

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## The Marks of Neo-Liberalism

Paul M. Elliott

*In October The Trinity Foundation will release an important new book by Paul M. Elliott, former Ruling Elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This essay is an excerpt from chapter 2 of that book, Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond.*

*A free copy of this book will be sent to everyone whose purchases or gifts to The Foundation total \$200 or more during August-October. To purchase the book, please send \$25.95 (\$19.95 plus \$6.00 shipping) to the address above.*

Using the word “neo-liberalism” in the same sentence with the name “Orthodox Presbyterian Church” violates a widely accepted but false paradigm held by the vast majority in the OPC.<sup>1</sup> They believe that their denomination remains a bastion of conservative theology. They reject the idea that liberalism of any description could have gained a foothold in the OPC, much less have come to seriously corrupt it.

In this paradigm, liberalism by definition exists only outside the denomination – among “them,” but certainly not among “us.” Other denominations, including the PCUSA, from which the OPC emerged, deserve to be called liberal, but there are no liberals in the OPC. So, by definition, this paradigm says that there can be no liberal-conservative struggle within the OPC.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, those who are bound by this paradigm insist that any controversies that exist within the OPC are nothing more than intramural disagreements among conservatives. And, therefore, they must be about “things on which sound men may differ.” Three generations ago many people in the PCUSA held tenaciously to the same kind of paradigm. But subsequent events proved that their spiritual vision was seriously defective.

Skeptics have said to me, “Alright then, prove your case. Where are the marks of liberalism in the OPC? We don’t see any. The OPC hasn’t changed its confessional

standards. The OPC isn’t ordaining women or homosexuals to the ministry. The OPC isn’t tolerating New Age paganism. The OPC is not even seriously discussing things like admitting women to the office of deacon.”

All of this is true, of course. But the presence of such evils does not define liberalism. Churches that we would identify as liberal by those marks did not one day “flip an apostasy switch.” They did not suddenly write entirely new confessions of faith, place women and homosexuals in their pulpits, and begin holding pagan ceremonies honoring the goddess Sophia – all of which happened in the PCUSA decades *after* conservatives separated to form the OPC. Those evils are the manifestations of final apostasy, when the cancer of liberalism has completed its work, and there are few if any living cells in the body of a “church” consumed by spiritual disease.

Nor does the *absence* of these evils in the OPC mean the absence of neo-liberalism’s spiritual corruption. Satan, the adversary of the true Church of Jesus Christ, is much subtler in his strategies than Christians often imagine. He is far too cunning to invade the church in a single frontal attack bringing sudden and widespread devastation. Rather, *Ephesians* 6:11 speaks of “the wiles of the devil” – his *methodias*. The adversary of the church uses cunning and deceit to bring about a gradual downgrade.

The history of the church tells us that a church’s descent toward full apostasy usually begins subtly and gains momentum gradually. It can occur over the course of decades or even generations. It may consist of many small downward steps, sometimes punctuated by temporary recoveries. The events of the incremental decline, even if recognized as such, may seem isolated and insignificant, and the issues not worth fighting over, until the larger pattern emerges. By then, it is often too late to overcome the momentum of the downward slide. The downgrade always has a beginning, it always has root causes, and it almost always reaches a point of crisis where true believers in Christ must face a test of their loyalties.

<sup>1</sup>This is also true of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

### **The Marks of the Old Liberalism**

To debunk the no-liberals-here paradigm in the PCUSA, in 1923 J. Gresham Machen publicly identified the marks of the liberalism of that time. Machen said that liberalism is chiefly characterized by “its attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> These fundamentals include the Biblical doctrine of God, and the Biblical doctrine of man (54-68). He said that liberalism is at first equivocal about the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, and that such equivocation begins the downward spiral to open denial (69-79). He said that “in their attitude toward Jesus, Christianity and liberalism are sharply opposed” (80). He said that “with regard to the gospel itself, modern liberalism is diametrically opposed to Christianity” (54). Machen observed that liberalism

differs from Christianity with regard to the presuppositions of the gospel (the view of God and the view of man), with regard to the Book in which the gospel is contained, and with regard to the Person whose work the gospel sets forth. It is not surprising then that it differs from Christianity in its account of the gospel itself; it is not surprising that it presents an entirely different view of the way of salvation. Liberalism finds salvation (so far as it is willing to speak at all of “salvation”) in man; Christianity finds it in an act of God [117].

