

“Liberalism” and “Anti-ism” – Two Erroneous Extremes

Dub McClish

Introduction

History reveals that men are susceptible to extremes in almost every arena of thought and behavior. This is no more clearly demonstrable than in the field of religion. A classic illustration is seen in the extreme of *salvation by meritorious works* advocated for centuries by Roman Catholicism and its opposite extreme of *salvation by faith only* advocated by the Reformers since the sixteenth century. Further, extremes sometimes (but not always) beget extremes. The *works-only* system of the Roman Church certainly begat the *faith-only* system of Luther and the Reformers. The Lord’s church has been plagued by extremes from time to time. Every extreme position among brethren from the day of the apostles to the present revolves around the two opposite extremes, generally designated “liberalism” and “anti-ism.”

Defining and Illustrating Liberalism

I am using the term *liberalism* to refer to a certain attitude and approach to religion that is unwilling to be as strict and definitive as God is in His Word. It is called “liberalism” due to its misplaced “generosity” in “giving away” that which it does not possess. It refuses to bind things that God has bound. This approach treats matters of Scriptural obligation as if they were matters of mere option. Those who are liberal in this sense tend to rely on their emotions and subjective opinions to make presumptions on the grace and mercy of God rather than strictly adhering to the Law of Christ. For example, such an one has said, “There are sincere, knowledgeable, devout Christians scattered among all the various denominations.” This, in spite of the fact that the New Testament explicitly and implicitly teaches that there is only one church which Christ built, for which He died, to which He adds those who are saved, and which He will save when He comes again (Eph. 4:4; Mat. 16:18; Acts 20:28; 2:41, 47; Eph. 5:23).¹ Before going further, I need to distinguish between a “liberal” in the sense that I have just defined him, and a “modernist.” While these two terms have some things in common, they are not synonymous. All modernists are liberals, but not all liberals are modernists. The liberal is willing to take some liberties with the Word of God but may still profess to maintain at least some confidence in and respect for some Biblical fundamentals (e.g., inspiration of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, Biblical miracles, resurrection of Christ, et al.). The modernist is basically an infidel; he no longer holds to such fundamentals. To him Christianity is but one of many “world religions,” all of which are human in origin, and “truth” is not objective, but

subjective, and therefore relative and mutable. In his view the Bible is a product of literary evolution over which he sits in judgment as merely an interesting curiosity piece.

Clear illustrations of the distinction between liberals and modernists are apparent in those brethren in the nineteenth century who insisted on imposing instrumental music and the missionary society upon the church. All of them were liberals in desiring to have these additions, which the Scriptures did (and do) not authorize. However, some of them proved themselves to be modernists as well, having come under the skeptical influence of the German rationalists of their time. When the “mere” liberals could not reform their modernist brethren, they separated from them and continue in that separation to the present. **The liberals became (and are) the Independent Christian Church (hereafter referred to as the ICC) and the modernists became (and are) the Disciples of Christ Christian Church.**

By these definitions one can observe that all modernists are liberals, but not all liberals are modernists—at least, not to begin with. **However, the seeds of modernism are most certainly in the liberal mind-set; the liberal is usually progressive in his liberalism.** When one adopts the liberal approach to religion, he has abandoned the authority of Scripture, and, free of its restraints, usually moves farther and farther from Truth and righteousness.

Defining and Illustrating Anti-Is

I am using *anti-ism* to refer to the disposition to be more strict than the Law of God. It is called “anti-ism” because those of this disposition generally occupy a negative position. It is characteristically against or opposed to certain things that God allows. The “anti” frame of mind takes matters of judgment and option and binds them as matters of Scriptural law and obligation. For example, various ones among us from time to time have tried to bind the listing of the acts of worship in Acts 2:42 as an invariable pattern for the order of the acts of worship. Since the “anti” characteristically forbids what God allows, he thereby makes laws where God has made none. For this reason, anti-ism is sometimes referred to as “legalism.” Thus, the private scruples of the “anti,” rather than the actual dictates of the Law of Christ, become the standard of doctrine and behavior.

With but few exceptions those who have adopted the “anti” mind-set in religion believe strongly in the verbal inspiration of the Bible and its authority. However, their mistake is in making their opinions and preferences as authoritative as the Scriptures themselves. Just as the liberal is broader than God, the anti is narrower than God in approaching the Bible and religion.

