

## WHAT'S IN A NAME – LIBERAL

### Martin Camroux

The word liberal is not exactly flavour of the month in the Church today. Currently the church papers are full of people threatening to leave the Church of England because of the influence of the liberal establishment. This isn't just Anglican. I was speaking to a URC minister recently who is looking for a move. He went to meet the elders at a Church and never got asked to preach. "The problem" he said "was I put the word liberal in my CV. It seemed to cause some of them awful problems. I'm thinking of taking it out before I go anywhere else". In America its worse. You can buy a book with the title [\*The Enemy within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Schools, Faith, and Military.\*](#) What is it about the L-word which causes such controversy?

Giving the Centenary Lecture here at Trinity recently Professor Clyde Binfield asked why "whenever the word liberal is brought to play, it is often preceded by such a phrase as "wishy washy" and it is often followed by something like "do gooder". For him however, he said, such words were "Badges of pride and courage" and that for him "Wishy-washy liberal do goodery as practised by politically correct bleeding hearts" is about liberating the truth and nothing is more needed. So what is a liberal?

Liberal theology has two origins. Firstly it begins in evangelical Christianity. Once Martin Luther said that "to go against conscience is neither right nor safe , if you want me to recant you must prove I am wrong out of scripture or evident reason" without realizing he was giving the individual the right to ask questions and to think for themselves. . Having challenged the Pope people went on to challenge Luther and to ask questions about the Bible and to challenge the teaching of the Church. People began to demand the freedom to think critically about their faith.

Secondly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries came what you might describe as the crisis of modern belief. Christian faith was challenged by the development of science, including the idea of evolution. It was challenged by new ideas of biblical scholarship. It was challenged by new moral ideas –for example to many people the idea of everlasting hell became morally objectionable. It was challenged by feminism – which asked why the churches are dominated by men.

In this situation, some Christians sought to use the freedom to think critically which evangelicalism had given them, to restate the faith in a way which answered the questions raised by new knowledge and new ideas. It's this desire to restate in the context of current knowledge which is the core of liberalism.

The man who more than anyone else is regarded as the originator of liberal Christianity is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834). His life is nothing like as exciting as Luther but gives you the heart of the liberal enterprise. His family were pietistic Moravians. He went through a conversion experience as a child. His letters are full of references to the Saviour's love and his own unworthiness. It was the full born again experience. It's

important he begins as an evangelical. Then questions began to form in his mind to which he could not find answers. It seemed to him that the Jesus who was preached to him was not a human being. And the idea of Christ dieing to placate the wrath of an angry God he found impossible to believe. The rejection from his father was terrible. By his doubts he had crucified Christ, disturbed his late mother's rest and made his stepmother weep. But to Schleiermacher it appeared differently. The fact that he could not believe all of the theology with which he had grown up did not mean that God was not still real in his life. What was basic to religion he came to believe is not theology (which often changes) but the underlying religious experience. Always people have a "Sense and taste for the infinite." That comes first. Theology is the attempt to make sense of this experience and that is done anew in every situation. As Harry Emerson Fosdick used to put it "Astronomies change, but the stars remain." That is the fundamental liberal conviction.

It goes without saying that some liberal attempts to do this have been better than others. For some people liberal Christianity is a stage they pass through on the way out of faith. But the task is vital for Christianity if we to believe with honesty and integrity. And liberal Christianity brings out qualities vital to the living of the gospel.

Firstly the liberal is committed to thinking about faith, to intellectual criticality. Dorothy Sayers once said "most Englishmen would die rather than think, and many of them do". A liberal says I cannot park my brain at the door and offer God my heart. I've got to bring intellectual criticality to bear on the ultimate issues of my life. Harry Emerson Fosdick puts it like this "Faith does not take reason by the throat and strangle the beast. Faith and reason are not opposites. They need each other". Good thinking clarifies faith, stimulates faith, purifies faith. As Clyde Binfield put it "There is nothing more disintegrative of unthinking certainty, nothing more subversive, nothing therefore more likely to liberate the way to truth."