Machen also noted that liberalism discards the distinction between the visible church – all who *call* themselves “Christians” – and the invisible church, those whom *God* has truly called to salvation (158-159).

Machen rightly viewed the crisis in the PCUSA as not merely an intramural dispute among conservatives. Thus, he defined the conflict in its proper terms – the warfare between authentic Biblical Christianity and liberalism’s counterfeit. Machen saw Christianity and liberalism as we must see them today: not two different brands of Christianity, but two different and irreconcilable sets of beliefs, one leading to Heaven, the other to Hell. The two may often use the same vocabulary, but one is true, while the other is false. There is no middle ground. Counterfeits often look exactly like the genuine article, except on careful examination. Machen wrote:

Clear-cut definition of terms in religious matters, bold facing of the logical implications of religious views, is by many persons regarded as an impious proceeding. May it not discourage contribution to mission boards? May it not hinder the progress of consolidation, and produce a poor showing in the columns of Church statistics? But with such persons we cannot possibly bring ourselves to agree. Light may seem at times to be an impertinent intruder, but it is always beneficial in the end. The type of religion which rejoices in the pious sound of traditional phrases, regardless of their meanings, or

shrinks from “controversial” matters, will never stand amid the shocks of life. In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called “modernism” or “liberalism” [1-2].

We are not dealing here with delicate personal questions; we are not presuming to say whether such and such an individual man is a Christian or not. God only can decide such questions; no man can say with assurance whether the attitude of certain individual “liberals” toward Christ is saving faith or not. But one thing is perfectly plain – whether or [not] liberals are Christians, it is at any rate perfectly clear that liberalism is not Christianity [160].

The OPC’s neo-liberalism today shares the core characteristics of the PCUSA’s old liberalism in the 1920s and 1930s. The OPC is repeating the mistakes of history. Satan has not corrupted the OPC with precisely the same forms of error that he employed three generations ago. The church would perhaps be on its guard for that. Today the error is expressed in different words and with contemporary points of emphasis. But it has the same destructive force, and confronting it requires the same spiritual alertness and resolve.

What then are the marks of neo-liberalism, and how do they parallel the old liberalism of the past? We present here six key characteristics in abbreviated form. We will develop them more fully in later chapters, as we examine their deadly effects on the OPC and beyond.

### **Neo-Liberalism’s False Conception of God**

*The old liberalism and today’s neo-liberalism both begin with an un-Biblical conception of God.*

The old liberalism championed a form of mysticism – a God who is unknowable and need not be known. Machen observed that liberalism “is opposed to Christianity, in the first place, in its conception of God.... It is unnecessary, we are told, to have a ‘conception’ of God; theology, or the knowledge of God, it is said, is the death of religion; we should not seek to know God, but should merely feel His presence” (54).

The old liberals made God the mystical and universal father of all men. Thus they made all men brothers, and placed man in the same relationship to God as Jesus

<sup>2</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 1923, 17.

because He was man's "brother." The relationship of "father" and "son" was, in the old liberal view, merely an analogy of something mystical and incomprehensible....