And, just as the liberal is progressive, ever embracing more and more liberal concepts, so those of the *anti* persuasion tend to draw ever narrower their boundaries of doctrine and those whom they can fellowship (e.g., some who, upon first adopting anti views, only opposed church support of orphan homes, next evolved to legislate against any congregational help for a non-Christian, and finally moved to the point that a church could not give one penny to provide milk for a starving baby).

I do not employ *liberal* and *anti* with any unkind, disrespectful, or malevolent intent, but simply as terms of simplifying identification in order for the reader to understand what I mean by them throughout the remainder of this Manuscript.

A Brief History of Some Liberal and Anti Movements

Although *liberalism* appears before *anti-ism* in the wording of our title, I have chosen to discuss them in reverse order because anti-ism arose and became widespread among us in recent times before the rise of pervasive liberalism, and anti-ism has been largely isolated and stabilized, while liberalism is still on the rise.

Historical Notes on Anti-ism

The element of anti-ism is clearly identifiable in the Bible. The scribes and Pharisees are sometimes called “first century antis” with good reason. They ever sought to bind upon others as law their own traditions and opinions, which God had not bound (Mat. 9:11-13; 12:10-12; 15:2; et al.). Clearly, the Judaizing teachers of the early years of the church were antis in their contentions. They taught: “Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). However, God had not bound circumcision as a religious act or a condition of covenant privilege under the new covenant (v. 24). Therefore, those who were binding it were troublesome and were attempting to subvert the brethren by binding this law that God had not bound.

Even the apostle Peter was caught up in the spirit of anti-ism as demonstrated by his behavior in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). The Gospel was for Gentile and Jew without respect of persons by God (Acts 10:34-35), but Peter refused to eat with Gentile brethren and influenced others to do the same. He was refusing those whom God had accepted, thus binding where God had not bound. Diotrephes was guilty of the same anti error (3 John 9-10). Paul warned of a coming apostasy in which men would forbid others to marry and to eat meat (1 Tim. 4:3). Since these were things that God allowed (Heb. 13:4; 1 Tim. 4:3-4), they were making laws that God

had not made. Paul labeled those teachers as hypocritical liars and their doctrines as “doctrines of demons” (vv. 1-2). They were “antis” in the truest sense.

In more modern times the spirit of anti-ism has demonstrated itself in varied issues. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century a great amount of opposition among brethren had arisen to “Sunday Schools.” This carried over into the early part of the twentieth century and was an issue of major controversy till about 1930. Gunter College (Gunter, TX), founded in 1903, was doomed from the beginning because its board passed a resolution which labeled “Sunday Schools,” uninspired literature, and women teachers as unscriptural. It died for lack of support in 1928. To a great degree, the same brethren who opposed individual Bible classes, printed Bible literature, and women teaching others at all (even children or other women) in the church building, also attempted to forbid the church to use individual cups for the Lord’s Supper (“one-cuppers”). They eventually divided among themselves with some of them opposing classes while allowing separate cups and others opposing both classes and cups. Several public debates, articles in brotherhood journals, and sermons saved the church from domination by these anti positions by exposing their fallacies.

In the 1940s and 1950s the same sort of spirit caused some brethren to oppose “located” preachers (aka the *mutual ministry* doctrine) and colleges founded by brethren primarily to teach the Bible. Among those prominent in advocating these anti issues were W. Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett, who, in the 1960s, radically changed directions and became as liberal as they had formerly been anti.

In the early 1950s some brethren began voicing their opposition to churches supporting orphan homes and congregational cooperation in preaching the Gospel. Two of the principal advocates of these anti views were Roy E. Cogdill and Fanning Yater Tant. They strongly pushed their views, especially through the pages of *The Gospel Guardian*. Numerous debates were conducted on these issues, some of the most crucial of which were those between W.L. Totty and Charles Holt (1954), E.R. Harper and Yater Tant (1955, 1956), Guy N. Woods and W. Curtis Porter (1956), Guy N. Woods and Roy E. Cogdill (1957), and G.K. Wallace and Charles Holt (1959). Roy C. Deaver and Thomas B. Warren also wrote, debated, and spoke extensively against this anti movement and thus helped greatly to stem the tide that seriously threatened to engulf the church.² These latter anti movements have spawned additional anti positions which oppose eating a physical meal in church buildings and, as earlier mentioned, giving even a penny to anyone who is not a Christian (commonly referred to as the *saints-only* doctrine).

