

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Historic Biblical Christianity & Contemporary Progressive Christianity

HARRY REEDER

1



Recently in light of the increasing challenges by the persistent and penetrating movement of Progressive Christianity within the Evangelical Church in general and my own denomination—the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—in particular, I made a book recommendation to the 20+ young men in my Pastoral Mentoring Group as well as to the Briarwood Session and Diaconate with whom I am honored to serve as Senior Pastor. The book recommendation was the recently published “Legacy Edition” of *Christianity and Liberalism* by the noted professor, educator, preacher, scholar, and churchman, J. Gresham Machen.

Full disclosure. J. Gresham Machen was the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), my alma mater. He was accompanied by an extraordinary faculty which followed him from Princeton Seminary in the days of the Princeton Seminary Downgrade

WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

which corresponded to the predictable apostasy of Theological Liberalism within the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA) after its embrace of Liberal Christianity. The original publication of *Christianity and Liberalism* was designed to counter the burgeoning movement of Christian Liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries within the Protestant Church in general, yet the focus was the consequential theological apostasy within the PCUSA, in particular. Furthermore, this volume was influential in the founding of the International Board of Missions, Westminster Theological Seminary, and ultimately the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).



Not surprisingly my recommendation was not only questioned by some outside the Briarwood fellowship when it was broadly shared but was actually challenged passionately by Progressive Teaching and Ruling Elders within the PCA. The challenge was repetitive and unambiguous—“Machen wrote to confront Theological Liberalism produced by the Liberal Christianity movement initiated in the 19th Century. The Theological Liberalism produced by Liberal Christianity

challenged the reliability of the Divinely revealed ‘fundamental and supernatural truths’ of biblical Christianity.”

The rejoinder continued, “Pastor Reeder, no one in the PCA is challenging these ‘fundamental and supernatural doctrines’ affirmed within our Confession as they did in the days of PCUSA (Northern Presbyterian Church) Theological Liberalism; and then, fifty years later, in the PCUS (Southern Presbyterian Church). Machen confronted Theological Liberalism and its resulting adulteration of the Confession leading eventually to theological apostasy. Progressive Christianity is not mounting an assault upon the ‘fundamentals of the faith,’ nor has it proposed theological aberrations to the Westminster Confession.”

In a word, while Progressive Christianity is not promoting the Liberal Theology of the 20th century, it is and will produce an equally destructive Progressive Theology in the 21st century, which is why I not only maintain the relevance of Machen’s book, but also its importance.

The *simple reason* the Progressive Christianity of the 20th and 21st centuries will produce a theological downgrade as did the Liberal Christianity of the 19th and 20th centuries is because they both originate from the same motivation and are committed to the same mission.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

THE SIMPLE REASON

Progressive Christianity and Liberal Christianity are both cut from the same bolt of cloth.

The *fabric* of this *bolt of cloth*, which is found in both Liberal and Progressive Christianity was identified by Machen as early as his 1912 presentation on “Christianity and Culture.” There, as he addressed the biblical mission and ministry of the Church within the culture, he also identified Liberal Christianity’s motivation and mission, which of necessity led to the adulteration of the Christian message/confession and then ultimately theological apostasy. In that lecture, and even more precisely in *Christianity and Liberalism*, which he published almost two decades later, he exposed the *fabric* of Liberal Christianity that inevitably results in theological Liberalism. Therefore, since Progressive Christianity is *cut from the same bolt of cloth*, meaning that it is made of the same *fabric* as Liberal Christianity, it will likewise inevitably produce, first, its own brand of Theological adulteration and then ultimately Theological apostasy. In other words, Liberal Christianity, because of its originating motivation and its newly adopted mission of necessity, produced an apostate message—Liberal Theology.

Therefore, since Progressive Christianity originates from the identical motivation and adopts the identical mission of Liberal Christianity, it will likewise, of necessity, produce, first, an adulterated message, and then, an apostate message—*Progressive Theology*.

THE “FABRIC” OF LIBERAL AND PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY EXAMINED

In my “deep dive” I was amazed at how obvious the motivation and the mission of Progressive Christianity aligned with the *fabric* of Liberal Christianity. Although they are separated by 100 years, Progressive Christianity in a real sense is Regressive Christianity as it reveals itself as Liberal Christianity 2.0. Why? Because it originates from Liberal Christianity’s same failed motivation and is committed to its same failed mission, which insures an inevitable Progressive Christianity theological downgrade of its message—though not necessarily adulterating the same doctrines as did Liberal Theology.

