions of theological thinking, to apply Christian insights into hitherto untouched areas of Christian life. But

this willingness ought to be a hallmark of every biblical thinker. 'Radical' means 'going to the roots', which is what Bible-loving evangelicals ought to be ready to do at all times. In some ways I am unhappy with the title 'conservative evangelical' (although what it stands for is precious to me) because it makes it seem that we are not radical, that we are happy with the *status quo* in church or society. If 'conservative' is understood to mean 'seeking continual reformation, but in a conservative and peaceful rather than a revolutionary or anarchical way', or simply 'conservative as opposed to liberal', I am happy with it. But so often it has meant simply fighting to preserve the past without any thought for present or future. For that reason I find the title 'classical evangelical' much more congenial. And this very conscious change in the way we think about ourselves should help to remind us that authentic protestant evangelicalism is always radical in looking afresh at what Scripture says, though never liberal in replacing Scripture with our own opinions.

All too often liberalism has arisen because of a proper fear of getting stuck in a traditionalist rut, or in an attempt to revive an orthodox but apparently dead congregation. We must not fall into liberalism, questioning or defying the truth or authority of God's word. But we must be fully radical, always ready to question traditions, formularies, interpretations of Scripture, and submit them all to God's word itself.

Liberalism is one of Satan's greatest weapons against the church. But conservative or traditional reaction against it is no protection. Traditionalism, espoused in the attempt to resist liberalism, can so easily lead us to put our faith in good things, such as the Prayer Book or the Authorized Version, which then become idols. And liberalism continues to attack, leading us to dead orthodoxy where we cherish the formularies, liturgies and traditions, but fail to hear or meet the living God who calls us to continual renewal and reformation. Liberalism attacks with equal ease the traditionalist and the radical. The only safeguard is to ensure that we are fully biblical: biblically traditional, biblically radical, approaching God through his word, living under that word.

Fighting liberalism

Since liberalism is such a great danger to the church, how can we guard against it? Not by reactionary traditionalism, or by trendy experimentation, but only by sound doctrine, careful teaching, and bold outreach (guarding the gospel must include preaching it as well as protecting it, and churches which aim for orthodoxy without outreach inevitably lose even their orthodoxy). I suggest six themes necessary today in preaching and protecting God's word.

1. Scripture and the point of revelation

What evangelicals must insist on is that it is the written word which is God's revelation rather than the events which the word describes.

Thorough liberals will deny revelation altogether, but others affected by liberalism, including so many so called evangelical Bible scholars and preachers, go halfway to that by claiming to find revelation other than in Scripture, or by denying that Scripture is God's one and only word to us.

2. Inerrancy (God's unerring word)
The Scriptures are completely true, reliable and trustworthy in all that they affirm. What the Bible teaches us about history or geography, men and women, the thoughts, words and deeds of God—all this is to be believed and obeyed without reservation. The inerrancy of Scripture (or, if you prefer less abstract language, God's unerring word) must be our watchword against liberalism. If in doubt what a passage means or how it applies we will believe it literally and obey it absolutely. God will honour that because we are honouring him.

3. Sufficiency
Article 6 of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles of Religion spells out the biblical truth that Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that nobody is to be required to believe anything that is not found in Scripture or provable from Scripture. Romanism has always tried to add to the Bible, forcing its adherents to believe extra-biblical doctrines. Liberalism does exactly the same, asking us to accept that you can be saved without Christ, or that homosexual practice is acceptable in the church, or that gender distinctions are irrelevant today. We need confidence and faithfulness on this critical point.

