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AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

The Colonial Era

The First Step: Liberalizing Church Membership.

- The Puritan “holy commonwealth”.
- The “**Half-Way Covenant**”.
 - The Half-Way Covenant allowed non-church members who offered no testimony of a personal spiritual “new birth” to partake of communion.
 - The motive: Keeping nominal Christians under the influence of the church.
- Increase Mather, “The Danger of Apostasy.”
- By the end of the 1600s, about 80% of Congregational churches in Massachusetts had adopted the Half-Way Covenant, and some offered Communion to unconverted members.
- The first step toward extending church membership to all “professing Christians.”
- By the early 1700s, liberal Congregationalists believed that distinguishing between full members and half-way members was “undemocratic, illiberal, and anachronistic.”

[NOTE: Churches cannot function as the true “Body of Christ” in society if membership rights and responsibilities are extended to non-believers.]

The Great Awakening Controversy.

- The central theme of the Great Awakening: the “**New Birth**”.
- Opposition from many of America’s most prestigious and influential ministers and churches.
 - (1) Revival chaos and hyper-emotionalism:
 - (2) Should churches restrict membership to those who can provide a personal testimony of a spiritual conversion?, and
 - (3) Should prospective pastors provide a personal testimony of a conversion experience?
- “New Light” (or “New Side”) v. “Old Light” (or “Old Side”) Presbyterians.

Liberal Lions.

- **Edward Wigglesworth** (1693-1765).
 - A Harvard divinity professor and critic of the Great Awakening.
 - Samuel Eliot Morison: “Wigglesworth ... and his son, Edward, who succeeded him, had a very great influence on New England theology. It was the Wigglesworths who trained the pioneers of liberal Christianity in New England – the ministers who led the way out of the lush but fearsome jungles of Calvinism into the thin, clear light of Unitarianism.”
 - An opponent of **George Whitefield**.
- **Charles Chauncey** (1705-87).
 - An outspoken critic of the “religious Phrenzy” of the Great Awakening revivals.
 - “Enthusiasm Described and Caution’d Against” (1742).
 - “Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England” (1743).
 - Identification with **Universalism**.
 - *The Salvation of All Men* (1784).

- **Jonathan Mayhew** (1720-66).
 - Mayhew rejected Christian orthodoxy as a fixed set of doctrinal propositions.
 - Over time, he renounced Trinitarian theology in favor of **Unitarianism**.

The Ascendance of Liberalism

The Wedge Issues.

- (1) The divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.
- (2) The doctrine of the Trinity and the full deity of Christ.
- (3) The necessity of a spiritual “new birth.”
- (4) Calvinistic doctrines such as total depravity, limited atonement, and predestination.
- (5) The relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The Harvard Factor.

- New England Christianity’s abandonment of traditional Christian orthodoxy.
- In 1805, only one of Boston’s 16 Congregational churches was still conservative.
- By the time the American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825, 88 of the 100 oldest congregations in eastern Massachusetts joined the new alliance.
- Conservative Congregationalists: *“They kept the buildings, but we kept the faith.”*
 - Harriet Beecher Stowe: “All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarians. All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches.”

New Haven Theology.

- The rift between traditional Congregationalists and Unitarians crested at Yale in the early 1820s.
- Nathaniel William Taylor (1786-1858) and the founding of Yale Divinity School (1822).
- The failure of “moderate Christianity.”

Unitarianism.

- **Joseph Priestley** (1733-1804) brought Unitarianism to America in 1794.
 - Priestley was a scientist, philosopher, and originally a Presbyterian minister.
 - Priestley’s *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782).
- Unitarianism as “liberal Christianity.”
- Unitarianism’s distinctive beliefs:
 - (1) The primacy of human reason.
 - (2) The rejection of the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ.
- The Unitarian drift:
 - Unitarians doubted the historicity and infallibility of the Bible.
 - They doubted the doctrine of the Fall and held that human nature is basically good.
 - They regarded Jesus Christ as a great teacher, prophet, and moralist, but not fully divine or co-equal with God the Father.
 - Some believed in biblical miracles, but others regarded miracles and supernatural interventions as myth.
 - Opposition to the doctrine of Christian exclusivity.
- **Henry Ware** (1764-1845), the Hollis Professor of Divinity.
 - A protégé of Edward Wigglesworth.
 - Harvard as a center of Unitarianism.