Like the old liberalism, today's neo-liberalism is also founded on a mystical conception of God. Herman Bavinck,<sup>3</sup> a philosophical hero of neo-liberal theologians such as Norman Shepherd, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., and John M. Frame, asserted the following in the second volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*:

Mystery is the vital element of Dogmatics. It is true that the term "mystery" in Scripture does not indicate abstract-supernatural truth in the Romish sense; nevertheless, the idea that the believer would be able to understand and comprehend intellectually the revealed mysteries is equally unscriptural. On the contrary, the truth which God has revealed concerning himself in nature and in Scripture far surpasses human conception and comprehension. In that sense Dogmatics is concerned with nothing but mystery.<sup>4</sup>

Bavinck thus begins an entire volume on the doctrine of God by telling believers that we "cannot understand and comprehend intellectually" the God of the Bible – not even after He has clearly revealed Himself in Scripture. Bavinck uses the term "mystery" in an un-Scriptural sense, and one that is far more "Romish" than he admits. Mysteries in the Word of God are not that which remains inscrutable, but rather divine secrets that have been revealed and explained in the Scriptures for human understanding through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

Bavinck continues his discourse by acknowledging that God has revealed Himself. This seems encouraging until the reader sees the kind of God that Bavinck says has been revealed. He claims that "Christian theology made the idea of God's incomprehensibility and unknowability its point of departure.... God's revelation in creation and redemption fails to reveal him adequately" (21). He seeks to support this viewpoint by approvingly quoting a number of early and medieval theologians:<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, adequate knowledge of God does not exist. There is no name that makes known to us his being.... The words *Father, God, Lord*, are not real names but "appellations derived from his good deeds and functions" [21].

The fact that God exists is evident, but "what he is in his essence and nature is entirely incomprehensible and unknowable." When we say that God is unborn, immutable, without beginning, etc., we are only saying

what he is *not*. To say what he is, is impossible. He is nothing of all that which exists... [22, emphasis in the original].

...[T]here is no concept, expression, or word, by which God's being can be indicated. Accordingly, whenever we wish to designate God, we use metaphorical language. He is "supersubstantial infinity, supermental unity," etc. We cannot form a conception of that unitary, unknown being, transcendent above all being, above goodness, above every name and word and thought. We can only name him in accordance with his works, because he is the cause and principle of everything. Hence, on the one hand he is "without name," on the other hand he "has many names." But those positive names which we ascribe to God because of his works do not disclose his essential being to us, for they pertain to him in an entirely different manner than to creatures. Hence, negative theology is better than positive, for the former teaches us God's transcendence above the creature. Nevertheless, even negative theology fails to give us any knowledge of God's being, for in reality God is exalted above both "negation and affirmation" [22-23].

Whatever is said concerning God is not God...[25].

Bavinck wrongly claims that "Reformed theologians were in agreement with this view" (47) from the time of the Reformation. "Gradually, however," he says, "the significance of the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility was lost sight of also in those circles where the principles of the Reformation once flourished." Bavinck considers this an error that must be reversed (26). And from this starting point, he builds an entire systematic theology. Commenting on these statements, John W. Robbins observes that

any informed Christian, actually any sane person, reading these pages in Bavinck, would stop and lay his book aside. The reader has just been told, repeatedly and emphatically, that no thought or language adequately and accurately describes God, that we have and can have no knowledge of God. If that is so, there is obviously no point in reading further, unless it is to attain a clinical understanding of how a mind can become so disordered as to write a book on a subject about which he can know and say nothing. This is the Antichristian irrationalism that passes for Christian theology in both Protestant and Catholic, "conservative" and "liberal" seminaries. It explains a great deal about the "dialectical," that is, contradictory, pronouncements that issue forth from every modern school of theology. In such a turbid atmosphere, anything goes, including the simultaneous affirmations that justification is by faith alone and also by faith and works. No Christian doctrine, none whatsoever, can be maintained in such a mystical, skeptical, and irrational framework. It is a black hole that swallows and extinguishes all light and all rational thought. It is the medieval mother of all

<sup>3</sup> 1854-1921; Professor of Systematic Theology, Free University of Amsterdam, 1902-1921.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, translated and edited by William Hendriksen (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 13.

