

**“A House on the Sand”:**  
*American Theological Liberalism*  
*From the 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**Part V – Observations and Applications**

So here we are, we’ve come to our final hour together. What do we make of all this? Why did we spend the last four hours listening to and discussing the story of American theological liberalism? Why did I do this? Am I just projecting? Was this a kind of group recovery therapy for me having grown up in the tradition I’ve been describing? Why did you come? For curiosity’s sake? For education? To broad your horizons? Do did you come hoping to get some ammunition for or against conservatives or liberals? If that’s the reason you came, I hope you didn’t get what you came for. Why did we do this? Or more helpfully, let’s ask...what *do we do* with this? Because no matter the reason we came, we’ve *come*. And we’re now *responsible* for what *we’ve heard*. How *then* should we *engage* liberalism? To make it more concrete, how ought we to connect with and respond to our liberal family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and classmates? There are those in this world who name the name of Jesus Christ and yet desire to be *free* from the Word of God with reference to their mood, methods, morals, and message. How then should we live with them? To that question, I have five biblical applications for us.

**Main #1: Understand them**

Understand them. The ultimate goal with people (any people – liberals included) is the *love* them. To love them. Love your *brother*, love your *neighbor*, love your *enemy*. Love, love, love! But love is not biblical love if it is devoid of knowledge of the beloved. What makes God’s love in John 3:16 so *stunning* is that he knows the world so thoroughly and loves so it so beautifully.

God's *knowledge* of the world, makes his *love* of the world *all the more breathtaking*.

So in 1 Corinthians 14:20, Paul says: "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature." And why? Because like God, our knowledge is to be pressed into the service of love. Once again, Paul, in 1 Corinthians says: "'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up." 1 Corinthians 8:1. The point being that what we have in our *brain* is *lighter fluid* on the *fire* of our *heart*. If our brains are *empty* our love will be *cheap* and *bargain-basement*. But if our *knowledge* is *full*, then our love stands the chance to be deep, comprehensive, wise, and mature. The first step toward answering the question: how then do we *respond* to liberal theology in America is do we *understand* liberal theology in America?

Do we know the story? Do we know it *well*? Do we *really* get what's been happening for three centuries in this country? If we want to *arrest* the drift of liberal theology, we first need to *catch* the drift of liberal theology. One step toward remedying this is reading authors like Gary Dorrien who do an outstanding job sketching the narrative of this movement. Toward that end, I've got some bibliography that you can take with you today and hopefully with it go further than I have here. Read biography. One of the most helpful biographies I read preparing for this was the story of Charles Chauncy. It's called *Old Brick*.<sup>1</sup> It was written by Edward Griffin who lives right here in the Twin Cities. It was incredibly helpful to me just to sit and listen to the life of Chauncy from someone who knows him through his writings.

On a practical and personal level here the other thing I'd recommend (this application is mainly for conservative Christians among us), is spend time with folks that are further to the left of you theologically. Spend *time* with them. Get to *know* them. Learn *their* story. Ask them *questions*. Ask them *lots* of questions. If you are going to *love* them, it stands to reason that you'd get to *know* them. If you're a pastor here, you may know the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston (1705-1787)*. Minnesota Monographs in the Humanities Volume 11. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN. 1980.

names of the progressive and liberal pastors in your area, but do you know their *spouse's* names? Their *kids'* names? Do you know what they do on their day off? Do you know what they like to eat at a restaurant? Do you know where they went to school? Do you know *why* they hold the views they do? The first step in engaging them is seek to understand them. Second application:

## **Main #2: Appreciate them**

Appreciate them. Philippians 4:8 carries within it a command that is life-changing if you will apply it to American liberal theology. Here's the command: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." This verse is a call to admire and laud that which is admirable and laudable. So much of what I saw in my study this past year was that way. Here's a short list of what I've appreciated. And this is not flattery, *this is fact*: The 60 year pastoral ministry of Charles Chauncy at First Church Boston, the thorough-going integrity of Theodore Parker (with all the Unitarian ministers wimping out around him), Horace Bushnell's ability draw doctrinal lines, the customarily unflagging conservatism of Charles Briggs (unjustly accused of heresy), the technological innovation of Harry Emerson Fosdick (with his pioneering radio ministry), and the zeal and passion of Phillip Clayton. This is a sampling of what I've come to appreciate about the players in American theological liberalism throughout our country's history.

