

The Truth Never Lies

(Revision 15)

Don't be too conservative. Don't be too liberal. And don't be too moderate either. The truth does not lie somewhere on a spectrum from conservative to liberal. Truth lies on a completely different plane. A knowledge of the truth cannot be achieved through analysis, no matter how rigorous or learned. Neither is the truth a matter of personal taste or inclination. It is not derived from us at all.

Here is a description of true liberalism for consideration by those who are of a conservative, liberal, or moderate theological persuasion: True theological liberalism arises out of one truth-- God is free.

Therefore, the conservative can embrace true liberalism by seeing the freedom of God. And the theological liberal can become truly conservative by waiting for God to act in His freedom and by acting himself or herself only when it is appropriate and in a manner that is appropriate. Both the liberal and the conservative become moderate, not by moving away from either true conservatism or true liberalism, but by bringing them together. We see the freedom of God, we wait patiently for God to act, and we act ourselves only when it is appropriate and in a manner that is appropriate. The Spirit of God shows us the freedom of God, teaches us how to wait for God to act, and shows us how and when we should act ourselves (John 14:15-17). Consequently, true liberalism and true conservatism become united under the guidance of the Spirit of God. Unspiritual liberalism, conservatism, or moderation for that matter are meaningless and in error because they are not rooted in the Spirit of God, but in things like politics and economics and analysis and inclination and historical circumstances and corporate bodies of all sorts.

Perhaps an example might help to illuminate what is being said. In 1 Chronicles 13, David had a desire to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem from Kiriath Jearim where it had been since the Philistines had captured it in the last days of Eli the priest and then released it. David proposed his plan to the nation of Israel, and all the people agreed to it "because it seemed right to all the people" (1 Chronicles 13:4). As the ark was being transported, God became angry because it was not being treated in the manner prescribed by the Law, which requires Levites to carry the ark with poles on their shoulders so as not to touch it (Numbers 4:15; 1 Chronicles 15:1-2, 11-15). When Uzzah (a non-Levite) touched it during its transport (on a cart) to prevent it from tipping onto the ground, God struck him down on the spot (1 Chronicles 13:9-10). David aborted his plan and left the ark in the house of Obed-Edom, a Levite (1 Chronicles 13:12-14). A few months later, David prepared to have the ark transported in the proper manner, with Levites carrying it with poles on their shoulders to avoid touching it, and the ark was successfully brought to Jerusalem to a new tent that David had constructed for it (1 Chronicles 16:1).

How is it that David, and all the people, had the courage to bring the ark to Jerusalem to a new tent? Why didn't David, and all the people, decide instead to take the more conservative

route and return the ark to the tabernacle, which was now in Gibeon? This is where the sacrificial service was currently being performed (1 Chronicles 16:39). One looks in vain for a definitive answer in the text itself. David and the people did it because they thought it was the will of God (1 Chronicles 13:2). This is an example of a more than just liberal action. The action was stunning. It succeeded because it was the will of God who put it into the heart of David and the people together to do it. God is free, and He can make His will known to His people.

It is vital to note that this incident happened before David's purchase of the threshing floor of Araunah in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices for his sin (1 Chronicles 21). After David had offered his sacrifices, he suddenly realized that the threshing floor was to be the site of the temple of God (1 Chronicles 22:1), which would ultimately house the ark (1 Chronicles 22:19). So, the plan of God was being carried out, bit by bit and step by step, and God led King David and the people to bring the ark to Jerusalem in advance of the King's purchase of the site of the temple.