<sup>5</sup> The words in quotation marks are from early and medieval theologians; the rest are Bavinck's own words.

heresies, for the rejection of propositional revelation is the root of all error. Bavinck was a conduit carrying this rubbish into Reformed theology in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

Bavinck was not the only such conduit. Cornelius Van Til, professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia from 1929 to 1972, and the leading philosophical influence on WTS and on three generations of OPC ministers, held that “we dare not maintain that [God’s] knowledge and [human] knowledge coincide at any single point.”<sup>7</sup> This position leads, as we shall see shortly, to a completely defective view of the nature and authority of the Scriptures.

### **Neo-Liberalism’s False Conception of Man**

*The old liberalism and today’s neo-liberalism share an un-Scriptural conception of man and his fallen state.*

Liberalism, said Machen, adopted a view of man that produced confidence in human goodness, a loss of consciousness of sin, and a defective conception of the law of God.<sup>8</sup> Liberalism denied the enormity of sin. It viewed man as essentially capable of improvement by imitating the ethical example of Christ. The old liberalism thus taught people to live by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Liberalism’s view of man, Machen observed, is diametrically opposed to the Bible’s. Scripture portrays the law as the schoolmaster that brings men to Christ, causing them to recognize their inability to keep it and their resulting condemnation before God, in order “that we may be justified by faith” (*Galatians* 3:24)....

Neo-liberalism’s view of man echoes the old liberalism’s preaching. In the OPC this thinking has been propagated for three decades through the teachings of Norman Shepherd<sup>9</sup> and his supporters. In his book *The Call of Grace* Shepherd writes:

Because the evangelistic methodology prescribed for Abraham and his descendants was to result in worldwide blessing, Jesus prescribed precisely the same methodology for his church when he said that all nations of the earth were to be disciplined by “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (*Matt.* 28:20). Just as the gospel of the Abrahamic covenant taught God’s people to do what is right and just (*Gen.* 18:19), so the gospel of the new covenant teaches us to seek first the righteousness of the

kingdom of God (*Matt.* 6:33). The gospel of the kingdom (*Matt.* 4:23) is the Sermon on the Mount (*Matt.* 5-7).<sup>10</sup>

Shepherd asserts that “the Lord God deals with the power and corruption of sin by teaching his people how to live happy and productive lives.”<sup>11</sup>

Shepherd’s “gospel” is not the good news of redemption for helpless sinners who stand under God’s condemnation and wrath, who have no righteousness of their own, and who need their sins imputed to Christ and the righteousness of Christ’s active obedience imputed to them. On the contrary, Shepherd rejects what he at least correctly calls the “evangelical view” that Jesus “fulfilled all the requirements of the law, and his law keeping is imputed to believers for their justification.” He claims that the Apostle Paul did not teach this, despite his clear presentation of it in passages such as *2 Corinthians* 5:21 (“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”). Rather, Shepherd teaches that the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ was a later corruption of Reformed theology.<sup>12</sup>

In its place, Shepherd teaches a pseudo-gospel of salvation through good works done by people who have been made capable of doing good works because they have been baptized:

For Abraham, the sign of both covenant privilege and covenant responsibility was circumcision. Paul calls circumcision “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith” (*Rom.* 4:11), and is therefore simultaneously covenant privilege and responsibility.

Corresponding to circumcision in the Great Commission is baptism, indicative at once of the grace of God and the response of faith, repentance, and obedience. As the Israel of the old covenant becomes the church of the new covenant, the circumcised people of God must be baptized, as they were on the Day of Pentecost. At the same time, the circumcision of the nations is accomplished in and through their baptism into Christ [76].

And what is the significance of baptism in Shepherd’s false gospel? “[B]aptism, the sign and seal of the covenant, marks the point of conversion. Baptism is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved” [94].

<sup>6</sup> John W. Robbins, *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> *Minutes of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the OPC*, 1945, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 64-68.

<sup>9</sup> Born 1933; former OPC and currently Christian Reformed minister; Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, 1963-1981; highly influential neo-liberal speaker and writer.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000), 75-76.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Shepherd, *Law and Gospel in Covenant Perspective* (privately published by the author, 2004); reproduced with his permission at [www.christianculture.com](http://www.christianculture.com).