Not to mention how well historical theological liberalism has fared in the realm of academia. In 1995, conservative historian Mark Noll published *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. His argument was simple: when it comes to the evangelical mind, the scandal is that there's not much of one. Now while that reality has changed somewhat over the last 20 years or so, we have to admit that since about 1870, American theological liberalism has simply not known that scandal. Thinking, academic labor, rigorous thoughtful argument has *not* been the Achilles heel of liberal theology for close to 150 years. They've run the ivy league. And

if you include Unitarian Harvard in the story then American liberal theology has owned the American field of higher theological education for close to 300 years! They have been the gatekeepers of so much of this nation's theological higher education. I'm in awe of that. I'm humbled by that. I appreciate that. So the second application in engaging theological liberalism is appreciate them. Third application:

### **Main #3: Empathize with them**

Empathize with them. Romans 12:15 says – "...weep with those who weep." 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 – "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." I'm thinking more than ever these days that Christians are supremely people of comfort. That we are to both experience and extend comfort to others. We know the God of all comfort who comforts us. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who himself is the Comforter. And he comforts us with the express purpose that we might offer that comfort to those in affliction – the very comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. In Matthew 9:36 we read that "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

One of my favorite song writers is Michael Kelly Blanchard who wrote these lines in a song called "In From the Cold" Blanchard writes:

"I've been lookin' for a womb since the day I was born...It may be crazy, but give me the One, who started as a baby without a home. I need a God who's been there and back. Walkin' this sod with a cross on His back, Someone who's real when it come to the soul. Who knows how it feels to come in from the cold. In from the cold. Out of the wind. Survivin's as old as breathin'. All of creation's your next of kin. When you're out in the cold and you want to come in."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.michaelkellyblanchard.com/writings/lyrics\\_cold.htm](http://www.michaelkellyblanchard.com/writings/lyrics_cold.htm) . Accessed 11-11-13 4:35pm.

Examples abound in the history of American theological liberalism with individuals who stood by themselves out in the cold. If you can honestly hear the story of Charles Chauncy's protective, unflinching, watchman-like concern for New England during the First Great Awakening, or William Ellery Channing, Walter Rauschenbusch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's experiences with their fathers, or Charles Briggs's unjust heresy trial, or the vacuum of family worship that occurred in Langdon Gilkey's home even though both of his parents were leaders in the church! If you can honestly hear those accounts and you're not moved with some form of empathy – you are not a Christian. You're not. When we hear these accounts better to follow the instruction of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 3:12 – “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts...”. What should we do with liberals? Empathize with them. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says – “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Which brings us to a fourth application. What are you to do with theological liberals?

#### **Main #4: Confess your sins to them**

Confess your sins to them. Here I'm thinking (of course) of our Lord's words to us in Matthew 7:3-5 – “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clear to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” The logs of conservative Christians are legion: ungodliness, sinful anxiety and frustration, discontentment, unthankfulness, selfishness, lack of self-control, impatience and irritability, self-righteous and short-fused anger, judgmentalism, jealousy...and the

list goes on and on and on.<sup>3</sup> Wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust envy, gluttony – the seven deadly sins...for many evangelicals, they're the seven *daily* sins. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are not typically guilty as often of a liberal message. I *grant* that. I'm not *contesting* that. We tend to have our doctrine correct and tidy. And doctrine's a priceless thing. But our mood, our methods, or morals can be reprehensible. And if you follow the pattern, if you know the story of American liberal theology that is the very cocktail that gives rise to doctrinal compromise some point down the line. Oh, it's cool to scoff at the so-called 'slippery slope'. Don't scoff. It's real. It's very real. There are real roots here for doctrinal liberalism. Why are evangelicals so *liberal* in these other areas? It's indefensible. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians ought to have the *market cornered* on love. We are the ones who wield the *sword* of the *Spirit*. So why don't we more often exhibit the *fruit* of the *Spirit*? Why? What excuse can we possibly offer? Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:5 – "The aim of our instruction is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." The aim of our instruction is not *more instruction*. The aim of our instruction is not *hurting people*. The aim of our instruction is not *being right*. The aim of our instruction is not *willing an argument*. That's not the aim. The aim of apostolic instruction is *love*.

