

Same-Sex Marriage and the Challenge and Opportunity of Liberal Theology

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The Archbishop of Canterbury was recently quoted in Canada as saying he had 'many questions' when asked for his personal take on the issue of same-sex marriage in the Anglican Church. This is encouraging as up to now much of the 'discussion' on this issue has consisted of hurling vacuous insults back and forth. Those in favour of same-sex marriage have been described as un-Biblical heretics, apostates and non-Christian pagans. On the other side, those opposed have been described as hateful, homophobic, unloving holders of the pre-scientific and superstitious view of the Bible. Discussion on this level has polarized and fragmented the Anglican Church, distracted clergy from effective ministry and led to a steep decline in attendance. Many people - including Synod Delegates who will meet to possibly change the Marriage Canon in 2015; are confused, disgusted and I believe deceived by these simplistic arguments. The Anglican Church of Canada is now evenly divided. On one side many Anglicans have come to believe that a new, more loving and inclusive but vaguely defined Liberal Theology is an improvement over the more judgemental form of Biblical Theology found in many Anglican Churches. Others believe Liberal Theology, which affirms same-sex marriage, is actually a deconstruction of Biblical Theology and needs to be exposed and rejected. In order to discuss the issue of same-sex marriage from a clearer theological perspective we need to compare the two theologies. This is also an important opportunity for all of us to reflect on these differences as a Church and make a clear decision on whether to continue compromising with Liberal Theology or to change direction and embrace a more balanced form of Biblical Theology that includes both law and grace.

1. What is Liberal Theology?

Liberalism is a philosophy of liberating people, often from religious doctrines that prevent them from – well, getting married! This philosophy has historically challenged the authority of the Bible and its' interpretation by the Church on a range of issues. The result is that since the Reformation a new, largely unstated, Liberal Theology has developed to accommodate those who cannot believe in traditional Christian beliefs such as the Virgin Birth, the healing miracles and the sacrificial death of Jesus as atonement for human sin. The long history of this collision of science and reason with the supernatural spiritual worldview and claims of the Bible includes:

- The Enlightenment and Kant's "Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone" which proposed a new philosophical understanding of God by rational reflections without appealing to special revelation such as the supernatural self-revelation of God in Christ in the Scriptures.
- Source Criticism by academics who have seriously questioned the degree of divine as opposed to human authorship of the Bible.
- Text Criticism by scholars that has identified specific variations in the Bible text suggesting errors in copying, errors in translating and possible minor additions to the original sources.
- Scientists and individuals who cannot believe in the supernatural Biblical worldview including the healing miracles of Jesus and the resurrection and see them as the un-historical products of an ancient culture based on pre-scientific superstition and mythology.
- Darwin's "Origin of the Human Species" has been assumed (wrongly) to discredit the Biblical story of Creation – and by extension all references to the supernatural acts of God
- New narrow liberal interpretations of the Bible that focus very vaguely on the 'love of God', to the exclusion of the holiness of God and the righteousness of God; that are now being used to justify freedom from any form of human or divine judgement or Law.

2. Liberal Theology compared with Biblical Theology

Understanding these differences will help us decide whether or not Liberal Theology is an improvement on Biblical Theology as claimed - and whether or not compromise is possible. Liberal Theology has developed since the Enlightenment as a series of defeats, denials and / or presumed improvements to specific doctrines of Biblical Theology. Until recently most discussion has been in academia as clergy have been reluctant to directly challenge Biblical Theology in public teaching for fear of losing their positions. This was a very real fear. J. Gresham Machen lost his teaching position on the Theology Faculty at Princeton University for exposing the content of Liberal Theology in his classic "Christianity and Liberalism" in 1923 – reprinted in 2009 and available electronically (free) at: <http://reformedaudio.org/audio/machen/Machen%20-%20Christianity%20&%20Liberalism.pdf> Machen was able to penetrate the deliberately vague sermons of liberal teachers and analyze what they were really saying – or not saying, in relation to Biblical Theology. He begins with the authority of Scripture then compares theologies of God's relationship to man, Jesus and salvation and the agenda of the Church.

a. Liberal Theology has an opposing view of the Bible and authority for Doctrine

Machen explains that Christianity is based on the truth of the Bible and a series of historical events and experiences. These events and experiences are regarded as facts. Christianity stands or falls on the truth and authenticity of these historical claims. If Jesus did not really die sacrificially to create a new way for human salvation, and if God did not raise Him to new life, as a sign to His followers of the truth of Jesus promise of eternal spiritual life; then there is no Christianity. The facts or basic truths of Christianity have been examined for centuries and enshrined as doctrines and creeds. Machen argues that traditional Biblical Christianity is in fact 'scientific' and rational in the sense that the experiences of the followers of Jesus have duplicated the healing miracles of Jesus and personally experienced the Holy Spirit as in the Bible in all times and in all places.

