**What On Earth Is God Doing? Satan’s Conflict With God**

***Lesson Seven***

***THE CONFLICT***

***FROM LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM***

***THROUGH THE DENIAL***

***OF A PERSONAL GOD***

**Further Apostasy of the Modern Era**

*The Principles of Liberal Protestantism*

Through the combined influence of the philosophies and movements of the nineteenth century, Satan succeeded in getting much of Protestantism to go apostate. Liberal Protestantism developed during the latter part of the century and reached its peak in the early decades of the twentieth century. Its development could be described as a Protestant response and adjustment to nineteenth-century trends in scientific, philosophical, economic, and political thought. The liberals thought it was necessary to reinterpret the gospel to be able to present it in the thought forms of the modern world.

Several principles became characteristic of most of liberal Protestantism.

1. There was a spirit of open-mindedness and tolerance toward new modes of thought and toward other groups with Christendom. Theological and denominational differences were considered insignificant.
2. There was confidence in the scientific method as a means to truth not only in the study of the material world, but also in the realm of Biblical criticism and the history of religion.
3. A strong feeling against theological dogmatism developed. Men became skeptical about the possibility of obtaining sure knowledge of ultimate reality.
4. There was a desire to emphasize similarities rather than differences. Liberals began to look for the common features of Christianity and non-Christian religions. They stressed the immanence of God so as to eliminate the differences between the supernatural and the natural and between God and man. i.e., compromised on truth.
5. Liberal Protestantism expressed great confidence in man and his future. It believed that man and his society were perfectible.
6. It stressed the authority of individual, religious experience as opposed to Biblical or church authority.
7. It made the example and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ central to everything.
8. It criticized many of the traditional beliefs of Protestantism. Many things formerly believed were now regarded as unessential to Christianity. Belief had to be accommodated to new knowledge and ways.
9. Liberalism became permeated with social idealism. It concluded that the church is responsible for righting social wrongs and for bringing the social structure into conformity with the ideal of the kingdom of God on earth.

Liberal Protestantism developed a theology that would agree with its basic principles. In its doctrine of God it stressed the immanence of God so strongly that it practically assumed a unity of God and the world. It erased the clear distinction between the infinite, perfect God and the finite, corrupt world. It stated that God is present in all the processes of nature.

This emphasis upon the immanence of God colored almost all the rest of liberal theology. It disposed of belief in miracles and the distinction between the supernatural and natural. In the doctrine of man, it implied that man has a spark of divinity within him. Thus there was no fall or man or inherited guilt; man is essentially good. In the doctrine of the church, it denied the sharp distinction between the Church and the world; thus, it de-emphasized the importance of the organized church. Concerning eschatology, it rejected the concept of eternal punishment and stressed the fulfillment of life now rather than the hereafter. With regard to revelation, the notion that God is in everything led to the conclusion that He can be known in every experience.

Concerning the doctrine of Christ, it implied that Jesus was only a man, being subject even to error. However, as a man, Jesus raised humanity to its highest level by allowing God to be supremely immanent in Him. He was not the kind of Redeemer that Paul and Church pictured. Instead, He was the great Teacher of ethics who gave the greatest example of how man can allow God to become supremely immanent in him. In the matter of salvation, the idea of immanence ruled out the concept of God entering a person’s life in an instantaneous moment of conversion. The liberals concluded that, since every person is born with God in him, conversion is simply a matter of educating a child to act like Christ. Finally, in the area of religious authority, liberalism says that, because God is immanent in each person, the final court of appeal for faith and practice is the individual’s own reason, conscience, and intuition. Nothing is authoritative for an individual unless it is meaningful to him personally. In essence, this means that each person is his own authority, and there are no absolutes of faith and conduct to which all men are responsible.

*Development of the Social Gospel*

Although commercialism had produced many social injustices, where was a great air of optimism that arose in society during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It reached its peak in the years before World War I. The amazing accomplishments of science, the concept of evolutionary progress., and the liberal Protestant ideas of the perfectibility of man and of God working immanently in the world all contributed to the belief that the transformation of society was possible. Men began to preach the message of social change so extensively that eventually their message became known as the social gospel.