So, learn enough from the history of American theological liberalism to see the plank / speck dynamic of this thing. Theological liberals may be in a hurry to be free from God's Word in its message, but conservative Bible believers have been *all too guilty* of the desire to be free from the word of God in our mood, our methods, and our morals. I haven't even touched the issue of Evangelicals and method. Good night. If I start on that, I'll never stop. The most blatantly pragmatic movement in the American church today is evangelicalism. It is. And it's frightening. So very many evangelical churches are wondering "what works?" and fewer are asking "what's right?". We want at all costs what

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<sup>3</sup> This list was actually compiled from the chapter titles in Jerry Bridges outstanding book *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*. NavPress: Colorado Springs, CO. 2007. pp.8-9.

draws a *crowd*, but I'm increasingly afraid that we will not pay the price it costs to build a *church*. Evangelicals are routinely captured for a desire for *cool* at the expense of the mandate we have to *love*. But that's an application for another day. That's what I mean by pragmatism within evangelicalism. It is plague of 21<sup>st</sup> century western evangelicalism and it has grown to biblical proportions.

What's the best way to engage theological liberals? Confess your own liberalism. Identify with them and your own desire to be free from the Word of God. Confess your sins. And 1 John 1:9 holds the promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Your liberal family members, ministry colleagues, neighbors, friends, co-workers and classmates need to see you doing business with the gospel like this. The gospel's for believers. Romans 1:15 says it's so.<sup>4</sup> Confess your plank, take out your log. Now Jesus says in Matthew 7:5, when you "take the log out of your own eye...you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." So there's one more application for us, and it's this:

### **Main #5: Correct them**

Correct them. 2 Timothy 2:22-24 calls us to correct them. Notice I didn't say "criticize" them. There's a world of difference. It's not enough just to disapprove of someone or to censure them. Complaining and carping are *not* the same thing as correcting. Correction is redemptive. It's hopeful. It's helpful. It's what love does. And 2 Timothy 2:22-24 shows us the way. Listen to the inspired Apostle Paul. This is God's Word: "...the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." Please do not misread me with all these applications. False teaching, heretical doctrine, is at the end of the day the work of men and

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<sup>4</sup> "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." – Romans 1:15.

woman who have been captured by the devil himself to do his will. This is serious business. And it stands in need of serious correction.<sup>5</sup>

So how do we deal with this? 2 Timothy 2:22-24 is incredibly practical on this score. Three verses. The first verse and a half outline our work in this sort of conflict resolution. The second verse and a half show us God's work. Once again, 2 Timothy 2:22-23a: "...the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness...". By God's grace, in the strength that he supplies, freshly forgiven of your own sins, here's what you do...don't quarrel, be kind to everyone, teach, patiently endure evil, correct your opponents with gentleness. That's it. It's remarkably simple. That's our work. When it comes to correction, there are seven magic words that I learned many years ago that have borne fruit in our congregation time and again. Here's the seven words: "Would you be open to an observation?" Would you be open to an observation. I learned this from C.J. Mahaney 12 years ago. Would you be open to an observation? If they indicate that they're not, respect their answer. Consider first if you've even earned the right to ask them this question. Have you sought to understand them? Do you appreciate them? Do you have empathy for them? Have you confessed your sins to them? These first four steps typically grease the skids for these seven words: "Would you be open to an observation?" If they indicate they are open, when it comes to your observation...be biblical, concentrate on the matter of first importance (the gospel) or doctrines that our Lord might refer to as the "weightier matters of the law". Beyond that be specific, be direct, and seek to be helpful. Show them why this area of doctrinal error matters. Explain to them the cash value of getting doctrine right and the great peril of getting it wrong. In brief, don't just get the content of your correction right,

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the New Testament is clear that such corrective measures may well include public denunciation of them and a plain distancing ourselves from them. Texts along these lines include (but are not limited to): Romans 16:17-20; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 John 7-11; 2 Peter 2:1-3:7; Jude; and Revelation 2-3.

concentrate on your tone as well. Just like Paul says – kind, patient, gentle.