In contrast Liberal Theology questions the divine inspiration of the Bible, the reliability of its' text, it's authority for teaching and most of the supernatural stories and evidence. Liberal preachers see the Bible as mythical. Instead of being 'true' in the sense of factual; Liberal preachers tend to use Biblical stories as examples or aspirations for moral behaviour. Where Biblical Christianity is based on historical facts supporting a specific doctrine; Liberal teachers use the Bible to identify general life principles. Where Christianity offers the redeeming work of Jesus and eternal spiritual life; Liberal Bible teaching offers guidance in earning personal merit by right behaviour.

Biblical Christianity believes that the Bible was divinely inspired – not necessarily all dictated orally, but that the many authors had a personal experience of the divine which gave them a greater understanding of God and protected them from serious errors. We know there are some errors in the text and in the arrangement of the text; but on the whole the 66 Books of the Bible are amazingly coherent with a consistent message that is obviously from a single source. If we believe the Bible is divinely inspired, authoritative and "true" ; then neither Bishops or Synod Delegates may actually have the authority to over-rule what the Bible clearly says about marriage and sexual relationships and change the Marriage Canon.

Because the more liberal teachers and clergy do not like the limitations of the Biblical teachings on sexuality, they have tended to reject the authority of the Bible on the mostly political ground that it was written by superstitious, culturally biased and homophobic men – like the Apostle Paul, who repeatedly condemns 'sexual immorality' (1 Cor. 6.12, 6.13, 6.18, 7.2, 10.8; Gal. 5.19; Eph. 5.3; Col. 3.5; 1 Thess. 4.3). Paul is not alone as there are additional warnings against sexual immorality in Numbers (1), Mathew (3), Mark (1), Acts (3), Jude (1) and Revelation (3).

b. Liberal Theology has opposing theologies of God and Man

“The modern doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God is not to be found in the teachings of Jesus.” (p.52). Machen notes that Matthew 5.44 in fact teaches us that God is **not** “the father of all men”, but only the father of those who chose to include themselves in a Covenant relationships of Baptism which includes belief and obedience (i.e. control). Liberal Theology in contrast is primarily inclusive (without conditions) and particularly opposes judgement and any distinction between who is saved and who is not. But Jesus says to His followers (Mathew 13.11) “..the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” This clearly indicates exclusion.

The God of the Bible is much more than the limited ‘god of love’ of Liberal Theology. The God of the Bible is a God of transcendence. He is holy and must remain separated, for our protection because of human sin. Liberal teachers tend to mock the doctrine of the Christian Doctrine of the Atonement as suggesting Jesus death was necessary to placate and angry God. They underestimate the holiness of God which the Bible teaches us could “break out and destroy” (Exodus 22.19,2) anything unholy that was too close.

The God of the Bible is also a person who desires a personal relationship with the people He created for Himself. Christianity is based on God reaching out to individual men and women as Father, Son and Holy Spirit with a conditional offer of forgiveness and reconciliation to remove the barrier of sin and include men and women in His Heavenly Kingdom. Liberal Theology, with its narrow and vague assumption of a god of love; does not recognize sin as a serious problem – and some teachers even deny the sacrificial death of Jesus as necessary for forgiveness and salvation. This is why many Liberal Anglican clergy have quietly dropped the (newly optional) Confession and Absolution from the Sunday Eucharist over the last twenty years.

c. Liberal Theology has an opposing understanding of Jesus and salvation

Liberal teachers tend to proclaim a non-divine Jesus who was born in the usual way by a virgin, but translated as ‘young woman’ as opposed to ‘woman who has not had sexual intercourse with a man’. This Jesus is thus not the real biological ‘only Son of God’ through the Holy Spirit; but an adopted son of God – like you and I. He is not the only son of God in spite of what the Bible and the creeds say. He is not divine. This is critical as Liberal teachers go on (rightly) to question how a ‘man’ could die for the sins of all men. This is one of the most difficult questions for non-believers. But of course the Bible is very clear that Jesus did not claim to be an ordinary man and did not act as an ordinary man. In fact if Jesus was just an ordinary man as Liberal Theology teaches; he was either an impostor or clinically insane – and thus not the ‘good example’ for humanity that they teach.