- **William Ellery Channing** (1780-1842).
 - Unitarianism’s most articulate and influential spokesman.
 - Channing’s view of Scripture: “I am surer that my rational nature is from God than that any book is an expression of his will.”
 - “**Unitarian Christianity**” (1819).
 - Unitarianism as “pure Christianity.”

Universalism.

- **John Murray** (1741-1815).
- The defining doctrines of Universalism:
 - God is too good, loving and merciful to condemn anyone to hell.
 - Eventually, all humanity will be reconciled to God.
 - Even Satan will eventually be reconciled to God.
- Regarding the nature of Jesus Christ:
 - The doctrine of modalism: “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost are no more than different [expressions] of the self-same existent, omnipresent Being.”
- George B. Tindall and David Shi: “Unitarians and Universalists were in fundamental agreement,... the Universalists holding that God was too good to damn man; [and] the Unitarians insisting that man was too good to be damned.”

The Summa.

- In reality, the UU Church represents the culmination of “progressive” theology.
- Fortunately – and to their credit – Unitarian/Universalists do not claim to be Christians!

Transcendentalism

Nature-Based Romanticism.

- The “new age” spirituality of the early 19th century.
- A **panentheistic** spiritual orientation.
 - A free and open alternative to doctrinaire, dogmatic and institutionalized religion.
 - An emphasis on subjective intuition in lieu of facts (historical or scientific) or reason.
- The ideal spiritual orientation for the **Romantic** era in literature and culture.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82).

- The foremost exponent of Transcendentalism.
- Emerson’s original agenda: to “de-Christianize” Unitarianism by denying biblical revelation, supernaturalism, miracles, and the uniqueness of Christ.
- A celebrity essayist and lecturer among New England’s intellectual and literary elite.
 - Emerson: “The highest revelation is that God is in every man,”
- Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) set forth his basic philosophy of Transcendentalism.
 - Knowledge and spiritual insight can be attained intuitively by transcending rational processes... “*Build, therefore, your own world.*”
 - “*Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string.*”
 - “*God must be sought within, not without.*”
- Emerson’s critique of Jesus Christ:
 - “I do not see in him cheerfulness: I do not see in him the love of Natural Science: I see in him no kindness for Art; I see in him nothing of Socrates [or] of Shakespeare.”

- The Harvard “**Divinity School Address**” of 1838.
 - ▶ Divinity indwells all of life [**panentheism**].
 - ▶ Biblical “miracles” were superstitious legends.
 - ▶ Jesus was a great spiritual teacher, but he was not divine.
 - ▶ The original gospel message was that just as Jesus proclaimed his own divinity, he likewise taught that God incarnates himself in every man.
 - ▶ Emerson proclaimed that “true religion” is always open to new revelation, but historic Christianity is a closed book that limits inspiration to a closed canon of Scripture.
 - Therefore: “*Make your own Bible.*”
- Eastern metaphysical influences.
 - ▶ “*The highest revelation is that God is in every man.*”
 - ▶ In “The Over-soul” (1841), Emerson declared, “*The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God.*”
- William Ellery Channing: Emerson and his followers are “ego-theists.”

19th Century Conservative Protestantism

1776	Pct. of Pop.	1850	Pct. of Pop.
1. Congregationalists	20.5%	1. Methodists	34.2
2. Presbyterians	19	2. Baptists	20.5
3. Baptists	17	3. Roman Catholics	14
4. Episcopalians	15.7	4. Presbyterians	11.5
5. Methodists	2.5	5. Congregationalists	4
6. Roman Catholics	1.8	6. Episcopalians	3.5
		7. Lutherans	3
		8. German and Dutch Reformed	1.9
		Unitarians/Universalists	1.9
		10. Restorationists	1.8
		11. Quakers	1.6

Source: Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, p. 153.

Growth of Methodism.

- In the first 60 years of its existence the Methodist Church experienced amazing growth.
 - ▶ 1775: Less than 5,000 Methodists in the Thirteen Colonies.
 - ▶ By 1815 there were 200,000 American Methodists – making it the largest denomination in the U.S. by far.

[NOTE: Over a period of 40 years, Methodism grew about 4,000%.]