The anti-Bible class, anti-Bible literature, anti-women teacher, anti-located preacher, anti-multiple cups, and anti-Bible college positions were generally recognized as extreme through the efforts of stalwart men who exposed their fallacies. They therefore captured only a relatively small percentage of congregations and had largely run their course by the 1940s. However, the anti-cooperation and anti-orphan home contention had a far more powerful effect, in spite of the valiant effort of several good men. Many preachers aligned themselves with it and at least a few hundred congregations were captured by it. Florida Christian College in Tampa, Florida, came under the influence of this faction and it continues in this alignment as Florida College. While these anti brethren continue to propagate their doctrine, refusing to fellowship those who will not bow to their personal scruples, they have not made any major gains in the past few decades.

All of the *anti* movements make the same basic arguments and the same basic mistakes in Biblical interpretation:

1. They argue that they have found an “exclusive pattern” for their way of doing things when there is none.
2. They elevate incidental matters to the level of essential matters.

As described above, the anti-cooperation and anti-orphan home contentions posed a grave danger to the church for several years. While we should not relax our vigilance against those errors, the threat with the possibility of far more disastrous consequences from the mid-1960s to the present has been and is liberalism, as previously defined.

Historical Notes on Liberalism

As defined above, liberalism is evident in many persons described in the Bible. All of those who thought they could substitute what pleased them in place of what God specified were liberals. This includes the likes of Cain (Gen. 4), Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10), Saul (1 Sam. 15), and David (1 Chr. 13, 15).

In more modern times, in the middle part of the nineteenth century some brethren began to insist upon using mechanical instruments of music in worship and a missionary society in evangelism. In order to do so they had to adopt a loose and liberal view toward Scriptural authority. They insisted on their right to have these things on the basis that the Scriptures did not specifically forbid them. These brethren were so determined to have their unauthorized innovations that they would stop at nothing, even a general division in the church, which was recognized in 1906 by the federal census. Those who were so wedded to the instrument and the

society that they split off from the church then split into two denominations by 1926. One of these became the **Disciples of Christ Christian Church**, which now revels in its ultra-liberal denominational status and its radical modernistic theology. It claims Alexander Campbell as its founder and ridicules the very concept of restoring New Testament Christianity. The other is the **Independent Christian Church**, sometimes called the "Conservative Christian Church." However, it is "conservative" only in comparison with the Disciples of Christ, not with the New Testament church. It has continued to add numerous innovations to its doctrine and practice in the course of its existence. When the devastating split occurred, it is estimated that eighty-six percent of the church was captured by the liberal element. This meant that faithful brethren in most places had their buildings and congregations ruthlessly seized from them and had to start all over. However, now free of having to expend so much energy and expense in fighting the liberals, faithful brethren could turn all of their attention to evangelism. In only fifty years, the church of Christ would far outgrow the liberal elements that had departed from them and within five decades would become the fastest growing religious body in America for a few years.

While the church was riding the crest of this wave of growth in the late 1950s and early 1960s some of the "mainline" denominations (e.g., Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, et al.) were being overwhelmed with modernism. They were "sitting ducks" for modernism because they had long been enslaved to liberal theology and hermeneutics, which had produced liberal doctrine and practice. These religious bodies, captured almost totally by modernism, no longer stand for anything but super tolerance of everything and everybody. The Southern Baptist Church began to feel the same pressures in the 1970s and those in that denomination who still claim to believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible are in a fight-to-the-finish struggle with liberals and modernists for control. It threatens to split the Baptists right down the middle.

It was predictable that sooner or later these religious currents would affect the Lord's church. There had been isolated cases of liberalism all through the years, but they were just that. Even to the early 1960s, when a liberal preacher or professor was discovered he was generally dismissed and deprived of a pulpit or classroom till he repented. Liberalism would soon prove to be not so isolated and unpopular. One of the early indications of a more widespread influence of liberalism among us was the accusation from some brethren in the early 1960s that preachers had over-emphasized the plan of salvation to the neglect of Christ Himself. *The Man*

or the *Plan* issue, as it came to be popularly styled, was thoroughly discussed in the papers. This was an early attempt to shift our emphasis away from sound doctrine, which doubtless influenced some in that very direction.