For the purpose of accuracy, it needs to be stated clearly that the theological apostasy of Progressive Christianity, while inevitable, will not necessarily be doctrinally identical to the theological apostasy of Liberal Christianity, but it will be equally destructive. So, let’s take a closer look at the three elements that comprise the *fabric* of Liberal and Progressive Christianity: motivation, mission, and message.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

THE MOTIVATION

By documentation Liberal and Progressive Christianity are movements which arise from an identical motivation. The self-confessed motivation of 19th- and 20th-century Liberal Christianity was not to destroy Christianity but to save the Mainline Protestant Church from the burgeoning movement of “modernity” and the intimidating boasted sophistication of the “modern mind.” The motivation talking points of Liberal Christianity were: “In light of modernity the church must be saved from cultural irrelevance” and “Christianity must be saved from the intellectual dustbin of history” and “if Christianity doesn’t change, we will lose the next generation.” Sound familiar?

Likewise, the Progressive Christianity of the 20th and 21st centuries does not originate from a desire to destroy Christianity but to save, not the Protestant Mainline Church, but this time, the Evangelical Church from “cultural irrelevance,” “the dustbin of history” and “the loss of the next generation.” There is no doubt in my mind that few Progressives are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” such as those Paul warned the Elders of the Church at Ephesus to alertly guard against in shepherding “the flock of God which He bought with His own blood.” In fact, I believe the vast majority are “sheep in wolves clothing.” But make no mistake as affirmed by its celebrated apologists and preachers, Progressive Christianity is “wolves’ clothing” in that it has the identical and, dare I say, in reality arrogant motivation as Liberal Christianity—to *save Christianity and the Church from cultural irrelevance*. Also, interestingly, they have the same talking points and marketing slogans. But do they have the same mission?

THE MISSION

In Liberal Christianity the Church is saved from “cultural irrelevance” to a new culturally approved mission of “cultural transformation—human flourishing.” Mainline Protestant 20th-century Christianity was aspirationally committed to making the 20th century the “The Christian Century.” They even initiated new publications such as “The Christian Century.” Mainline Protestant Churches were now poised to unleash an updated and “culturally relevant” Christianity which would usher in a newly defined postmillennial utopia. This optimistic hope was broadly proclaimed from the pulpits of Mainline Protestant Churches. Liberal Christianity promised to be the venue to bring “human flourishing” to a waiting world—“cultural transformation” was within our reach. Sound familiar?

Fast forward 100 years to the concluding 20th and newly inaugurated 21st century. Interestingly and informatively, the Mainline Churches which embraced Liberal Christianity are actually in the “dustbin of history” and on a trajectory into oblivion

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

having been eviscerated by Theological Liberalism. Yet, amazingly, previously self-identified “Evangelical churches” are now proclaiming their new – actually not so new – mission of the “culturally relevant Evangelical church” committed to “cultural transformation.” The Evangelical Church now promises to secure “human flourishing” through “social justice” and a newly defined accommodating sexual ethic guided by a culturally sensitive informed initiative – *to seek the welfare of the city*. Yes, a biblical quote, but a quote for cultural reasons taken out of biblical context and therefore bereft of biblical content.

THE MESSAGE

Liberal Christianity, motivated to “save the church from cultural irrelevance” and position the Church to be a primary player to achieve its newly discovered mission of “cultural transformation” then had to edit the unacceptable theology from its message/confession in order to be culturally acceptable in the age of “modernity.” The necessary casualty was the removal of any and all doctrines that offended the “sensibilities of the modern mind.” Why? Because the doctrines that affirmed the supernatural power of God, the holiness of God, and the sinfulness of man were no longer culturally acceptable. In other words, any and all of the “foundational, fundamental and supernatural doctrines of Christianity” (i.e. the Virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the necessity of Christ’s atoning death, the inerrancy of God’s Word, the recorded miracles etc.) were removed. Even more specifically, Liberal Christianity, to be “culturally relevant” and to obtain a seat at the table of the “culture shapers,” out of necessity, jettisoned the Reformation-secured doctrine of “biblical magisterium” – *Sola Scriptura*. In its place Liberal Christianity embraced “cultural magisterium” resulting in the formulation of a theological message marked by “cultural accommodation.” This cleared the way for proposed theological changes to the *Confessions of the Protestant Churches* introducing first theological adulteration and then demonic theological apostasy. Sound Familiar?

Progressive Christianity (like Liberal Christianity) uses the glossary of theological terms from historic biblical Christianity but does not use the same dictionary to define those terms. Progressive Christianity (like Liberal Christianity), in the pursuit of “cultural relevance” to achieve its new mission of “cultural transformation,” willingly abdicates selected theological fidelity by also abandoning biblical magisterium – *Sola Scriptura* – for cultural magisterium (cultural accommodation).

