

Church History II

(Pre-Reformation to Modern Day)

Week 8 – American Christianity, Liberalism, and the Social Gospel

Introduction: I mentioned last week that America often finds itself following after the European blueprint, simply 25-30 years later, this was seen clearly in the Christian movements, social engagements, and the influence of liberalism.

- I. American Christianity
 1. The Direction of the Faith
 - A. “The American West provided Christianity with its greatest opportunity ever to press the claims of the gospel on a whole nation.”¹
 - B. “After the Revolutionary War, so many Americans poured into the territory that the whole continent seemed to tilt toward the Pacific. Between 1792 and 1821, nine new states were added to the original thirteen. By midcentury half of the American people were west of the Appalachians.”²
 - C. “At the time only 5 or 10 percent of the American people were church members. In time, however, the crude, turbulent, and godless society of the West was tamed, and more than any other single force, it was evangelical Christianity that did it.”³ **PTQ**
 - i. The two ideals that propelled this avenue were voluntary societies and Revivals. **PTQ**
 - ii. Voluntary societies
 - 1) Although denominationalism had won the day, it seemed that the creation of voluntary societies of mixed denominations of Christians was the source to push Christian values and moral reformation in the country.
 - 2) “Thus early in the nineteenth century a host of societies appeared seeking to shape some aspect of American life: the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American Sunday School Union, the American Education Society, and scores of others.”⁴
 - iii. Evangelistic revivals
 - 1) The early problem was to regain the east and reach the west.
 - 2) Fresh life had been found in the revivals and colleges in the East when prepared men to go out west and preach.
 - 3) The preaching in the West met the people who were there too. The preach was impassioned, visual, and boisterous and geared towards the rugged inhabitants who were focused on work freedom and survival. **PTQ**

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 449.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 450.

- 4) “The great western frontier revival took place in newly settled regions between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi and centered in Kentucky and Tennessee” ⁵ **PTQ**
 - 5) One of the more well-known revivalists was James McGrady.
 - 6) In July 1800, McGready held a significant revival at Gasper River, which changed American religious history. He announced a sacramental service, attracting many pioneers who traveled up to one hundred miles to attend. Families brought tents and food, preparing to stay for several days. This event is recognized as the first camp meeting—an outdoor religious service lasting multiple days for those who traveled to participate. ⁶ **PTQ**
 - 7) “McGready was a pacesetter. For almost two centuries the revival preacher and the camp meeting have endured in America... Under the leadership of evangelists like Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham, the camp meeting moved indoors and continued its soul-winning ways in rural chapels and urban auditoriums.”⁷
 - 8) With the increased Christian influence, social injustices of the day began to grow more apparent.
 - a) The faith of the enslaved was bolstered as well during this time.
 - b) At times, the prevailing idea was to minimize the slaves' interactions with the scripture out of fear of calls for equality.
 - c) Later, the idea was to teach them the scripture, so they would remain faithful slaves, as was the call from Paul and Peter.
2. The Issue of the day
- A. The issue at hand in America was slavery, which had started in 1619 in the colonies, but its continuation was becoming a hot-button topic.
 - B. From the creation of America as a nation, it was intended to do away with Slavery.
 - i. As early as 1787, Congress was already attempting to minimize the power of the South and its possible influence on the country by limiting the population consideration of the enslaved to limit congressional representation. They had agreed on a congressional idea called the 3/5 compromise. ⁸ **PTQ**
 - ii. One of the bigger arguments as needed states entered the country was the question of whether the state would be a free or slave state. Each side was seeking to gain the edge to outnumber the other.
 - C. Major voices and names in the war on Slavery.
 - i. “Richard Allen (1760–1831) was born into slavery and sold as a child to work on a Delaware plantation. After hearing a traveling minister rail against

⁵ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 450.

⁶ Ibid., 452.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “U.S. Slavery: Timeline, Figures & Abolition,” History.com, December 3, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/slavery>.

slavery, he joined the Methodists at age seventeen and began evangelizing other slaves eagerly. “Sometimes, I would awake from my sleep preaching and praying,” he later recalled. Prompted by Methodist teachings, Allen’s master became convinced of the sinfulness of slavery and allowed his slaves to purchase their freedom. After buying his freedom for \$2,000, Allen moved to Philadelphia and became a Methodist preacher. Though his sermons at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church were popular, he was restricted to the 5:00 a.m. service and resented that his black congregants were seated separately from the white worshipers. Alongside fellow Methodist preacher Absalom Jones, Allen formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 as the first fully independent black denomination in the United States. Today, the AME church boasts more than 2.5 million members.”⁹ **PTQ**