 - ▶ By 1850, more than 1/3 of all American church members were Methodists.
 - ▶ Nathan Hatch: Early Methodism was “the most powerful religious movement in American history, [and] its growth [was] a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic.”
- In the early decades, Methodism was a spiritual movement more than an institutionalized denomination, and it flourished so long as it was aggressively evangelistic, passionately devoted to holiness, and on the cutting edge of social change.
 - ▶ Jeffrey Breshears: “More than any other denomination, early Methodism came closest to honoring what Jesus called the ‘Greatest Commandment’ – to love [and serve] God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves.”

Revivalism.

- Prior to the Civil War, the **Second Great Awakening** provided much of the energy in conservative Protestant Christianity.
 - Evangelicals such as **Charles Finney** were active in the great revivals of the era – and also in the social issues of the day.
 - Abolition of slavery.
 - Women’s rights.
 - Temperance movement.
 - Prison reform, and increased concern for the physically- and mentally-handicapped.
- [NOTE: Those involved in abolitionism were often involved in women’s rights and other reforms. Many were **postmillennialists** who believed the Millennium would be ushered in by zealous Christians who evangelized the world and promoted social justice.]

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92).

- A Reformed (“Particular”) Baptist minister and longtime pastor of London’s New Park Street Chapel (later Metropolitan Tabernacle).
- A model for evangelical Protestant preaching.
- A controversial figure.
 - A bold traditionalist.
- A moderate Calvinist who promoted interdenominational cooperation.
- Separation from the Baptist Union in 1883 due to liberalizing tendencies in the denomination over biblical “Higher Criticism,” Darwinism, etc.
- Metropolitan Tabernacle became the largest nondenominational church in the world at the time.

Dwight L. Moody (1837-99).

- The most influential American evangelical Christian in the century between Charles Finney and Billy Graham.
- As an evangelist, Moody preached a simple gospel message and sought to avoid controversial social and political issues.
 - According to some estimates, he might have led a million people to faith in Christ
 - Moody’s detractors charged that he preached a version of “**easy believism**” that downplayed the cost of discipleship.
- Moody’s anti-intellectual approach to the gospel was typical of most evangelicals.

Princeton Theological Seminary: The Bullwark of Fundamentalism.

- PTS was established in 1812 under the leadership of **Archibald Alexander** (1771-1851).
- Alexander was a traditional Calvinist, and PTS was chartered to provide a high-quality education based strictly on the “Westminster Standards”:
- Alexander and his proteges and successors defined “Princeton theology”.
- **Charles Hodge** (1797-1878) succeeded Alexander as Principal of Princeton from 1851-78.
 - Hodge’s *magnum opus*, *Systematic Theology* (1871-73), replaced Francis Turretin’s *Theological Institutes* as the standard theology textbook at Princeton.
 - An arch-conservative, Hodge often said with pride that Princeton never originated a single new idea.(!)
- **Archibald Alexander Hodge** (1823-86) served as Principal from 1878 to 1886.
- **B. B. (Benjamin Breckinridge) Warfield** (1851-1921): “The Lion of Princeton.”

19th Century Theological Liberalism

Horace Bushnell (1802-76).

- Bushnell’s priority was to make Christianity relevant to the times.
- A customized theology independent of traditional dogmas.
- A Christian existentialist.
- In *Christ in Theology* (1851), he argued that dogmatic theology was unwarranted.
 - He emphasized divine immanence and intuitive knowledge.
 - Spiritual truth cannot be expressed in literal terms – but only in imaginative, metaphorical and poetical language.
 - Bushnell questioned (or rejected) traditional Christian beliefs regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ, and the necessity of a spiritual new birth.

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87).

- A gifted and charismatic preacher, and one of the most influential ministers in the late 1800s.
- The prototypical “celebrity pastor.”
- Beecher came from a distinguished New England family.
 - His father, **Lyman Beecher**, was a prominent Congregationalist minister.
 - His sister, **Harriet Beecher Stowe**, was the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.
- Like Bushnell, Beecher had little affinity for traditional orthodoxy.
 - He favored the Universalist doctrine of the Fatherhood of God.
 - He doubted the reality of a literal Hell.
 - A proponent of Darwinian evolution.
- In 1874 Beecher was tried in civil and ecclesiastical courts on charges of adultery.

Hell? No!

- Many liberal Christians rejected the traditional doctrine of Hell.
- Unitarians and Universalists rejected the very idea of Hell, while others argued that there would be an opportunity to be saved post-mortem.
- Others held to annihilationism – i.e., the souls of the lost would simply be extinguished.

The Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy

The Origins.

- Originally, the controversy mostly affected the mainline Presbyterian Church in the USA.
 - By the turn of the 20th century, however, it impacted all major denominations.
- The major issues:
 - The authority of Scripture.
 - Basic biblical doctrines such as miracles, the incarnation, the atoning sacrificial death of Christ, and the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 - Issues related to the Bible and science.
 - Social, economic and political issues.
- Previously schisms in American Presbyterianism:
 - (1) The First Great Awakening: “New Side” v. “Old Side” Presbyterians.
 - (2) The Second Great Awakening, “New School” v. “Old School” Presbyterians
 - (3) 1857-1866: Southern Presbyterians v. Northern Presbyterians.

B. B. Warfield and Biblical Inerrancy.

- Warfield was an ardent critic of three trends in American Christianity:
 - (1) “Modernist” theological liberalism – which he regarded as apostate pseudo-Christianity.
 - (2) Popular emotion-based revivalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - (3) The Holiness and Pentecostal movements.

The Briggs/Warfield Controversy.

- In the late 1800s two forces undermined the intellectual integrity of traditional Christianity:
 - (1) Biblical “Higher Criticism”; and
 - (2) Darwinian evolutionary theory.
- The controversial **Charles Briggs** (1841-1913).
 - Briggs was a pastor and theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.
- Briggs’ lecture, “The Authority of Holy Scripture” (1891).
 - Challenging the historicity of the Old Testament.
 - The Scriptures are riddled with errors, and the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy “is a ghost of modern evangelicalism to frighten children.”
 - The Torah is a historical record that showed man in a lower state of moral development.
 - The bottom-line: The Bible contains much “dead orthodoxy”.
- The heresy trial of 1892.

The Aftermath.

- The Briggs case was a harbinger of things to come.
- Liberals drafted a manifesto criticizing heresy trials and calling on Presbyterians to focus more on the “spiritual work” of the church.
- Increasingly, more “moderates” agreed with liberals that such trials were divisive and a bad witness to outsiders.

The Five Fundamentals.

- The Presbyterian General Assembly in 1910 passed a Doctrinal Deliverance that declared five doctrines (“Five Fundamentals”) to be “necessary and essential” to the Christian faith:
 - (1) The inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, and the inerrancy of Scripture.
 - (2) The virgin birth of Christ.
 - (3) The belief that Christ’s death was an atonement for sin.
 - (4) The bodily resurrection of Christ.
 - (5) The historical reality of Christ’s miracles.

Fundamentalism.

- Published between 1910 and 1915, *The Fundamentals* included 90 essays written by 64 authors from several denominations.
 - Topics ranged from theology, bibliology, eschatology and evangelism to apologetics, biblical “Higher Criticism,” other religions, “Science and Christian Faith,” “The Church and Socialism,” and “Satan and His Kingdom.”

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937).

- Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1906 to 1929, and the last of the great theologians who perpetuated traditional “Princeton Theology”.
- Throughout the early 1900s Machen became increasingly concerned with the growing influence of theological liberalism.

- **Harry Emerson Fosdick’s** sermon, “**Shall the Fundamentalists Win?**” (1922).
 - Modernists are sincere Christians who are attempting to reconcile new discoveries in history, science, and biblical studies with the Christian faith.
 - Conversely, Fundamentalists are anti-intellectual and intolerant legalists who are stuck in the past.
- Machen’s response: *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).
 - “The chief modern rival of [true] Christianity is Liberalism.”
 - True Christianity is in a war against “a totally diverse type of religious belief” that is particularly insidious because “it makes use of traditional Christian terminology.”
- Increasing liberal influences at Princeton Seminary.
- The reorganization of Princeton Seminary in 1929.
- Machen, **Cornelius Van Til**, and the founding of **Westminster Theological Seminary**.

The Legacy.

- Over the next 90 years, intra-denominational conflicts between conservatives and liberals would be played out in every other major Christian denomination.

The Social Gospel

Christianity and Social Activism: A Venerable Tradition.

- **William Penn, John Wesley**, and the tradition of Christian social activism.
- Wesleyan humanitarianism.
- The Foundry’s social service ministry.
- Wesley’s *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774).
 - Wesley’s alliance with **William Wilberforce**.
- Christian social and political involvements in the antebellum era.

Christian Social Concern in the Late 19th Century.