In summary, to redefine the motivation and mission of the Evangelical Church, “cultural magisterium” is introduced as the new *rule of faith and practice* under the guise of “contextualization” in order to fulfill its motivation and to further its new mission.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Since *Sola Scriptura* is no longer the functional authoritative “rule of faith and practice,” the Evangelical Church is free to functionally canonize literature originating from anti-God, anti-gospel, and anti-Christian political and sociological philosophies. Thus, social justice replaces biblical justice, penance replaces repentance, oppressors become the oppressed, racism replaced by a new racism with no redemption promise, no reconciliation offered but continued polarization, and division assured.

Further casualties, men and women in sins of addiction and specifically sexually unnatural besetting sins, now hear “another gospel” — which is not “the gospel.” This non-gospel deceitfully offers the positional blessings of justification and adoption but effectively denies the transforming blessings of regeneration and sanctification. Regeneration and sanctification are now replaced with culturally approved sociological and psychological categories and terms baptized with a redefined theology. The church’s new message is no longer one of sinner transformation with a cultural impact but now it is a deceptive message falsely promising cultural transformation through providing cosmetic behavior modification delivered through categories of sociological manipulation.

THREE TAKEAWAYS

1. **Motivation** and **mission** inevitably control and define the **message** and **ministries** of the Church. An unbiblical **motivation** and **mission** no matter how well-meaning will infallibly ensure an apostate **message/confession** of the Church and will also destroy the **ministries** the Church.
2. **Contextualization** – When a church embraces an unbiblical motivation (cultural relevance) and an unbiblical mission (cultural transformation) it will produce an unbiblical Message (cultural accommodation) by redefining the biblical doctrine of “contextualization” — *to be in the world, but not of the world*. Biblical contextualization is the call to speak in the culture to its people in terms they can understand. Unbiblical contextualization speaks in the culture to the people on the terms they demand. The loss of the biblical doctrine of one race (human) and multiple ethnicities for the Darwinian fabrication of multiple races with the unending chaos of attempting to remove sins such as racism with racist philosophies and tools—i.e., critical theory, critical race theory, critical law theory, and the scorecard of intersectionality—all of which exchange repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation for unending penance, polarization, and reverse oppression. The gospel of redemption that delivers us from sin’s power (regeneration), sin’s penalty (justification), sin’s position (adoption), increasingly from sin’s practice (sanctification), and ultimately from sin’s presence (glorification), is now abandoned for “another gospel” offering empty promises of

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

self-forgiveness, self-esteem, and psychologically defined terms and therapies to “manage sin as a syndrome instead of *mortifying* sin as an enemy.” Furthermore, our identity in “union with Christ” is now abdicated to hyphenated identities exalting our besetting sins which according to the Scripture are “not to be named among us,” but in Progressive Christianity are now being used to name, identify, and define us.

3. ***Sola Scriptura*** — Liberal Christianity’s theological apostasy began with the abandonment of “biblical magisterium” for “cultural magisterium.” *Sola Scriptura*, which declares the supremacy of the Scripture was dismissed along with all of its culturally unacceptable doctrines including biblical inerrancy in its cultural accommodating surrender. In Progressive Christianity, the theological downgrade also begins with the abandonment of biblical magisterium—*Sola Scriptura*—the supremacy of Scripture by abdicating the sufficiency of Scripture, the sufficiency of Christ and the sufficiency of the gospel to save men and women from sin’s penalty and power by the grace of God to the glory of God.

FINAL THOUGHT

The Church must remain “the bulwark and the pillar of truth.” There is no “unity by love” if there is no “unity of truth.” There will be no ability to love the lost nor one another if we lose the truth out of a desire to gain the affirmation and the applause of the world instead of the affirmation and applause of God. We are stewards of the truth—and stewards must be *found faithful*.

Harry Reeder is the Senior Pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Birmingham, Alabama. Dr. Reeder can be heard on the daily radio program, "Today In Perspective," and is devoted to church revitalization through the "Embers to a Flame" ministry. He is a council member of the Gospel Reformation Network.

© Gospel Reformation Network, July 23, 2021. Retrieved August 4, 2022.

<https://gospelreformation.net/historic-biblical-christianity-contemporary-progressive-christianity/>
<https://harryreeder.wordpress.com/2021/07/16/historic-biblical-christianity-contemporary-progressive-christianity/>