More and more promising young men who attended colleges operated by brethren to prepare to preach were being encouraged by their professors to immediately pursue graduate and post-graduate degrees in sectarian schools, generally staffed with modernistic professors. As they did so, they were coming back to teach in our colleges and preach in our pulpits, even though, as time would prove, many of them had embraced liberal concepts, while some of them had lost their faith altogether. By the late 1960s liberal elements were beginning to surface rapidly. Generally, they were calling for a “restructuring” of the church and had the disposition of mind to challenge every precept, practice, and principle of New Testament Christianity.

Mission Magazine, a monthly journal that first appeared in July 1967, played a leading role in this effort. Until its demise about twenty years later it would carry the banner of liberalism (at times evincing tinges of modernism) for the young liberals among us. It was attacking the concept of a Biblical pattern for the church at least as early as January 1973. About the time this magazine was introduced, another group of young liberals began the **Campus Evangelism** program with its annual seminars, heavily stacked with some of the most liberal preachers and professors available. The outcry over its influence became so great from parents and other sound brethren that the program folded in 1970. Chuck Lucas picked up the pieces and developed it into the Crossroads cult, which, in turn, spawned the Boston cult. In this same period, Reuel Lemmons, editor of *The Firm Foundation*, was increasingly defending apostates such as Pat Boone and Don Finto and pushing his *elders-have-no- authority* hobby. Also, in the late 1960s, *The Christian Chronicle* came under extremely liberal influence. Sweet Publishing Company began publishing books from some of the most liberal men among us, along with questionable Bible school material.

By the early 1970s the liberal “snowball” had begun to pick up momentum. Congregations controlled by liberal elements were increasingly easy to find. To be liberal was now becoming more and more accepted and those who had for a long time been “closet liberals” began coming out into the open. It became increasingly possible for a liberal preacher or professor not only to find a place to preach or teach, but to hold on to his position and even be honored. The influential Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, and the Herald of Truth radio and television programs came under strong and growing criticism for their liberal

leanings. I speak here of criticisms totally apart from the objections of *anti* brethren of 20 years previous. These outcries were from brethren who defended the Scriptural right of the Highland Church to operate Herald of Truth, but who increasingly distrusted the doctrinal soundness of at least some of the program's speakers. This flak culminated in a marathon meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1973, attended by over two hundred preachers and numerous representatives of Highland and Herald of Truth. The meeting only intensified the fears of concerned brethren.

Institutions of higher learning were a fertile breeding-ground for the liberalism of the nineteenth century. They are repeating this dubious function in this century. Pepperdine University has long been a bastion of liberalism on the West Coast, even in the 1950s. The other colleges were generally perceived as conservative, with some more so than others, until the 1970s. With the retirement of Don Morris and the installment of John Stevens as president of Abilene Christian College in 1970, a spirit of unprecedented tolerance soon became observable. The drift to the left in Abilene was clearly underway, hand-in-hand with that of the Highland congregation. The Bible department and the lectureship gradually began to be more and more staffed with men of "uncertain sounds." With succeeding administrations, the drift has become an open and obvious shift.

Expressions of concern in 1986 over the documented teaching in science classes of theistic evolution and that Genesis 1 is a "myth" were met with denial of the facts and defense of the teachers involved.³ Abilene Christian University (as it was re-named) has become one of the foremost proponents and encouragers of liberalism through: (1) outrageously heretical statements, both orally and in writing, by various men on the faculty of the Bible College and the president himself, (2) books published by the ACU Press and authored by ACU professors, (3) the almost exclusive use of liberal speakers on their lectureships, workshops, and seminars in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992 the president of ACU defended the appointment of a Methodist preacher, enrolled as a student at ACU, as editor of the school paper. Lamentably, several other colleges and universities supported by the Lord's people are rapidly following the ecumenical, "unity-in-diversity" lead of ACU.

A series of "scholars' conferences" was begun in the late 1980s, hosted by a different one of "our" colleges or universities each year. These have encouraged and produced some of the most liberal and anti-Biblical declarations and proposals imaginable. Certainly, liberalism has found a mighty ally in the schools.

In 1983, Rubel Shelly shocked the brotherhood by declaring his newfound ecumenism, as quoted earlier, that he believed there were faithful Christians among all the denominations. This represented a total reversal of his previous strong stance in defense of the Truth. He soon lent his considerable influence in Nashville, Tennessee, to the beginning of a series of “unity forums” with the Independent Christian Church. The first one, styled a “Restoration Summit Meeting,” was held in 1984. These have continued at least annually to the present and have involved only a very few brethren known for their doctrinal soundness as speaking participants. In spite of the hundreds of hours spent in these discussions the ICC people have adamantly said they are not about to give up instrumental music in worship. Meanwhile, many of our soft and “irenic” brethren who have been participating are now urging that we treat the use of instruments as merely a matter of opinion or conscience, rather than one involving Scriptural authority. The unity forums have definitely brought many more liberals out into the open and have emboldened others who were already of a liberal spirit.