4. Interpretation
Interpreting the Bible is very important, and here the differences between evangelicals, Romans and liberals are seen very clearly. There are three basic ways in which Scripture is interpreted.

i) Scripture interpreted by the church. This is the Roman Catholic and in practice the anglo-catholic position: it is the church alone which can give an authoritative interpretation of Scripture, particularly where there are major disagreements, or issues at stake over which Christians are not unanimous. So the Roman church is lumbered with many decrees which most Romans would far rather not have. They cannot do away with them because of their view of the infallibility of councils and of popes. And we in the Anglican Communion have a few Lambeth statements which are best forgotten. Scripture interpreted by the church is a danger and it ends up not being true Scripture.

ii) Scripture interpreted by human reason or conscience. This is what we find in the 'liberal' churches, where if something in Scripture does not seem to be what we want to hear, what we think God is like, what we think God is saying; we need to re-interpret that passage (possibly to reverse its

meaning completely), in order to make sure that it fits in with the way we see the world, or the way we feel things ought to be.

iii) Scripture interpreted by itself. This is the classic protestant position and the right one, difficult though it often is to work out in practice. This involves doctrinal, historical and linguistic study of the text. It involves reading Scripture in the light of Scripture, allowing clearer passages to shed light on less clear ones, allowing central teachings to shed light on more peripheral ones. This is the right approach to Scripture, when we say that no outside force will shape our thinking or understanding. If the church shapes our understanding of Scripture we have accepted catholic heresy; if our own thinking or the world shapes our understanding of Scripture we have accepted liberal heresy. We need to submit ourselves to Scripture, to fill ourselves with Scripture so much that it is the Bible alone which enables us to understand the Bible.

5. Fact and faith, word and spirit

At the heart of liberal Christianity, as we have seen, is a separation between fact and faith. Orthodox believers insist that faith rests firmly upon facts of history, geography and so on: they say with Scripture that if the resurrection did not happen preaching is futile, faith is pointless, and we might as well go home. Liberals say that faith and fact are different categories altogether, with no necessary link between them. What this really is, theologically, is a divorce between word and Spirit. 'The letter kills, but the spirit gives life' (2 Corinthians 3:6) has often been misused to argue that over-reliance on Scripture or on historical or doctrinal detail destroys the vitality of faith. (The text does not mean that at all, but reading Scripture in context is not one of liberalism's greatest strengths.) Liberals are saying that the Bible is a liability if we stick too closely to it. They argue that God, the Spirit, is free from any slavish reliance on Scripture—and so should we be.

But the biblical Christian knows full well that word and Spirit belong together and always work together. The Spirit does not work in revelation or salvation save by the word which he inspired. God is bound by his word, in that it is a faithful expression of his character and will. Jesus said: 'The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing'. But he continued: 'The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life' (John 6:63). To claim activity for the Spirit apart from the word is every bit as wrong as to claim that the word without the Spirit can do God's work. True believers rejoice in word and Spirit, and happily submit to both.

6. Freedom under authority

We will not insist on rigid authoritarianism as do Rome and many of the house churches. Neither will we justify lawlessness as in practice do the liberals. Under the authority of God's word we are free from the power of sin, guilt, death, judgment, hell and the devil. We are free to be the people God made us to be, free to live for him. His service is perfect freedom.

Reformation today

You may have heard or read of the call by George Austin, Archdeacon of York, made before General Synod's vote on the ordination of women on 11 November 1992, for a split in the Church of England. We do not share all his catholic views, but we will certainly agree with him on the basics: the full deity and humanity of Christ, the virgin birth and the resurrection, the cross as the only way to eternal life, and the need for divine revelation since man cannot by himself reach up to God. He is articulating a frustration felt by many (myself included) about the way that liberals continue to dominate the Church of England's hierarchy and bureaucracy.