The idea that God is free has numerous ramifications, but it is not necessary to draw them out here. Many people have written extensively about the idea. Beware of thinking that the truth lies in the idea itself. The truth resides in the actual presence of God as He reveals Himself to us (Job 40:1-5). Truth resides in Jesus Christ, who claims to be the truth, the way, and the life (John 14:6). And we know and understand the truth by the Spirit of truth, who is our Counselor, and who lives in us as a gift of God through the Lord (John 14:16-17). The Spirit lives in us, and we do know Him (John 14:17). We must sow to the Spirit, and not to the sinful nature (Galatians 6:7-8). Sowing to the Spirit involves doing good to everyone, especially other believers (Galatians 6:9). We also sow to the Spirit by practicing all the spiritual practices and disciplines by which God makes Himself and His counsel known to us, and by which we have fellowship with the Lord and with the Spirit who lives in us: Prayer, the study of scripture by the power of the Holy Spirit, meditation on the scripture, worship (including Communion), resisting the devil, alertness, self-control, confessing our sin to God, love, sharing our faith in evangelism, service, caring for those both inside and outside of the churches, fellowship with other believers, peacemaking, and forgiveness. As we obey the Lord's commands, especially his command to love one another (John 15:12), the Lord reveals himself to us (John 14:21). And we obey the Lord's commands because we love him (John 14:15).

I can see some ostriches in my mind's eye. Across a large expanse of grassland are many ostriches, all with their heads in the sand. They all refuse to take their heads out and look at each other, and so even though there are males and females, they are unable to mate. Consequently, they will all die with no offspring, and so the population of ostriches will become extinct. There are conservative ostriches, to be sure. But there are many other types of ostriches. There are ostriches in other religions. There are liberal ostriches who will not evaluate and criticize their own positions; they are not engaged in a search for higher wisdom and truth. There are secular ostriches also, to be sure. They will not look beyond their secularism. They claim that they cannot do so and that it is in fact impossible to do so, and they are right as far as their own abilities as human beings.

All theological positions are "no positions" in the end. This applies to the theological spectrum. All these positions are dissolved by the presence of God. They are rendered

meaningless, useless, and in error by His very presence. This is what Job and his friends discovered. Their "wise" positions were demolished by the first word that God spoke (Job 40:1-5). Pascal declared that unless we love the truth, we cannot know it. The truth is that we have no ability to know the truth apart from the revelation of Jesus Christ to us. This includes the secular thinkers and everybody else. Jesus Christ is the truth, and he shows himself to those who obey his commands (John 14:21). And the Spirit, by His unimaginable power, reveals the Lord to men and women in evangelism (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Furthermore, scripture contains a multitude of examples in which God revealed His presence to men and women just as He pleases, and He still does so just as He wishes. When revelation occurs, we will find ourselves quite able to criticize our own position and to find higher wisdom, just as Job did. That higher wisdom enables us to understand all of the various positions that are no positions at all. This includes our own. We will find ourselves in the position of being an obedient servant of Jesus Christ because we love him (John 14:15). It is our proper task to stay in just this position. We abide in Christ (John 15:5). We do this by obeying his commands, especially his command to love one another (John 15:12), and by sowing to the Spirit who lives in us (Galatians 6:8) and practicing all the spiritual practices.

The alternative is to do what Job did. He started off fine. He did not sin when his wife told him to curse God and die (Job 2:9-10). But as time went by, he ended up justifying himself at the expense of God (Job 40:8). This happened very early on and continued from that point. After his friends had been with him in silence for seven days, Job spoke up and cursed the day of his birth, thus minimizing the counsel of God (Job 3:1-3). This is precisely how those who hold so firmly to their positions on the conservative-liberal continuum end up. The point at which they begin their stance is justified, but the point at which they end up is not. Their position in the end is no position.

Those who regard themselves as liberal are justified in their starting point if they are reacting against the position called conservatism. But if they are rejecting the starting point of conservatives, which is faith in Christ, they are quite in error. The problem is that many who regard themselves as liberal believe that they are champions of faith in Christ, but they fail to obey the Lord's command to teach everything that he commanded (Matthew 28:20). The error of such liberalism is disobedience.

Those who regard themselves as conservative are justified in their starting point if they are reacting against the position of liberalism, which champions the ascendancy of anthropocentric humanism. But if conservatives are rejecting the starting point of true liberalism, which is the freedom of God, then they are quite in error. And if conservatives are rejecting the methodologies of biblical criticism, when these are simply analytic forms of thought, they are also quite in error.

The conservatives' final position, which should be rejected, is nothing other than the error of the Pharisees, which was to justify themselves at the expense of God. This was Job's error. The liberals' final position, which should be rejected, is nothing other than unbelief which culminates sometimes in libertinism, against which Jude warns the true Church (Jude 4). The moderate position is faced with the stumbling block of doubt. Those calling themselves moderate must overcome their doubt about the kernel of truth which is in both positions. They must

embrace both the freedom of God and faith in Christ in all its aspects and stop sitting on the fence.