<sup>12</sup> Norman Shepherd, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology,” in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, P. Andrew Sandlin, editor (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media Foundation, 2004), 85-86.

Shepherd teaches that evangelism should focus on baptism, and not on regeneration.

In contrast to regeneration-evangelism, a methodology oriented to the covenant structure of Scripture and to the Great Commission presents baptism as the transition point from death to life. The specific terms of the Great Commission describe the process of making disciples in terms of baptism and instruction in the commands of Christ. This means that evangelism does not end with regeneration, but continues as long as a person lives. Baptism marks the entrance into the kingdom of God and the beginning of life-long training as kingdom subjects. According to the Great Commission, conversion without baptism is an anomaly. A sinner is not "really converted" until he is baptized.

...The Philippian jailer and the members of his household are not said to have been regenerated or converted, but to have been baptized. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is usually thought of as the time of his conversion. The Bible does not say when he was regenerated, but it does say when he was baptized (*Acts 9:18*). His baptism marks the time when his sins were washed away (*Acts 22:16*).<sup>13</sup> When Paul exhorts the Romans to obey God, he does not remind them that they were regenerated or suggest that they might not be regenerate. Rather, he points to their baptism, and calls them to live out of that experience (*Rom. 6:1-11*).

...Christians are those who have been baptized. Unbelievers are those who have not been baptized.<sup>14</sup>

Rev. Mr. Tom Trouwborst, graduate of neo-liberal Bahnsen Theological Seminary, pastor of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Schenectady, New York, and proponent of Federal Vision theology, concurs with Shepherd. Trouwborst states that baptized "children of believers, even from infancy, have regeneration, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins."<sup>15</sup>

Shepherd's teachings are also echoed in so-called "covenant succession" theology that is gaining increasing acceptance in the OPC, PCA, and elsewhere. Typical of its tenets are these statements by Dr. Robert S. Rayburn:

<sup>13</sup> Protestant exegetes (employing the principles that Scripture is its own interpreter and that less clear passages must be understood in the light of those that are more clear) have long recognized that *Acts 22:16* does not support the doctrine of the remission of sins through the waters of baptism. And in *Acts 22:13*, Paul recalls that Ananias addresses the recently-converted and newly-commissioned apostle as "Brother Saul" before baptizing him. Also, Paul himself distinguishes baptism from the Gospel: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel" (*1 Corinthians 1:17*).

<sup>14</sup> Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 100-101.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Trouwborst, "A Response to 'The Reformed Doctrine of Regeneration'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons* (Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 193.

It is affirmed... The [baptized] children of Christian parents are to be considered Christians...until and unless they prove the contrary. Their situation, in other words, is the same as any other church member. It is denied: Covenant children are to be evangelized like every other lost sinner.

...It is denied: The spiritual history of covenant children will be marked by an experience of conversion....

...It is denied: Christian children, before reaching an age at which they are able to make a profession of faith, can, at best, only be considered as "Christians to be." [It is denied that] in general they are to be regarded as unsaved until they show evidence of true faith in Christ.

...It is denied: The teaching of covenant succession is likely to produce nominalism and a crippling self-confidence.<sup>16</sup>

But that is exactly what it does produce. To say that someone may simply look to his baptism and to a lack of evidence of outright apostasy in his life as the proof of his salvation is not the Scriptural standard. There are millions of baptized people who live moral lives but are on their way to Hell. They are still in their sins.

To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ – to confess with the mouth, and believe with the heart – is the standard. Any other standard is nominalism by definition, and produces a self-confidence that is not merely crippling but soul-damning. Covenant succession is another error of the Pharisees that both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ denounced (*Matthew 3:7-12*, *John 8:31-47*). Our confidence must be in the blood of Jesus Christ, and that alone. And to say that we do not need to evangelize our children is to disobey God's command: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (*Mark 16:15*). We are to bear witness to our children of the salvation that is in Christ, just as Israel was instructed to bear witness to it in a figure: "And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt....'" Despite these clear teachings of Scripture, the OPC's May 2005 *New Horizons* magazine published a glowing review of a book promoting the covenant succession error. The book's contributors include Trouwborst, Rayburn, Joel Belz of *World* magazine, R. C. Sproul, Jr., and Douglas Wilson.