The problem facing Liberal Theology is that the Jesus of the Bible is a historic person who clearly performed many miracles, healed many sick people and conducted many exorcisms. It is impossible to disentangle Jesus from the supernatural worldview of the Bible because almost everything He did involved the supernatural. Since these healing miracles and exorcisms have been repeated (i.e. scientifically) in all places and at all times they are impossible to deny. If we cannot deny the supernatural worldview of the Bible, we cannot deny the divinity of Jesus. All the evidence – and reason; points to Jesus being exactly who He claimed to be. This brings us to the heart of Christianity. If Jesus was divine, then he could die for the sins of all the people – as the Bible says.

d. Liberal Theology has an opposing agenda that is attacking the Church from within

Machen makes an important distinction between the “Church Invisible” and the “Church Visible”. The Church Invisible is the spiritual “Body of Christ” – defined as lost souls that have been redeemed and are now united with Christ. They are spiritual brothers and sisters joined together by keeping their Baptismal Faith Covenant and their love of Jesus. The Church Visible is the formal organization of individuals who (presumably) have voluntarily chosen to work together to

model and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. The agenda of this Church Visible is to proclaim the Good News of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ through outreach, teaching, Bible Study, worship and sacraments. The agenda has always been to warn and save people from the consequences of sin and rebellion against God and to try and include them in the Heavenly Kingdom.

In contrast the agenda of Liberal Theology is limited to educating people with the Good News of a God who loves and forgives them unconditionally – even if they rebel; and includes them in His Heavenly Kingdom. Liberal Theology is founded on the idea of the worldly brotherhood of all – as opposed to the redeemed. It does not teach about a spiritual force of evil, the separation of man from God by sin guilt or the need for repentance, confession and absolution. Instead of the Sin – Redemption model of transforming society, Liberal Theology offers a spiritually powerless model of education.

5. The Challenge and Opportunity of Liberal Theology

Machen has shown us that in fact that when they are examined in depth and projected to logical conclusions, the teachings of Liberal Theology are directly opposed to the teachings of Biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity is a religion of redemption and grace. Liberal Theology tends to ignore the metaphysical worldview of the Bible and the 'sin-redemption' model of salvation to propose a (heretical) religion of good behaviour or works. 'Liberal Christianity', when pieced together, exposed and extended to its logical conclusions, is ultimately a contradiction of terms, an oxymoron. This should help us clearly understand that Liberal Theology is not an improvement on Biblical Theology, but rather a challenge and serious deconstruction of Biblical Theology.

The good news is that this comparison also points to a clear way forward for the Anglican Church. We have seen that many Anglicans, including those who do not see a theological problem with same-sex marriage, may be 'off-side' on what we could call the extreme Liberal end of the Christian theological spectrum. We could describe their understanding of Christianity as 'love without rules'. Before judging them deficient in their faith, as our Roman brothers and sisters would so graciously say; we need to acknowledge that there are also many Anglicans at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, who may be equally 'off-side' with a deficient understanding of Christianity that could be described as 'law without mercy'. These are the less than loving people who have historically driven others out of churches to seek a more loving and healing form of Christianity.

The result is that we have a Church that is polarized with people focussing on 'law without mercy' at one end of a spectrum of belief; and others focussing on 'love without rules' at the other end. Individuals who are at either extreme end of this polarity are driving the current debate on same-sex marriage. Individuals on both sides need to reflect on this comparison, see the serious deficiencies in their faith and repent and return to the Lord (as we promise in our Baptism). This is the only way we will be able to end the division, get back to our work of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus and remain united as a Church.

The way forward for the Anglican Church is to formally defeat any motion affirming or permitting same-sex marriage as a sign of our change of direction from Liberal Theology back to a higher Biblical Theology that emphasizes a better balance of Law and Grace. Rather than continuing down the road of compromise with those who cannot accept the teachings of Biblical Theology on marriage, we need to affirm our Faith as a Church by offering the higher sacraments of forgiveness, healing and grace.