

Two Kinds of Christianity

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(this was an article I wrote awhile ago for our local paper ... caused quite a stir)

Many people who call themselves "Protestant Christian" (Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc.) seem unaware of the fact that there are two radically different approaches to Protestant Christianity. One approach is "Liberalism/Modernism" and the other is "Evangelicalism." Both are represented by well-attended churches here in Ellsworth. The fact is that Liberalism/Modernism and Evangelicalism, in their classical forms, are more different than apples and oranges (they are actually more like two different religions). The heart of the issue relates to how these two groups view Scripture. As a rule, Evangelicals view Scripture as a miracle of God, an authoritatively guide in all matters of life and practice. Liberals/Moderns, on the other hand, typically hold that Scripture may be heart-warming and helpful at points, but is filled with errors, naïve myths and outdated morals. What does this mean in practical terms? For Evangelicals, Moses really existed and the Red Sea really parted, God Himself became a man, was born of a virgin, and died on a cruel cross for the sins of humanity. For many Liberals/Moderns, Moses was fictional, miracles don't happen, and Jesus' followers greatly exaggerated his life and claims. To understand the issue better, the interested person should read a very famous sermon from 1922 by Harry Emerson Fosdick called "Shall The Fundamentalists Win." Fosdick was a vocal proponent of the Liberal/Modern perspective, and argued that certain traditional Christian beliefs were just not believable anymore. What beliefs? Fosdick mentions "the historicity of certain special miracles, preeminently the virgin birth of our Lord ... a special theory of inspiration ... (and) a special theory of the Atonement." What he was saying was, among other things, that "Christians" should not have to believe that Scripture is true and historically accurate, nor that Jesus Christ died to atone for sin. Fosdick derided more traditional Christians by asking, "What can you do with folks like this who ... play with the tiddlywinks and peccadillos of religion?" Fosdick was saying in no uncertain terms that arguments over the truthfulness of Scripture, the Virgin birth, and Jesus dying for our sins were nothing more than "tiddlywinks" and "pickadillos."

Fosdick's sermon was the rallying cry for the Modern/Liberal cause, and it became increasingly popular for pastors to argue that "Christians" should be allowed to reject virtually everything "Christians" had believed for almost two thousand years. This Liberal/Modern perspective had an enormous influence in major Protestant denominations, and for awhile it looked as if this "new" vision of Christianity might win out over more traditional views. But, the "new" approach has proved futile, and (thankfully) the Liberal/Modern perspective is withering away. Today, it is the more traditional view of Christianity, Evangelicalism, which is exploding all over the

globe. Yet, even though Liberalism/Modernism is in its death throes, it still causes fits for simple Christians who have not taken the time to understand it. So, allow me to state the situation in the simplest of terms—some Protestant churches believe in the absolute authority of Scripture (Evangelicals), while other Protestant churches don't (Liberals/Moderns). So, in which sort of church will you be sitting this weekend, and more importantly, in which sort of church might you experience the living God? The Scripture says this, "But to this one will I look, to him who is humble and contrite of heart, who trembles at my Word." (Isaiah 66:2)

(because the above article caused such a stir--not quite torches and pitch forks, but close-- I was asked to write another)

"The Truth Will Make You Free"

My last article seems to have struck a nerve in the community, so the following seeks to further clarify differences between Evangelical Protestantism and Liberal/Modern Protestantism. I am not interested in pitting my personal views against any other individual's, but will be referring to easily verifiable facts. My hope is that polite discussion on these things will yield good fruit.

Fact: Evangelical Protestants believe that the Bible has no errors, and there is only one gospel message (which has no competitors)—The Son of God literally, actually, historically became a man, died for the sins of humanity, and rose bodily from the dead (I Corinthians 15:1-4). Liberal/Modern Protestants, as a rule, believe the Scripture has many errors, and believe that there are many ways to understand "the gospel." While Evangelicals look to Scripture as their ultimate authority, Liberals/Moderns have always (since the time of their father Friedrich Schleiermacher) elevated the subjective "I" over the Scriptures—they are basically saying, "Ultimately, I determine what is right or wrong for me." The issues involved here can be seen in the history of many denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA (one of the most influential Protestant denominations in the United States).

Fact: Around 1920, the highest governing Presbyterian body (of what is now the PCUSA), the General Assembly, asked all ministers to affirm five beliefs: 1. The Bible is without error; 2. Jesus was born of a virgin; 3. Jesus died as a substitute for sinners; 4. Jesus rose bodily from the dead; and 5. Jesus really performed miracles. These points, which virtually every Christian since the days of the apostles has believed, evoked a tidal wave of protest from clergy, academics, and laymen (Yes, you read correctly. Many Presbyterians did not want to affirm them!). A rebuttal document titled "The Auburn Affirmation" was adopted in 1924. "The Auburn Affirmation" states that the Bible is not

inerrant (meaning that it does not have errors), and insists that the five traditional doctrines proposed by the General Assembly not be a requirement for pastors. From this point on, Presbyterian pastors were free to deny things that Christians for nearly 2000 years had believed—they could deny Jesus was literally born of a virgin, they could deny Jesus literally bore the guilt of sinners on the cross, and they could deny Jesus literally rose bodily from the dead. In short, they could deny the gospel that had been preached for centuries.

Traditional Presbyterians were alarmed at the Modernist influence, and felt that “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” was being assaulted (see www.opc.org/cce/clark.html). Other denominations were embroiled in this debate as well, and in an attempt to preserve traditional Christianity, many new denominations and schools came into being. The more traditional branch of Protestantism, with its high view of Scripture (no errors) and its traditional doctrines and morals, came to be known as “Evangelicalism.” The newcomer movement, with its novel ideas about doctrine and morality and its smorgasbord of “gospels,” came to be called “Liberalism/Modernism.”

Evangelicals believe the main strokes of Christianity are not negotiable and they hold together like a Roman Arch; pull out one stone, and the beauty and strength of the whole falls apart. Evangelicals believe that the traditional gospel is eternally true, not just one of many options. They believe the Bible is also clear on moral issues (this is why they do not, for example, even discuss approving things like homosexuality or abortion). Where do the Evangelicals’ uncompromising convictions come from? The same place Luther, Calvin and Wesley derived their convictions—a high view of Scripture. Liberals/Moderns typically argue that Scripture is flawed, and look to their own subjective experience as authoritative (referring to this as “Spirit” or “conscience”). Evangelicals won’t acknowledge this new approach because they say it denigrates traditional doctrine, traditional morals, and even worse—it obscures the eternal gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). If this discussion has “struck a nerve” with you, please study Scripture and Christian history. As Jesus once said, “The truth will make you free.”