Now, that’s our role. The second half of the text explains God’s role. 2 Timothy 2:23b-24 – “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” I hope you believe that. First that God grants repentance (because he does).<sup>6</sup> Sincere sorrow, godly grief over sin is God’s work. I think that’s part of why it’s called “godly” grief. Because God grants the grief. And 2 Corinthians 7:10 assures us that “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.” And you ask...but how often does it really happen? How often does a theological liberal come to the point of godly grief and the repentance that leads to a knowledge of the truth, coming to their senses and escaping the snare of the devil. How often does it happen? I don’t know. But I am proof that it happens. I was raised in the liberal church. I didn’t miss one Sunday until 18 years of age. I could have rehearsed the Apostles and Nicene Creeds backwards to you in Swahili – along with the prayer of St. Francis. And when I was 21 years old, God granted me repentance. Yes he did. I met Jesus. I met him. And for 15 years, I’ve been walking with him. God granted me repentance. And he did it as the Lord’s servants came alongside me. They weren’t quarrelsome. They were so kind. And they taught me. They patiently endured my evil – I was no bargain for them. They corrected me with gentleness. And God granted me repentance. And I’m far from alone. If you want to read some stories of church people who’ve come to saving faith in Jesus, get to know the faith journeys of biblical scholars like Eta Linnemann, journalists like Kirsten Powers, hip hop artists like Trip Lee...let their stories create a category of hope in your brain for this. And far more importantly, believe texts like 2 Timothy 2:22-24. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Bridges once wrote: “His commands do not imply our power to obey, but our dependence upon him for the grace of obedience.” Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*. Geneva Series of Commentaries. The Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, PA. (1846) 2008. p.224.

truth. Do I think we ought to evangelize theological liberals? Oh my, yes. I'm so glad someone evangelized me...theological liberal that I was. And while we're evangelizing – let's evangelize ourselves. Be a Christian who celebrates and demonstrates the good news of Jesus Christ all the time. Celebrate him, demonstrate him, because then (and only then) will you communicate him with power. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. You serve what's in your cupboard. So what do we do with liberals? Understand them. Appreciate them. Empathize with them. Confess your sins to them. Correct them. Do it by preaching the gospel to them. And preach to yourself most of all.

### **Conclusion:**

I'd like to close with a final exhortation through a wisdom parable that Jesus told. It's found in Matthew chapter 7 verses 24 to 29. Jesus says: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. [Matthew comments] And when Jesus finished saying these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

Two houses. Two men. Two foundations. Two storms. These are what the two stories have in common. The difference between wisdom and folly in each case is the sort of foundation the men built upon. One man, the foolish man, chose upon hearing the words of Jesus *not* to do them. Notice that this is the error of theological conservatives as well as theological liberals. Hearing the words of Jesus and not doing them. Spiritual constipation. Becoming sermon proof.

Matthew reminds us at the end of the parable that the words of Jesus are astonishing because he teaches as one with authority.

And just a reminder that the one with authority – Jesus believed the Bible. He believed the whole thing. His doctrine of Scripture is probably higher than yours.<sup>7</sup> It's no use trying to rend asunder what Jesus joins together. Listen to him speaking to the Pharisees in John 5:39-40 – “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” And far from being a condemnation of the Scriptures, if you understand what Jesus is saying – this is an affirmation of them. It's just that it's an affirmation of them as they testify to him. So we can't get out of this by saying: we love Jesus but not the Bible. *Jesus* loved the Bible. And he loved the Bible for precisely what it is: a pathway straight to him. Every story whispers his name. The pages point to him. So whether we're talking about the Word of God in pages or the Word of God in person. The Word of God in a book or the Word of God in a body. The inspired Scriptures or the incarnate Christ. Either way...liberalism is the desire to be free from the Word of God in our mood, methods, message or morals. And to commit our lives to liberalism is to build our house upon the sand. A house that will not stand when the storms of this life or the storm of God's judgment at the end of this life come. If you are building your house on the sand, I am calling you to turn from that project. Stop building on the sand. Abort your building plans.

Instead, build on the rock. *Hear* the Word of God, *believe* the Word of God, *treasure* the Word of God, *study* the Word of God, *meditate* on the Word of God, *obey* the Word of God and *teach* the Word of God. And when you teach it and preach it and counsel it, do it *clearly, plainly, earnestly, humbly, and manifestly* so that all who hear you may follow the truth trail back to chapters and verses and sentences and phrases and words. Because only the Word of God *written* leads people to the Word of God *incarnate*. And it's that Word of God that gives birth to faith, salvation, worship, love,

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<sup>7</sup> Evidence of Jesus high view of Scripture has been ably gathered by John Wenham in *Christ and the Bible*. Third Edition. Wipf & Stock: Eugene, OR. (1974) 1994. A condensed version of his argument can be found in *Inerrancy* edited by Norman L. Geisler. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI. 1980. pp.3-36.

hope, wisdom, joy, help, beauty, mission, a world view that will steady you for the days to come, and a vision of heaven that will beckon you forward until the day that you reach the celestial city and all the trumpets sound for you on the other side. *Let's pray*