Shepherd and other neo-liberals teach that man's salvation depends on a combination of God's grace and personal obedience beginning with water baptism, with the clear implication that man is capable of doing his part in

<sup>16</sup> Robert Rayburn in "Quotations on Covenant Succession," *Credenda Agenda*, Volume 13, No. 2. Rayburn is pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church (PCA), Tacoma, Washington; President of the Board of Trustees of Covenant College; and a frequent theological consultant to numerous PCA committees.

effecting his salvation. Shepherd asserts that “abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments” (*John* 15:5,10; *1 John* 3:13, 24) [is] necessary for continuing in the state of justification” and “the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day.”<sup>17</sup> This is also the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church....

In an article misleadingly titled “Justification by Faith Alone,” Shepherd asserts that “saving faith has to be the same as justifying faith.”<sup>18</sup> For his purposes, he makes it clear, the two terms are interchangeable. On this basis, he overthrows the Biblical distinction between the empty-handed faith by which a sinner is justified – declared not guilty based on the life, death, and imputed righteousness of Christ alone — and the *evidences* of saving faith manifesting themselves in a changed life through the grace of sanctification. Contrary to Shepherd’s false gospel, Scripture plainly teaches that there is no such thing as justification by “faith-plus-works” (*Galatians* 2:16, 3:1-3, 3:12; *Romans* 4:4-5). In God’s economy, faith and works are mutually exclusive in justification; mingling the two is impossible. Add one iota of works to faith, and it is no longer faith (*Romans* 11:6). But Shepherd says that the impossible is not only possible, but *necessary*. He redefines faith as “faith-plus.” He erects a false doctrine of justification that un-Scripturally packs all sorts of works into the “saving faith” which he equates with “justifying faith”....

Shepherd calls his false doctrine a “covenantal understanding of the way of salvation.” He believes it provides the basis “for a common understanding between Romanism and evangelical Protestantism.”<sup>19</sup> And so it would, since it repeals the Reformation, capitulating to the Roman Catholic view of man as able to cooperate with divine grace in obtaining salvation through good works.

Like the liberal “gospel” that Machen described, Shepherd’s neo-liberal “gospel” is good news only for good people. It is a call not to sinners, but to those who think they are righteous. Jesus told the “good” people of His day, the Pharisees who boasted in their covenantal position and lawkeeping, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (*Luke* 5:31-32).

Shepherd finds this works-centered gospel superior to “methodologies oriented to the doctrines of election and regeneration” (77). Thus Shepherd rejects the methodology of Jesus himself in *John* 6, which caused many who had professed to be disciples, but were actually relying on their own goodness, to follow Him no more (verse 66)....

### **Neo-Liberalism’s Defective View of Scripture**

<sup>17</sup> Norman Shepherd, *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works*, theses 22 and 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Spring 2002, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 59.

*The old liberalism and today’s neo-liberalism both jettison sound principles of interpreting Scripture, and thus ultimately reject its authority.*

Defective hermeneutics are erected on the foundation of defective doctrines of God and man. Like the serpent tempting Eve in the garden, liberalism’s opening moves are to plant doubt about the clear meaning of God’s Word (“Has God indeed said...?”) and to elevate human interpretive wisdom (“Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”).

The old liberalism’s infamous *Auburn Affirmation* held that PCUSA ministers could believe that the Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit, but without believing that they were inerrant.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the old liberalism characterized key doctrines of authentic Biblical Christianity as “not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of [the] facts and doctrines of our religion.” Liberalism insisted that other theories were admissible – theories rooted not in the plain sense of Scripture as revealed by its Author, but in anti-Biblical secular scholarship.