- ii. “A primary fountain of the evangelical sentiment against slavery in the North can be traced to the revival preaching of Charles G. Finney. Through the broad impact of Finney, strong antislavery feelings built up in the Midwest, especially around Oberlin College, where Finney served as president.
- iii. At the forefront of this crusade was one of Finney’s disciples, Theodore Weld. His powerful writings, *The Bible against Slavery* (1837) and *Slavery as It Is* (1839), served as a catalyst for abolitionism.”¹⁰ **PTQ**
- iv. “Harriet Beecher Stowe lived with *Slavery as It Is* day and night till its facts crystallized into *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” In her famous antislavery book published in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe appeals, “Christians! Every time that you pray that the kingdom of Christ may come, can you forget that prophecy associates, in dread fellowship, the day of vengeance with the year of His redeemed? Slavery is not a sin of the South alone...The guilt is national; the purgation must be national. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, then, Harriet Beecher Stowe was striking at the national conscience in the hope that a cleansing of the nation’s soul would avert a divine scourging of the body politic.”¹¹ **PTQ**
- v. Harriet Tubman (1825–1913) was born and abused as a slave in Maryland. She escaped to Pennsylvania in 1849 but returned to lead others to freedom by way of the “underground railroad” from one abolitionist safehouse to another...During the Civil War she served as a nurse, a spy, and a scout for Union troops, liberating more slaves in the South... Vocal about her faith in Christ, she said of her work, “ ‘Twant me, ’twas the Lord. I always told him, ‘I trust to you. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,’ and he always did.”¹²

⁹ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 454.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 455

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 456.

¹² *Ibid.*, 456.

3. Culture Shocks

- A. The first shock came from Charles Darwin's 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*, perhaps the most important book of the century¹³
- B. The second shock to the traditional faith came from the increasing industrialization of American society and the rush to the cities¹⁴
- C. The third and most direct assault on confidence in the Scriptures came in the form of higher criticism of the Bible¹⁵

II. Liberalism

1. As we continued to "progress" the common view was to rethink the faith of our past in light of new ideas and scholarship especially European scholarship.
2. "No one expressed the irony of liberalism better than H. Richard Niebuhr when he said in liberalism "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."¹⁶ **PTQ**
3. "It might be helpful to think of liberal theology as a suspension bridge. The footing of one tower is planted on modern thought and the foundation of the other rests on Christian experience."¹⁷ **PTQ**
4. "They refused, therefore, to accept religious beliefs on authority alone. They insisted that faith had to pass the tests of reason and experience"¹⁸
5. The two types of Liberalism are Evangelistic Liberalism and Modernistic Liberalism. **PTQ**
 - A. Evangelical Liberalism - Evangelical liberals were devout believers seeking a theology that could engage educated contemporaries, placing greater weight on Christian experience as their anchor. **PTQ**
 - i. This view tries to explain the faith in rational means.
 - ii. A Modern example might be deciding the Israelites went through the Reed Sea instead of the Red Sea because that would take the supernatural essence out of the story.
 - B. Modernistic Liberalism – Modernistic liberals were intellectuals of the modern era who sought Christian legitimacy, finding their primary support in contemporary thought rather than traditional faith. **PTQ**
 - i. This view seeks to take modern thoughts and place them under Christian categories.
 - ii. This would involve the idea of taking the modern idea of love and using that to employ homosexual acceptance as a Christian virtue.

¹³ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 458.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 462.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 462–463.

6. This openness to modern theories and “sciences” led to the acceptance of theories like that of Evolution and questioning the Bible as if it was another book.
 - A. Biblical criticism came to be studied in two forms higher and lower criticism.
 - i. Higher Criticism - has to do with the meaning of the original text instead of its wording. This focuses heavily on background, authorship, and setting. **PTQ**
 - ii. Lower Criticism – has to do with evaluating textual variants and determining what is the most authentic reading of Biblical manuscripts. (This has gone on since some of the earliest copyists, especially if they had more than one copy to work from.) This is now often called textual criticism.¹⁹ **PTQ**
 - B. Influential representatives of the liberal camps were Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl.
 - i. Friedrich Schleiermacher - Schleiermacher fundamentally reshaped liberal theology by arguing that personal religious experience—rather than rational argument—formed the authoritative foundation for understanding religious truth²⁰ **PTQ**
 - ii. He sought to make religion intellectually credible by reframing the core debates about God’s existence, scriptural authority, and miracles as secondary concerns, positioning instead an underlying awareness of human dependence and vulnerability before divine transcendence as religion’s essential core.²¹
 - iii. Albrecht Ritschl emerged as the most influential continental Protestant theologian between Schleiermacher and Barth, particularly during liberal Protestantism’s peak from 1875–1930. Following Kant’s epistemology, Ritschl rejected metaphysical claims about God’s nature and instead grounded theological knowledge in God’s effects on humanity—specifically through Christian experience of justification, reconciliation, and progress toward God’s kingdom. This represented a decisive shift from abstract doctrinal systems toward concrete religious experience understood through ethical and relational categories. Ritschl sharply critiqued Schleiermacher’s approach, arguing that the feeling of absolute dependence was too subjective, and that mysticism and pietism were individualistic and morally deficient.²²
- III. Social Gospel
1. The Industrial Revolution had been focused primarily in England and America.
 2. The immense increases in productivity due to breakthroughs in different industries (enhanced by things like the steam engine) and improved production through factories