Liberal Protestant advocates of the social gospel declared that the church should be concerned primarily with this world. It should divert its efforts from the salvation of individuals to be salvation of society. (Ignore great commission). The church should bring in the kingdom of God on earth instead of teaching about a future, theocratic kingdom to be established in Person by Jesus Christ. It can do this by reconstructing the entire social order in accord with the ethical teachings of Jesus.

In its theology the social-gospel movement emphasized the immanence of God as the basis of social oneness. It concluded that, since God is immanent in all men, He is the Father of all, and all men are brothers. Christ’s redeeming work was regarded as the battle against religious bigotry, graft, political power, injustice, mob action, militarism, and class contempt. The church was to save the world, not be saved out of it. Thus Satan was able to pervert the true gospel again and to turn much of Protestantism away from preaching it.

*The Divine Counteraction of Liberal Protestantism*

While liberalism and the social gospel were permeating Protestantism, God was preventing total apostasy by maintaining His witness in the world. He did this through various means. In addition to reaching the unsaved through the evangelistic campaigns of Dwight L. Moody, R.A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday, He fortified believers through the establishment of Bible and prophetic conferences at numerous places. These conferences helped to ground Christians in the basic doctrines of Christianity and to confirm their hope in the Second Coming of Christ to establish the theocratic kingdom.

As many Christian schools yielded to the liberal apostasy, God raised up new schools to take their place in the task of giving sound, Christian instruction. One interesting aspect of this phase of the counteraction was the rise of the Bible school movement. From the 1880s through the early decades of the twentieth century numerous Bible schools were founded in such cities as New York, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. New Christian liberal arts colleges and seminaries also were begun.

In 1909 two Christian laymen financed the publication of a set of volumes that defended the basic beliefs of biblical Christianity against the apostasy of the day. The set was called *The Fundamentals*, and hundreds of thousands of copies were sent to church leaders all over the world. Because of the title of these volumes, those people who held to the doctrines defended therein came to be called fundamentalists. The publication in 1909 of the Scofield Reference Bible, with its explanatory notes, aided laypeople in their understanding of the Scriptures and emphasized the hope of the future, theocratic kingdom.

From 1918 to 1931 the fundamentalists challenged the growing liberal control of several of the major Protestant denominations. This led to the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies within various church groups. As the leadership of various denominations surrendered to liberalism, many fundamentalists withdrew from these organizations and began new denominational and interdenominational groups.

*The Birth of the Ecumenical Movement*

The latter nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries witnessed the birth of a movement toward unity within Protestantism. This movement was prompted by several factors.

1. Many people were disturbed over the contrast between biblical statements about Christian unity and the divided state of Protestantism.
2. Liberalism de-emphasized the importance of theology.
3. There was the desire to end the confusion and duplication of efforts caused by church divisions on the mission field.
4. The social-gospel advocates wanted Christendom to give a united expression of concern about the ethical and social issues of the modern world.
5. Through various youth and student movements young people expressed their impatience with the differences that divided Christendom.

In response to these factors the Federal Council of Churches was formed in 1908 in America to provide a central organ for united Protestant action on social problems, afford opportunity for the denominations to understand each other better through calm discussion of their differences, and facilitate cooperation on the mission field. At first the emphasis was upon interdenominational cooperation on a worldwide scale, rather than upon the organizational merger of all bodies into one.

*The Development of Neoorthodoxy*

The great scope and horrors of World War 1 severely cripped the social-gospel concept of the gradual perfecting of man and society. The optimism of liberal Protestantism didn’t seem to agree with reality. The war had demonstrated the corruption rather than the supposed inherent goodness of man. There was need for a revision of liberal, Protestant theology. Thus, in 1918 a new theological movement began within Protestantism in western Europe. Through time it spread to America and dominated much of Protestant thinking even into the post-World War II era.