Mission Magazine was but a precursor of even more liberal journals to come. When William Cline and Buster Dobbs purchased *The Firm Foundation* from the Showalter family in 1983, Reuel Lemmons was relieved as editor and the paper was restored to a Scripturally sound emphasis and direction. Within a year Lemmons had found backing for a new journal where he could have even greater freedom to propagate his liberalism — *Image Magazine*. In 1992 Rubel Shelly was instrumental in beginning an even more liberal journal, which he named *Wineskins*. *The Christian Chronicle*, which practically died in the 1970s, was revived by Oklahoma Christian University in the 1980s. It has become a major “unity-in-diversity” organ under Howard Norton, editor and chairman of the Bible College at OCU. A spate of books from liberal brethren, many of them professors in our universities, has flowed from the press since the 1980s, and their central theme is one: The church must make whatever changes are necessary to attract modern society. The quest for Scriptural authority for their changes has been all but completely abandoned. Publications have played a major role in leading many astray.

Liberalism has also received great impetus from various workshops, seminars, and lecture programs. The Campus Evangelism Seminars in the late 1960s were the pioneers of liberal efforts of this sort. Chuck Lucas continued these in the Florida Evangelism Seminars into the 1970s. Also, in the 1970s ACU began more and more to feature men recognized for their doctrinal softness and unsoundness on its annual lectureship. In 1978 the first Tulsa Soul-Winning Workshop was conducted. By 1980 the liberal doctrinal agenda of this annual event

was clearly evident. From year to year it has featured some of the most liberal and denominationally minded men among us and it remains a major rallying point for such. In 1989 three of the largest and most liberal churches in and around Nashville, Tennessee (Woodmont Hills, Madison, Antioch), planned the first “Nashville Jubilee,” which has become another hotbed of avant-garde doctrine and practice. When the lectureships of some of our higher institutions of learning, as already mentioned, are added to these efforts, they constitute a powerful force for the “gospel of change” — unauthorized change — in matters legislated by the Son of God.

Seven Major Thrusts Against the Bible and the Church by the Liberal Change Agents

1. **They are pushing for changes in how the Bible is to be viewed and interpreted.** Some of the liberals who attended the first unity forum with the ICC in 1984 came home crying for a “new hermeneutic” (i.e., a new set of rules of Bible interpretation) so we could have fellowship with those in the ICC in spite of their apostate condition. A few years later some of the self-proclaimed “scholars” began to call for a “new hermeneutic” at the “scholars’ conferences.” They want to discard any respect for the prohibitive nature of the silence of Scripture. They would have us believe we do not have any law under Christ, but that the New Testament is merely a “love letter” from Heaven. They deny that the Bible contains patterns for our behavior or that God intends for us to strictly follow it. Some have already taken positions, the implications of which deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture.
2. **They are pushing for changes in congregational worship.** Some are suggesting the observance of the Lord’s supper on other days besides the Lord’s day. Some now say that the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship is a non-issue and that they have no scruples against them. An increasing number of congregations are regularly using “special” or “presentation” music (i.e., solos, choirs, and other groups separate from the congregation) in their worship assemblies. Bible-quoting preachers were long ago replaced in many congregations by “hip” promoters giving pop-psychology pep talks laced with funny stories. Drama and theatrical productions are frequently filling the normal sermon time in some congregations. The practice of those in the congregation lifting their hands up over their heads during songs and prayers and applauding at points of agreement with the preacher, at a baptism, or at some announcement is on the rise. Some have already done away with a Gospel invitation and ridicule those who continue to offer one at each assembly. It has become increasingly common for congregations to meet only on Sunday morning and to replace the normal evening worship period with “cell” or “life group” meetings in homes. Some congregations now have two morning worship assemblies. One is structured along “traditional” lines and is conducted for those who might be offended by “non-traditional” practices. The other is for liberals who care little or none for Scriptural authorization for what they say or do, but who want to experiment with the old hollow, worn out practices of sectarianism, as if they possessed some magical formula for creating “spiritual worship.”