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 92.

²⁰ C. Douglas Weaver and Rady Roldán-Figueroa, eds., *Exploring Christian Heritage: A Reader in History and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 159.

²¹ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 468–469.

²² P. N. Hillyer, “Ritschl, Albrecht (1822–89),” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 781–782.

gave a new incredible chance for money and an improved life for some but there were also great risks for most the workers.²³ **PTQ**

- A. The early factories were without elementary sanitary and safety facilities.
 - B. Horrible cases of mangling were common, and under English common law any accident a worker might suffer was considered a result of his negligence.
 - C. The employer could not be held responsible.
 - D. There was no system of workmen’s compensation or health insurance.
 - E. Women and children worked alongside men.
 - F. Poverty often forced women to toil until a day or two before delivery of their children and then to report back to work shortly after the baby was born.
 - G. Many mills employed youngsters only four or five years of age and the workdays were twelve to fifteen hours of hard labor for minimal wages.²⁴
 - H. The workers and their families lived in a single room in a dirty tenement and were fortunate if they didn’t have to share it with other families. The squalid streets around them were littered with garbage and, without adequate sewers, reeked with the smell of excrement.²⁵
3. The Church had a hard time figuring out how to interact in these scenarios initially.
- A. “Those inside and outside the churches came to think of Christianity in narrower and narrower terms. Almost everything not obviously spiritual was left free from church-based criticism. Thus a growing body of industrial workers regarded the churches and the Christian message as largely irrelevant or powerless to speak to the difficulties they suffered in the age of the machine”²⁶
4. The raising difficulties in the industrial age gave way to good sounding but terrible theories by Karl Marx.
- A. Marx believed the answer to class differences was violence. **PTQ**
 - i. A friend of mine in Marxist fashion said something along the line of, “if violence doesn’t solve all of your problems you’re not using enough of it.”
 - ii. Marx thought the only and ultimate source to correcting the evils and inequities in society would be through violent upheaval. **PTQ**
 - iii. Marx viewed religion as the opiate of the masses a kind of sedation to the injustice in the world by promising reward in heaven for dealing well with temporal suffering. **PTQ**
 - iv. In 1848 Marx put out his Communist manifesto with his friend Friedrich Engels.
5. Instead of revolution being the answer the church was needed to provide support and help those in affliction.
- A. After the middle of the nineteenth century, however, an increasing number of Christians, Catholic and Protestant, worked zealously for improved conditions for laborers. Four lines of action were open to them:

²³ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 474.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 475.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 476.

- i. They could challenge the *laissez faire* philosophy in the name of Christian principles. **PTQ**
 - ii. They could establish Christian institutions to relieve the suffering of the poor and powerless. **PTQ**
 - iii. They could support the formation of labor unions. **PTQ**
 - iv. They could appeal to the state for legislation aimed at the improvement of working conditions.²⁷ **PTQ**
 - B. Nonconformists were also leaders in the temperance crusade and in the founding of orphanages. George Müller of the Plymouth Brethren; Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the leading Baptist preacher in London; and T. B. Stephenson, a Methodist, were all instrumental in creating Christian orphanages.²⁸
 - C. The most outstanding example of ministry to the dispossessed was the work of a pietistic evangelical, William Booth (1829–1912). He started his ministry with the Methodist New Connection but soon withdrew to work with London’s poor. His street preaching in London’s East End in 1864 met with phenomenal success. Within eleven years he had thirty-two stations promoting evangelism and social service among London’s destitute. His workers, organized like a military unit, were soon called the Salvation Army.²⁹
6. The Social Gospel then was an attempt to bring regeneration not to individuals but to The whole American system. **PTQ**
- A. The various Christian movements for social concerns faced the danger of reducing the gospel only to social work. They left us all an important reminder, however, that Christians cannot show their concern for people’s eternal destiny unless they also demonstrate their concern for people’s earthly needs.³⁰ **PTQ**

²⁷ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 478.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 479.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 479–480.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 485.

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