- Christian activism in the Populist and Progressive movements.
- Wholistic discipleship addresses individual sin and corporate (institutional and systemic) sin.
- The Social Gospel as an alternative to Marxism and radical socialism.

The Eschatological Factor.

- **Postmillennial** eschatology.
 - During the Civil War, many Unionists believed the war would cleanse the nation and hasten the advance of the Gospel and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth.
 - Horace Bushnell: The United States is “God’s own nation,” created by divine providence, and it has a divine mission to usher in the Millennium.
 - Following the Civil War, many Social Gospelers believed that progressive Christian social action would eventually transform the nations and usher in the Millennium.
 - The goal of the Social Gospel: “the conversion of the whole world.”
 - William Jennings Bryan: Christians should evangelize the world, enact social reforms, and defeat the forces of darkness so as to set the stage for the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his kingdom here on earth.
- **Premillennial** (and **Dispensational**) eschatology.
 - The “**Rapture**” of the church, the **Great Tribulation** and the reign of the **Antichrist**.
 - James Henley Thornwell (1802-62) and “the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.”

Washington Gladden (1836-1918).

- In *Working People and Their Employers* (1876), Gladden promoted workers’ rights and the union movement, and called on employers to treat employees in accord with the principles of the Golden Rule.
 - Gladden was neither a socialist nor a *laissez-faire* capitalist, but called for the application of “Christian law” to social and economic issues.
 - He was one of the first influential ministers to support labor unions.
 - He also advocated municipal ownership of public works.
- *Applied Christianity* (1886) set the agenda for the Social Gospel movement.
- Gladden was also an outspoken proponent of racial equality and religious tolerance.
- Gladden was also a proponent of theological liberalism.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918).

- The most influential figure in the Social Gospel movement.
- The influence of **Rochester Theological Seminary**.
- A theological liberal, Rauschenbusch rejected many of the core tenets of the Christian faith.
 - He doubted the reliability of the gospel accounts of Christ’s life.
 - Theologians should decide which biblical teachings are outdated in the modern age.
 - He doubted the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 - He rejected belief in Satan, demons, and Hell as a place of eternal punishment.
 - He regarded the Bible’s apocalyptic teachings as fanciful imaginations.
- Ministry in “Hell’s Kitchen” in New York City.
- A committed postmillennialist.
- Rauschenbusch claimed to be an evangelical who sought to win people to new life in Christ, but his priority was to transform earth into the Kingdom of God through socio/political action.
 - Rauschenbusch: “[The church] has no adequate answer to the fundamental moral questions of our day.... Its hymns, its rituals, its prayers of devotion, are so devoid of social thought” as to be sterile and lifeless....”
- Professor of New Testament, church history, civil government, English, and the natural sciences at Rochester Theological Seminary.
- *Christianity and the Social Gospel* (1907).
 - “Christianity is in its nature revolutionary,” and the purpose of the gospel is “to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconciling them in accordance with the will of God.”
- *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917).
 - John’s baptisms were “not a ritual act of individual salvation but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement.”
 - The source of evil is not individual sin but “suprapersonal entities” – unjust socio-economic and political systems.
- Rauschenbusch was a major influence in Christian socialist circles, and he regarded socialism as the next stage in the evolution of Christian consciousness.
- Rauschenbusch’s legacy:

The Social Gospel: A Critique.

- Theological liberalism and the Social Gospel.
- Comprehensive Christian discipleship.
 - ▶ Total transformation of our beliefs, values, priorities, lifestyles, etc.
 - ▶ The gospel should inform our attitudes and actions when it comes to morals, money, social attitudes, and political ideology.
 - ▶ An asocial and apolitical “gospel” is *not* a wholistic gospel.
- ▶ However: The gospel is primarily about preparing our souls for spiritual union with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - ▶ It is *not* primarily about transforming human societies here on earth.
- The motives of Social Gospelers might have been sincere, but in reducing Christianity to humanitarianism and the Kingdom of God to social and political reform, they lost the primary aspect of the gospel: personal spiritual transformation.
 - ▶ Humanity’s greatest problem is endemic sin – not social injustice.
 - ▶ The problem of government-imposed “social justice” and redistribution of wealth.
 - Ref. **Jefrey D. Breshears**, *C. S. Lewis on Politics, Government and the Good Society*.
- The problem of the “Christian America” thesis.