3. **They are pushing for changes concerning the very nature of the church.** More and more are indicating in their writing and speaking that they view the church in a completely denominational sense. One book advocates taking the personal traits of Jesus alone as a “paradigm” (a synonym for *pattern*, but they would not stoop to use such a dirty word!) for the church and disregarding Acts through Revelation for information on the church.⁴ Of course, every move to change the elements and/or acts of worship also directly affects the church.
4. **They are pushing for changes in the role of women in the church.** The secular, social, political, and humanistic “women’s liberation movement” of the 1970s and 1980s has had an obvious influence on some brethren who seem to care more about being “politically correct” than about being doctrinally correct. The liberals are pushing women into leadership roles in the church as rapidly as they can. Their usual beginning point is to use them as ushers and to pass the trays during the Lord’s supper, then they “progress” to have them lead a song or a prayer, then they further “progress” to have them teach mixed adult classes, with the intent eventually to move them into the pulpit. At least one Alabama congregation has published its agenda for appointing women as deacons, then as elders, and finally, turning the pulpit over to them.
5. **They are pushing for changes relating to the plan of salvation.** Carroll D. Osburn, Professor of New Testament at ACU, avers: “There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who believe that Christ is the Son of God, but who differ on...soteriological matters such as whether baptism is ‘for’ or ‘because of’ the remission of sins”⁵ Jimmy Allen, a Bible professor at Harding University, has written an entire book devoted to the proposition that a believer need not know or understand the Scriptural purpose of his/her baptism for it to be Scriptural baptism.⁶
6. **They are pushing for changes relating to fellowship.** Rubel Shelly has publicly renounced his former Scriptural views in favor of liberal views of Ephesians 4:4–6 and 2 John 9, which views imply the existence of fellowship between all who believe in the atonement of Christ for our sins and in His Deity.⁷ Carroll Osburn likewise argues that 2 John 9 refers only to teaching concerning the nature of the Christ and therefore fellowship should not be withheld from those who do not believe the Lord’s supper should be taken every Sunday, those who wish to use instrumental music in worship, premillennialists, or (as noted above) even those who teach that baptism is “because of” remission of sins.⁸ The move for unity and fellowship with the Independent Christian Church (and other denominations as well) is both the effect of this push for a broader fellowship and the cause of additional efforts of this sort. More and more preachers, especially in the large metropolitan churches, are joining denominational Ministerial alliances.
7. **They are pushing for changes relating to moral issues.** In the 1970s some prominent brethren, led by James D. Bales of the Harding University Bible faculty, began advancing doctrines that relaxed the Lord’s teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in Matthew 19:9. As a direct result of the “loopholes” he and others professed to find in God’s law for marriage, we now have active preachers, elders, and deacons in some congregations who

have divorced and remarried on grounds other than fornication. There are likely thousands of brethren whose adulterous marriages have been justified by themselves and by church leaders on the basis of these supposed “loopholes” and who are accepted as faithful members in hundreds of congregations. We now have brethren who defend “social drinking” of alcoholic beverages, dancing, the wearing of immodest apparel in public, public mixed swimming, and playing the state lottery. Some have already suggested an attitude of tolerance on the subject of abortion.⁹

While anti-ism is not dead by any means and likely never will be, I repeat for the sake of emphasis, the far more serious threat to the church of Christ during this last quarter of the twentieth century and as we anticipate the twenty-first century is definitely liberalism. While anti-ism presses optional and incidental elements of the faith into law, it at least, in the main, is concerned about Scriptural authority, although it errs in its attempts to ascertain it. However, the frightful thing about liberalism is that it cuts loose from the Scriptures and their authority all who are ensnared by it. Once liberalism is embraced there is no limit, no stopping place in religion, because there is no standard.

Dispelling Some Myths

Did the Opponents of Anti-ism Beget Liberalism?

Those who have become ensnared in anti-ism sometimes level the charge that the liberalism of today is the natural outgrowth of the things they opposed. (Some of them say that today’s rampant liberalism is what they have opposed all along.) They further charge that those of us who fought (and continue to fight) their anti-ism are responsible for today’s liberalism — that we in fact defended it and created an atmosphere conducive to it. They like to say, “See there, you are just reaping the fruits of your defense of church cooperation and support of homes. If you had just stood with us against those things you would not be plagued with liberalism as you are now.” This is an idle charge at best and an absolute lie at worst. The anti-Bible class brethren made this charge against those who fought them on that issue. The anti-individual cups brethren made the same charge against those who fought them on their contention. The anti-cooperation and anti-orphan home brethren have repeatedly made such statements. The liberalism that presently plagues the church would have come forth even if many of us had not stood up to the forces of anti-ism, due to the several factors already discussed that combined at about the same time to produce it. In fact, since it is arguable that one of those factors that produced (or at least accelerated) the liberal cause was anti-ism, it would therefore follow that if more of us had joined the *anti* faction instead of opposing it, it would have hastened the rise of liberalism!