The old liberalism said that those who hold such un-Biblical views, “whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and trust.” In liberalism’s view, such men should be accepted in the ministry without reservation so long as they continue to profess, whether through disingenuousness or delusion, that they subscribe to the doctrinal standards of the church when in fact they do not.

In chillingly similar words, today’s neo-liberalism in the OPC asserts that we must “cultivate a hermeneutic of trust,” even when men differ in their views of foundational doctrines. We must, neo-liberalism says, cultivate a “community of interpretation” that sustains “confessional integrity among its ministerial membership” without requiring agreement on foundational doctrines or on sound methods of Biblical interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

In this vein, neo-liberalism entertains strange views of what it means to interpret Scripture “literally” or “historically.” The 2004 General Assembly of the OPC approved and commended to its churches a study committee *Report* which states that widely divergent teachings on the nature and length of the days of creation in *Genesis* 1 all fall into the category of “literal” and “historical” interpretations. In neo-liberalism’s interpretive world of no fixed rules, a “literal” and “historical” day can be virtually anything one wishes it to be – an ordinary day,

<sup>20</sup> The *Auburn Affirmation* appears in full in Appendix A.

<sup>21</sup> “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation” (Commissioners’ Workbook for the 71<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004), page 1607. Available online at <http://www.opc.org/GA/CreationReport.pdf>. Members of the Committee were Leonard J. Coppes, Bryan D. Estelle, C. Lee Irons, John R. Muether, Alan R. Pontier, Alan D. Strange (Chairman), and Peter J. Wallace.

an ambiguous literary figure, or a day-age comprising billions of years (1604). The *Report* further says that, despite the unmistakable order in the text, *Genesis* 1 “need not be [viewed as] chronological” in order to be viewed as “historical” (1603-1604, 1631-1634, 1637, 1642-1643).

If Christians apply neo-liberalism’s no-rules method of interpretation to the Bible as a whole – and why shouldn’t they if seminary professors and ministers in the OPC lead the way? – then no doctrine is safe from radical revision.

None of this is surprising given the fact that neo-liberalism has its philosophical basis in the thinking of men such as Herman Bavinck and Cornelius Van Til. In his Introduction to an edition of Benjamin B. Warfield’s *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Van Til asserted,

When the Christian restates the content of Scriptural revelation in the form of a “system,” such a system is based upon and therefore analogous to the “existential system” that God himself possesses. Being based upon God’s revelation it is on the one hand, fully true and, on the other hand, *at no point identical* with the content of the divine mind.<sup>22</sup>

Van Til also says elsewhere that both theology and apologetics must be based on the principle that Scripture contains only an “analogical system of truth.”<sup>23</sup> Van Til looks backward to Bavinck for support, asserting that the Amsterdam theologian was “insistent...that the Scriptures are the Word of God and that its system of truth is an analogical system.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Scriptures contain a system of “truth” that is “at no point identical with” but somehow resembles the unknowable truth in God’s mind. The statements of Scripture are not God’s truth itself.

Robert L. Reymond observes that Van Til’s depiction of God’s self-interpreting revelation in Scripture

is no longer analogy at all but a form of equivocality, which God, according to Van Til, chooses to call true although it coincides at no point with the truth. This contention ultimately ascribes irrationality to God and ignorance to man....<sup>25</sup>

In answer to this key principle in Van Tilian thought, Gordon H. Clark maintained that if God possesses the truth, and man possesses in Scripture only an analogy of God’s truth – containing only that which is, in Van Til’s words, “*at no point identical* with the content of the divine mind” – then it follows that man does not have the truth at

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Van Til, Introduction to B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 33. Emphasis is in the original.

<sup>23</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), 298.

<sup>24</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 296.