Those calling themselves liberal who want to separate themselves from the anthropocentrism of Schleiermacher, but who don't consequently practice the whole teaching of the Lord, will find themselves embroiled in the same error as those calling themselves conservative who have wished to separate themselves from the position called "fundamentalism" but without practicing the whole teaching of the Lord-- they will both end up in denial of the power of God. The denial of the power of God was Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees.

One often hears theological conservatives criticizing theological liberals of being untheological (anthropocentric). It is also common to hear theological liberals criticizing theological conservatives of being fundamentalists (anti-intellectual/obscurantist). Both criticisms are quite true when they are intended as criticisms of the positions of liberalism and conservatism. However, no true separation has ever been achieved between theological liberalism and conservatism! Theological conservatism and liberalism have both denied the power of God, and they have both landed themselves into the error of libertinism as well, so the difference between them is purely cosmetic. They are the same thing at a spiritual level. This is why these positions lie on a continuum-- not a "spectrum" as many like to say. The continuum, or "spectrum" as some wish to call it, goes from fundamentalism to contemporary conservatism to moderation to theological liberalism to anthropocentric humanism. This entire range of "positions" forms a departure from walking in obedience to the Spirit of Christ who lives in us. These positions do not reside on the spiritual plane at all, but rather on the plane of our natural inclinations, which are sinful.

Regarding the legitimacy of the practice of higher biblical criticism in the first place, which has been so strongly opposed by many conservatives, those who apply critical methods to the study of the Bible should be allowed to do their work. Such work is an analysis based in reason and evidence and can most certainly give rise to insights about scripture that are useful. The work of higher biblical criticism is really the same as the work of natural scientists. Both can produce useful results. Both can produce results that are destructive to faith also, depending upon the presuppositions of the authors, but that is no reason to disallow them. Should we fear human reason? Listening to scripture by faith and in the power of the Spirit is primary. Higher biblical criticism must not be allowed to infringe upon that kind of study. The conservative objection to biblical criticism that does this is correct. But the methods themselves, when they are simply analytic, are legitimate. It is quite true that faith cannot be made a slave to reason as it was in the position of Schleiermacher, who made faith a slave to feeling also. The demotion of faith in the position of Schleiermacher and many others who practice biblical criticism is to be rejected.

Biologists, and others who adhere to evolutionary biology, are in error if they assert that the model of evolution shows that God does not exist. The statement is an overstatement and cannot be justified rigorously. Christians should not sweat so profusely over such overstatements and then conclude that biologists have no real basis for forming an evolutionary model in the first place. The overstatement is simply an example of unbelief and Christians need to learn how to take such unbelief in stride without resorting to rationalistic defenses of Christian faith, like many conservative apologists, or to strident opposition coupled with obscurantism and anti-

intellectualism like many on the conservative side of the continuum. Biology, as an analytic methodology, must be allowed to run its course. If it appears, based on analysis, that evolution has been operative in the natural history of the earth, then let the model of the evolutionists stand. The model of evolution, like all scientific models, is a tentative and incomplete conception of nature. Let the biologists keep working and let the model change over time as it will inevitably do. The question of God's existence is beyond the scope of scientific inquiry which is properly confined to the analysis of the physical world. Therefore, science has nothing to say about God's existence. However, correcting the philosophical error of the evolutionist who asserts that the model of evolution rules out the existence of God does nothing to help the errant individual make real spiritual progress. Progress is only made by a respectful witness to the individual of the death and resurrection of the Lord and then allowing the Holy Spirit to work in the individual's heart. The Spirit must reveal the truth about Jesus Christ and enable the individual to believe in him. Paul's advice is paramount (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

The burning question of the relation of God's activity to the physical world is simply mysterious. What can be said is that God is free and does as He wishes. Nobody can understand how God works. Enough words. Ideas are just ideas. Do not look for the truth in ideas themselves. The truth is the presence of our God, the fellowship of our Lord, and the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We do know them.