Did we create liberalism by defending the Scriptural right of congregations to cooperate with one another in evangelism and to support homes for the homeless out of the church treasury? Verily not! Those of us who defended those Scriptural options were neither defending nor encouraging any liberalism whatsoever. None of those who publicly debated the *anti* brethren on these issues ever suggested ignoring or going beyond the Scriptures. Quite the contrary! **The entire case for the right of congregations to engage in these cooperative and benevolent works – which the antis forbade – was rooted firmly in the teaching of the New Testament.** The very fact that we are now as strongly opposing the liberalism that has engulfed some of these efforts (e.g., the Highland Church in Abilene, TX, and the Herald of Truth programs) as we once defended their Scriptural authority to engage in these evangelistic efforts is proof that we have no sympathy for liberalism whatsoever – and that we did not create it. No, the elders of the Highland Church did not drift into liberalism because sound brethren upheld the Scriptural right of congregations to cooperate in preaching the Gospel on the Herald of Truth radio and television programs. They drifted into liberalism because they lost respect for the authority of the Word of God!

Our anti brethren, unable to distinguish between the things that God allows us to do in matters of judgment and their own private opinions, which they bind as Divine law, mistakenly aver that those who do not subscribe to their private judgments are liberals. They thus think they are fighting liberalism when they preach against eating on church property or one congregation sending money to another congregation to help in preaching the Gospel. If they really want to fight liberalism, let them cease calling those “liberal” who do not bow to their personal opinions, and join those of us who are on the firing line against the actual liberalism that is overwhelming so many in the church!

Did Liberalism Beget Anti-ism?

No, not unless the younger begets the older. I have shown that modern anti-ism arose as a reaction to what was **incorrectly** perceived to be liberalism (i.e., Scriptural cooperation of congregations in evangelism and congregational support of homes for the homeless). The liberal mind-set with which we are now having to deal was found only in exceptional and isolated cases in the hey-day of the most recent attempt by antis to take over the church, and it was exposed and contained. If either of these extremes begat the other, it is far more likely (as previously noted) that the anti-ism of the 1950s and 1960s pushed some brethren toward liberalism. To put it another way, some were so repulsed by not only the doctrine of anti-ism,

but by the generally vitriolic spirit of its advocates, that in running away from it they ran too far in the other direction. Of course, I am not at all saying that this is the only or even the main cause of the present poisonous and pervasive liberalism that has fastened itself on the church. As I indicated in the historical notes above, there were several factors involved.

What Is the Solution to These Extremes?

Is anti-ism the correct response to liberalism? Is liberalism the correct response to anti-ism? We may as well ask if Nazism is the correct response to Marxism or vice versa! Absolutely not! We do not correct one extreme by adopting another. When one lets his automobile veer off the road on one side it is not only improper, but dangerous, to steer completely across the road and veer off to the other side as a corrective measure. On either side are dangerous ditches; on the road is where we want to travel, not in the ditches.

When we are speaking of extreme positions, as in the case before us, the Truth is always the middle ground. The Lord set forth this very ground as the only ground we can follow to please Him when He gave the apostolic promise and charge: “And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mat. 16:19; 18:18). The English phrases “shall be bound” and “shall be loosed” are the translation of perfect tense Greek participles. The literal meaning of them is “shall have already been bound” and “shall have already been loosed.” This is a powerful promise to the apostles that they would not be able to teach or preach anything that had not already been settled in Heaven—a promise of inerrancy in their doctrine. The means by which they would do so would be by the unfailing guidance of the Holy Spirit the Christ would send to them (John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13).