This movement began as a severe criticism of the fallacies of liberal theology. It accepted some concepts from existentialism, a nineteenth-century movement that had been critical of liberal theology and the institutional church. In its theology the new movement stressed the sovereignty, transcendence, wrath, and judgment of God, as well as His mercy and love. God is infinitely above and supreme over the world. This emphasis was opposed to the liberal concept of the immanence of God. The new movement also emphasized that Christ was more than just a man; He was God come to man – truly God and truly man. It also stressed the sinfulness of man and of every human movement, and indicated that sin is so deeply rooted in man that only a redeeming act of God can overcome it. It stated that the final authority for faith and practice is not religious experience. It concluded that, although the church is obligated to speak about social evils, the social order cannot be transformed progressively into the kingdom of God on earth. These theological statements sounded so much like orthodoxy that eventually the movement became known as the new orthodoxy, or neoorthodoxy.

Although neoorthodoxy frequently used the language of orthodoxy, it often gave the language unorthodox meanings. In several crucial areas it differed from orthodox, biblical Christianity altogether. In the area of God’s revelation to man, neoorthodoxy declared that the final authority for faith and practice is not the Bible. In fact, God never has given divine revelation through declared statements of truth, whether spoken or written.

According to neoorthodoxy, the final authority is the revelation of Himself that God gives to an individual when He encounters him personally. This means that no divine revelation is the same for all men. God may reveal one thing to one man, but something else to another. The Word of God to an individual is whatever God used to speak to that individual personally. Thus, if God speaks to a person through a passage of the Bible then that passage *becomes* the Word of God for that person. But if God never speaks to a person through the Bible, then the Bible never is the Word of God for him. This view also means that, even if a man wanted to learn something about God through nature, he could not do so unless God spoke to him personally through some aspect of nature. In essence, neoorthodoxy believed that there is no objective revelation of God in the Bible or nature.

Neoorthodoxy differed from orthodox Christianity in other ways. It believed that the original Scriptures contained error. It held that the biblical accounts of creation, the Fall of Man, and the last judgment are not referring to actual historical events. Instead, these accounts are myths or symbolic ways of presenting important truths that could not be expressed in any other way. Actually, the Fall was not a once-for-all, past event; it is the turning away from God that is true of every human life and action. Neoorthodoxy stated that the kingdom of God will be established by God, not man, but that its establishment is beyond history. The biblical idea of the future, theocratic kingdom is a symbol. Its purpose is to picture a divine purpose for history. It is God’s way of promising a final victory over evil beyond history.

Thus, although neoorthodoxy opposed numerous liberal tendencies, it also continued several other of those tendencies. The fact that it used biblical language to express unbiblical concepts made some of its teachings an even more deceptive tool than liberalism in Satan’s war against the kingdom of God.

*The Denial of a Personal God*

Satan realized that one of the best ways to establish the permanent, visible form of his kingdom in the world was to prompt man to deny the existence of his archenemy – God.

But how could he get man to do this? Throughout history God has used revelation to uncover the reality of His existence to man. (***Look up Natural vs Divine Revelation.)***

In light of this, Satan knew that, in order to accomplish his goal, he must move man to reject all divine revelation.

Thus, from the time of rationalism on, he used one philosophy and movement after another to move man in that direction.

Rationalism propagated the idea that the world operates purely on a natural basis without the intervention of God;

Empiricism ruled out belief in truths that come by revelation;

Deism denied the existence of all forms of special revelation in the world;

Kant declared that there can be no knowledge of God through revelation;

Hegel raised doubts about the record of God’s actions in the world being true, historic fact;

Schleiermacher placed the final authority for faith and practice in experience rather than in revelation;

Destructive criticism rejected the Bible as the infallible, inerrant, supernatural revelation of God to man;

Commercialism took man’s thoughts away from God and spiritual things and focused them on the material things of this life;

Communism pictured belief in God as being detrimental to man;

Evolution in its purest form denied the necessity of a personal God to explain the existence of man and his world;

Ritschl placed final authority in experience rather than in revelation;

The amazing accomplishments of science gave man confidence that he could solve his own problems apart from God;

Liberal Protestantism came close to equating God with nature;

The social gospel declared that man could establish the kingdom of God on earth without the supernatural intervention of God;

And neoorthodoxy taught that there is no objective way than man can learn about God.