What George Austin is calling for is in effect two parallel churches, so that our opposition to liberalism can be seen more clearly. Thus if a diocese had a liberal bishop it would have an orthodox suffragan or assistant, and parishes could insist on having the sound man to perform confirmations or inductions. Parishes would be free to advertise themselves as being part of the orthodox wing of the Church of England, and would not be bound to pay any attention to liberalizing legislation from synods. Since the General Synod vote of last November there have been clearer calls for a Third Province (alongside Canterbury and York, but made up by voluntary membership of churches anywhere in England and attempting to maintain traditional doctrines and practices). My guess is that more than half the parishes would want to be identified with a thorough-going biblical orthodoxy, perhaps not going quite as far as the Third Province proposals, though well under half of the diocesan bishops would. But is a split the answer? Many would say yes, not least because so many good lay people are leaving the Church of England, either to join the free evangelicals and the house churches or to go nowhere at all: such folk are fed up with the liberalism at the centre. I am not at all sure about a split, because it would give some sort of legitimacy to the liberals as a genuine part of the church—and it would ally evangelicals rather too closely with anglo-catholics. I am very happy to work with anglo-catholics in fighting battles against liberalism, but the day must come when we need to fight against the ritualism and the sacramentalism which they have introduced to the Church of England in the last hundred or so years.

The strength of the Church of England (apart from the gospel itself) is the parish system, its local base. It is at its weakest when it meets in synods, discusses political and social issues, sets up permanent or semi-permanent boards, committees and commissions, and in other ways moves away from its real job of proclaiming and applying the gospel. We should never ignore other churches (of our own denomination or others) or become isolationist. We should always seek warm links of fellowship and co-operation with all gospel-loving congregations. But let us be clear: the local church is what really counts in God's kingdom. We need to move to a system where parishes are much more autonomous, where central synods, boards and committees are small and unimportant (if they need to

exist at all), where dioceses are seen as administrative units rather than mother churches, where clergy training is parish-based rather than dependent on colleges or universities, and where parishes work together in a voluntary way with those they trust when they feel the need to do so. In fact a proper biblical doctrine of the church will lead to such a development. Scripture and the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion are very clear about the priority of the local church.

There is certainly a need in England for a national body like Church Society, with its teaching and encouraging ministry, helping individual parishes and clergy to see the issues, and protecting them from error or dangerous trends. I think that the society's work needs to expand, so that it can offer more resources and help to those who want to stand clearly for the biblical gospel today. In theory all this is the job of bishops, but most of them shirk it. But then in theory bishops should not have the ridiculous task of pastoring two or three hundred congregations. Biblically, and according to the Thirty-nine Articles, the primary focus of the church is the local congregation, not the diocese or the denomination. If a bishop is an overseer or senior pastor there should be a bishop in each parish—in fact that is how we should think of every vicar and rector. All those with oversight (*episkope*) in the Christian church, not just those we call bishops, are to guard the gospel.

If we are going to stand against liberalism today without being reactionary or obscurantist we will need to pray, teach and work for further reformation. The reformers of the sixteenth century did not complete the work they started, and virtually nobody has done anything along those lines since then. We will need to identify issues and act on them to ensure that our Church of England is both relevant to today (as the liberals want) and faithful to Scripture (as the traditionalists want). On some issues we will be popular with one group, on some with the other, on many with neither. Taking the sixteenth century reformation on into the twenty-first century is our task. It will include rethinking our doctrines of ministry, sacraments, public worship and evangelism (among others). I hope and pray that God will give us the grace and courage to be faithful—and that he will have mercy on the Church of England so that future reformation takes place within it rather than outside it.

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NOTES

1 Some of the material was written for other purposes: substantial parts of two papers on 'Christianity and Liberalism' given at the 1992 Church Society (Ireland) conference, but here altered and rearranged; part of an article, 'What's happening to the C of E?' which appeared in *Cross†Way*, Autumn 1991; excerpts from my paper 'Under Authority: Putting the Bible First' given at the 1992 Church Society conference; small parts of my

paper 'Reforming the Local Church' given at the 1992 Bishopsgate Conference and published in edited form in *Briefing*. I have also used material from the Interfaith Newsletter published by Action for Biblical Witness to our Nation.

2 This paper was read to the 1993 Church Society Conference held at Swanwick 15–17 April 1993.