There is something in this promise even more pertinent to the subject of this chapter. **All of the “binding” and “loosing” has already been done!** To “bind” refers to those things that are obligatory, whether in matters required or forbidden. To “loose” refers to those things which the Lord has declared to be optional and we therefore have the freedom to do if we choose. The binding and loosing in spiritual matters had already been done in Heaven before the Lord set foot on earth (Eph. 3:9–11; 1 Pet. 1:18–20; et al.). The Lord, through what He taught personally while on earth and through what He would teach (and has taught) through His apostles and other New Testament prophets, has revealed all of the binding and loosing that pertains to us. **No man has any right to bind what God has not bound**—this is what the anti

does. **Neither does any man have the right to loose what God has bound** – this is what the liberal does. The only road of spiritual sense and safety is to limit ourselves to what the New Testament authorizes and nothing more.

John also pointed us to the only safe and proper course: “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9). This passage particularly applies to the mind-set of the liberal.¹⁰ The great flaw of the liberal is his determination to run ahead of, to go beyond what the Word authorizes him to do. If the liberal has any sensitivity at all to the Truth, he should shudder at his spiritual condition – **he/she “hath not God”!** This is to be without hope, just as Paul described the Ephesians before they heard and obeyed the Gospel: “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). If one desires to have fellowship with both the Father and the Son he must abide in the teaching. This simply means doing only what the Word of God authorizes us to do. Only in this course does one have hope because only in this course does he have fellowship with God and His Son.

Paul wrote to the Colossians of the necessity of abiding in the Gospel Truth: “And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). The phrase, *in the name of*, is used almost as a formula in the New Testament to refer to the authority of the one named, in this case, Jesus the Lord. Peter used it in precisely the same way on Pentecost when he said, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38; cf. 3:6; 4:10, 18; 5:40; 9:27; 10:48; 1 Cor. 5:4; 2 The. 3:6; et al.). The passage in Colossians clearly demands that both our words and deeds be measured by the standard of Christ’s authority – the New Testament. This means that no man has the right to erect a standard narrower or smaller than His, which every anti does. It also means that no man has the right to erect a standard broader or larger than His, which every liberal does.

Conclusion

Anti-ism is not the antidote for liberalism. Liberalism is not the antidote for anti-ism. The Truth lies between these two extremes and is the only God-approved antidote for both. It is not anti-ism nor liberalism, nor any other “ism,” but the Truth of the teaching of Christ in the New Testament that will make (and keep) us free (John 8:32).

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Thomas B. Warren, *Lectures on Church Cooperation and Orphan Homes* (Moore, OK: National Christian Press, Inc., 1963).
3. Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth?* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, Inc., 1986). 15
4. Rubel Shelly and Randall J. Harris, *The Second Incarnation; A Theology for the 21st Century Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Pub. Co, 1992). The heresies in this book have been soundly and Scripturally answered by Curtis A. Cates, *The Second Incarnation: A Pattern for Apostasy* (Memphis, TN: Cates Pub., 1992) and Wayne Coats, *A Review of the Shelly-Harris Material on The Second Incarnation* (Mt. Juliet, TN: Coats Pub., 1992).
5. Carroll D. Osburn, *The Peaceable Kingdom: Essays Favoring Non-Sectarian Christianity* (Abilene, TX: Restoration Perspectives, 1993), pp. 90-91.
6. Jimmy Allen, *Rebaptism* (West Monroe, LA: Howard, Pub. Co., 1991).
7. Rubel Shelly, *I Just Want To Be a Christian* (Nashville, TN: 20th Century Christian, 1984), p. 82; *The Restoration Movement and Unity: Preachers and Church Leaders Forum* (Henderson, TN: Freed- Hardeman College, 1986), p. 72.
8. Osburn, pp. 71, 90-91.
9. David Vanderpool, "Abortion: A Look at Questions and Controversies Surrounding a Major Societal Issue," *The Christian Chronicle*, Nov. 1993, pp. 14-15:
10. Liberals have sought to escape the application of this powerful passage to themselves by arguing that "the teaching of Christ" refers only to the teaching **about** Christ, particularly that He came in the flesh (v. 7). However, eminent Greek scholar, Marvin R. Vincent, wrote concerning this phrase: "Not the teaching **concerning** Christ, but the teaching of Christ Himself and His apostles" (*Word Studies in the New Testament* [McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d. reprint], 2:396). For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Alan E. Highers, *Studies in 1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1987), pp. 448-460.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Houston College of the Bible Lectures, hosted by the Spring, TX, Church of Christ, June 19-22, 1994. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Church Enters the Twenty-first Century*, ed. David P. Brown (Spring, TX: Bible Resource Pub., 1994).]

Attribution: From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.