Through all of these movements and philosophies Satan kept eating away at the vital organs of man’s beliefs in a personal God by getting man to reject the revelation that God has given. However, until the era of World War I, the disease remained well hidden. Man still had an outer shell of belief intact; therefore, he at least continued to pay lip-service to God, although in actual practice he often acted as if God didn’t exist.

As the twentieth century progressed, Satan used one tragic situation after another to chip away more and more of man’s outer shell, thereby revealing his growing unbelief in a personal God. The brutalities of modern warfare, as displayed in World War I, the failure of the League of Nations to maintain peace, the economic hardships of the depression of the twenties and thirties, the systematic annihilation of six million Jews by Naziism, the mass death and destruction of World War II, the threat of the annihilation of humanity through a nuclear holocaust, the injustices of racism, the frustrating conflicts of Korea and Vietnam, the hideous assassinations of key leaders, the constant friction of the Middle East crisis, the claim of future cataclysmic results of environmental pollution and population explosion, and more examples of genocide progressively drove more and more of humanity to conclude that man is all alone in his predicament. Because man has rejected the biblical testimony that his situation is caused by his own rebellion against God, he has the problem of understanding “human misery, tragedy, and bestiality.” Since human suffering does exist, he concludes that it must be because there is no good, personal, sovereign God, or, if there is a God, He has no relevance for the world or mankind. Thus modern man sees all life and reality on one level – the material; and the cry is made that the idea of a personal God is dead.

*Examples of the Denial*

From the end of World War I to the end of the twentieth century the denial of God’s existence or relevance was expressed in various ways. Secular atheists not only boldly proclaimed their denial of God’s existence, but also made attempts to have all public expressions of belief in God banned from society. A prime example was Madalyn Murray O’Hair, whose efforts prompted the United States Supreme Court to abolish Bible reading and prayer in public schools in 1963.

The “God Is Dead” movement of the 1960s was another expression of denial in the United Kingdom and North America. One God-is-dead theologian, Thomas J.J. Altizer, asserted that the world cannot move into the utopian age until mankind acknowledges that the God of the Bible is dead.

In addition, there were theologians who lectured and wrote about God, but their concept of God was not that of a personal, divine being. For example, Paul Tillich, who taught at Union Theological Seminary (New York), Harvard, and the University of Chicago and was regarded to be one of America’s foremost twentieth-century theologians, claimed that God is the impersonal ground or source of all being, not an existing being.

In the late 1970s I heard a radio program in which a philosophy professor was questioned about his view concerning the origin of the universe. The moderator said, “I take it that you do not believe in the existence of a personal creator God.”

The philosopher responded, “To the contrary, I believe that there was such a God.”

The moderator said, “You put that in the past tense. Do you mean that was such a God in the past, but that He no longer exists?”

The philosopher said, “Yes, that is what I believe.”

The moderator asked, “If there was such a God in the past, but He no longer exists, what happened that caused Him to go out of existence?”

The philosopher responded, “God decided to create the universe through a big bang. But when He caused the big bang, He got too close to it. As a result, it killed Him. Thus He went out of existence when the universe came into existence.”

Late in the twentieth century Gerd Ludemann, a German theologian and professor of Early Christianity at Gottingen University, wrote, “With the last of my strength I pushed God himself down in the mire and at last became free…So I prefer from now on to develop a purely human view of religion without having to legitimate myself by a higher authority which theologians call God.”

During the twentieth century secular humanists produced and published several humanist manifestoes. In the Humanist Manifesto II, 1973, they stated, “We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is meaningless or irrelevant to the survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.