This commitment to criticality is one which not all Christians share. Too many evangelists help us not to think or reason but to accept authority - generally theirs. Many cults major on irrationality. The founder of Est put it like this "With us understanding gets the booby prize". Or in the immortal words which one Indian guru put outside his Ashram at Poona "Leave your shoes and your minds at the door". The second part could well be written outside many churches – indeed I think some would be proud of it.

The Liberal however is committed to criticality. Jesus came to take away our sins not our minds. It's important to relate what one believes to science and to history, to be willing to ask critical questions. Reason is not all there is in a living faith but it is a vital part of it. I remember at Mansfield College hearing George Caird finish a lecture by quoting Isaac Watts:

"Where reason fails with all her powers,  
There faith prevails, and love adores".

"Yes" said Dr Caird "then, but only then".

That's a liberal conviction. We are to worship God not only with our heart and soul but also with our mind.

Secondly liberals are committed to the view that no-one has the whole truth. As James Dunn puts it "Liberalism encapsulated the lasting insight that all our knowledge is incomplete, all expressions of truth are fallible and corrigible". For a liberal faith is about glimpsing the truth not possessing it.

I recently read about a man who wanted a revelation from God. "I want a revelation" he told his minister "I want God to speak to me simple and straight". His minister was rather puzzled as to what to advise. Finally the minister said to him "The next time it rains, go outside, look up into the heavens, and ask God for a revelation".

A few days later the heavens opened. There was torrential rain. The man came back to the minister utterly sodden, dripping water everywhere. "I followed your advice" he said "I stood in the rain for over an hour, looked up in the skies and asking for a revelation from God. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. The rain pelted down by face, the water ran down my neck, I just felt ignorant and stupid". The minister replied "What greater revelation do you need?"

The liberal shouldn't need to stand in the rain to realise how ignorant we are in this amazing universe. As Paul said "Now we see through a glass darkly". Some people frankly don't like. They like to think they know everything. They are unhappy at the thought they might be wrong. Against this liberal faith has started from this fundamental position- that since none of us have the whole truth, we must be open to other people's ideas and committed to freedom of belief. I cherish the words of William Sloane Coffin "We can build a community out of seekers of truth, but not out of possessors of truth".

Thirdly liberal faith means the freedom to adapt faith to new knowledge. How can any church be concerned about the truth if it is not willing to do this? What do you do when Galileo shows the earth goes round the sun or Darwin discovers evolution or biblical scholars demonstrate how the gospels have come to us? What do you do when it becomes apparent that homosexuality is not a deviant life choice but part of what some people are? The freedom to adapt what one believes as the evidence changes is fundamental to liberalism. If you go to New York you can see this symbolised in stone at Riverside Church. Many of the statues are of the people you'd expect. There is Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley. There Epstein's Christ in Majesty. Over the West portal however you will find an extraordinary series of sculptures including scientists like Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein. They were put there when Riverside was built in 1930 because for Harry Emerson Fosdick they said that all new truth comes from God. For that same reason you'll also see statues above the portal of Confucius, Buddha and Mohammed. 1930. Isn't that amazing? All truth where ever it comes from is to be welcomed in the Church of Christ. That's a liberal conviction.

Nothing of this is anti-evangelical. In its Reformation meaning being an evangelical is about being a lover of grace, gripped by Scripture with a personal gospel to share.

Evangelical faith and critical reason are best in creative tension not alternatives.. Some of us will put the balance more some way, some more the other. Gilbert and Sullivan may be right **every boy and every gal that's born into the world alive Is either a little Liberal Or else a little Conservative.** But we need both.

Let me finish by telling you one of my favourite stories about Karl Barth. Schleiermacher we usually refer to as the father of liberal theology. Karl Barth was probably the most important conservative theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Much of Barth's energy was given to combating liberal ideas. But he used to tell his students jokingly that when he got to heaven he was going to have long talks with Schleiermacher. Barth would say "well Schleiermacher you saw some great things in your theology". And Schleiermacher will reply. "Well. Barth, you saw some great things too". None of us, Barth, used to say, can see everything.

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