<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 103.

all.<sup>26</sup> (And, I would quickly add, the Bible cannot be inspired, inerrant, or fully authoritative.) Clark contends that:

To avoid this irrationalism, which of course is a denial of the divine image, we must insist that truth is the same for God and man. Naturally, we may not know the truth about some matters. But if we know anything at all, what we must know must be identical with what God knows. God knows all truth, and unless we know something God knows, our ideas are untrue. It is absolutely essential, therefore, to insist that there is an area of coincidence between God’s mind and our mind. One example, as good as any, is the one already used, namely, David was King of Israel.<sup>27</sup>

And God’s truth – communicated directly and not in analogical form – is precisely what God the Holy Spirit has given us in the pages of Scripture. It is true that in numerous passages the Word of God employs analogies – comparisons based on resemblance – as in the types and symbols of Christ in the Old Testament. But Scripture is not, as Van Til plainly asserted, nothing but an analogy *in toto* of things of which human beings have – and can have – no knowledge. Van Til’s assertion eliminates the concept of analogy as God uses it in the Scriptures.

Tellingly, Van Til himself admitted a key defect of his writings on theology and apologetics: “The lack of detailed scriptural exegesis is a lack in all of my writings. I have no excuse for this....”<sup>28</sup> Yet Van Tilian philosophy – taught by Van Til himself to generations of OPC ministers and future seminary professors, and still championed today by his followers at Westminster and many other schools – is the foundation on which much of neo-liberal thought has been erected....

### **Neo-Liberalism’s False Confessional Unity**

*The old liberalism and today’s neo-liberalism seek to unify truth and falsehood under the same confessional tent.*

The liberalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century said that doctrinal inclusivism promoting “unity of spirit” was far more important than careful agreement on doctrinal foundations.<sup>29</sup> Today’s neo-liberalism asserts that those who preach another gospel can peacefully coexist in the same church with those who hold the truth. It says that together they must “await development of a consensus”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gordon H. Clark, “The Bible as Truth,” in *God’s Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics*, 24-38.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 76-77.

<sup>28</sup> *Jerusalem and Athens, Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan, 203-204.

<sup>29</sup> Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* [1940] 1992), 35.

<sup>30</sup> Frame, Foreword to *Backbone of the Bible*, xi.

on issues of fundamental doctrine that are in fact forever settled in the Word of God.

As we said at the beginning of this book, neo-liberals pretend to be what they are not, and profess to believe what they do not. Neo-liberals profess to believe in the God of the Bible, but they teach an unknowable God of their own imagining. Neo-liberals profess to know the truth, but they teach that for man there is only an analogy or analogies of the truth. Neo-liberals profess salvation by faith in Christ alone, but they teach salvation by Christ plus man's faithfulness. Neo-liberals profess to believe in the authority of Scripture, but they teach the primacy of human scholarship. Neo-liberals profess to hold to the truth, but they teach that the truth can be contradictory. Neo-liberals profess to believe the words of Scripture and profess loyalty to the doctrines affirmed in their confessions, but by twisting the words of both they create doctrines that are supported by neither. Neo-liberals profess to preach the all-sufficiency of Christ, but they teach the insufficiency of His obedience for the salvation of souls. Neo-liberals profess to believe in full assurance of salvation, but they teach that the believer can never be assured.

Because of their duplicity, neo-liberals can speak to unsuspecting conservatives in the church in a way that makes them think the neo-liberals are actually "one of us" – thus muting opposition, and leading the unwary to accommodate or even collaborate in their apostasy. Scripture condemns such deceitfulness:

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed....

While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning [2 Peter 2:1-2, 18-20].

To paraphrase Machen, conservatives today do not presume to say whether any individual who has embraced neo-liberalism, or has aided and abetted its spread, will be saved or not. God alone decides such questions, and on the last day Christ will make that righteous judgment plain to all when He places the justified saints on His right hand. Some who have gone after these errors may yet repent, and that is our hope and prayer. *But on the authority of Scripture, one thing is perfectly plain even now: whether or not some neo-liberals are Christians, neo-liberalism is not Christianity. And those who continue to reject Christianity will be lost.*

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