

“A House on the Sand”:
American Theological Liberalism
From the 18th – 21st Century

Part II – 1820s – 1890s

Introduction:

Though the seeds of American Theological Liberalism may well have been sown in 18th century New England, the roots really didn't break ground in the Protestant mainline until the middle to late 19th century. Now that I've used the word "mainline" let's seek to do a little defining in the interest of clarity. The term mainline is itself a little shrouded in mystery in terms of its origin. As a label for a movement, it is said to have emerged during the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of the 1920's. We'll tackle that story tomorrow morning. But as far as the name, many have said that the tag "mainline" was borrowed from the Philadelphia Main Line, a cluster of wealthy first ring suburbs of Philadelphia that were developed along the Pennsylvania Railroad Main Line. Numerous residents were themselves part of historic Protestant congregations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and so on). That's the "mainline". Now, there are other names (variations on the term "mainline"). Sometimes you hear the term "mainstream" Protestantism or even "oldline" Protestantism. United Methodist Bishop William Willimon (himself never one to shy away from self-deprecating humor) has even referred to the mainline as the "sideline" of American Protestantism. Referring to the fact that it is no secret that the numerical decline of mainline Protestantism as a movement has been sharp since the 1960's. From 31 million Americans in 1965 to about 21 million Americans by 2005.¹ Bearing in mind those

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainline_Protestant . Accessed 11-05-13 @ 9:59am.

statistics are 8 years old. The numerical bleeding of the mainline continues to this day.

So why are we interested in a movement that appears to be dying? Well, my answer is that it only *appears* to be so. The liberalism of the mainline is in many respects increasingly being shared by evangelicalism today. In mood, methods, morals, and even in message. I (for one) do not believe that mainline churches have no future. Though the raw numbers may be telling a different story, if you measure the ingredients of liberalism (freedom from the Word of God in mood, methods, message, morals) they are alive and well even among those who would self-identify as conservative evangelicals. And if we'd like to know where our current fragmenting evangelicalism is headed, we might be wise to look back on how liberalism came to dominate mainline American Christianity during the 19th century. The Unitarianism that emerged out of New England Congregationalism is only one part of the story of American liberal theology. And frankly, it's the not the part of the story that has had the greatest ripple effects among Christians in this country. The story (and the stories) that we're going to hear right now are the ones that provide the root structure for the growth that will come to full flower in the 20th century. The flower we'll examine tomorrow. The roots we will investigate right now. Let's begin with Horace Bushnell.

1. Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)

Horace Bushnell was born in 1802 in the village of Bantam in the township of Litchfield, Connecticut. He was a minister of the Congregational church and is revered by some as the greatest American theologian of the 19th century. Now that's, of course, a subjective opinion rather than an objective fact. But it is fair to say that Horace Bushnell is something of an unavoidable figure in our country's theological landscape. There are theologians (both liberal and conservative) that see Bushnell as the genuine father of American religious liberalism. There are others that are slower to draw such a conclusion, and some who are simply loath that the correlation is even made in the first place. My view is that Bushnell (like Charles Chauncy before him) can be understood as

an unwitting father of American theological liberalism. That is, if he did indeed play such a role, he did so unconsciously – even innocently. I'll try and provide some of the details of his life and let you draw your own conclusions.

He was a graduate of Yale College in 1827. He became a tutor at the school two years later and though he originally set out to study law, he ended up switching to theology and was eventually ordained to the North Congregational church in Hartford, Connecticut in May of 1833. Bushnell remained at his post as pastor of that church until the year 1859 when his health simply would no longer allow him – though he continued to write and produce theological work until his death at the age of 74 in the year 1876.

His ministerial training at Yale in many ways served to set the trajectory of his pathway. Yale was launched in New Haven, Connecticut in 1701 as the conservative antidote to the emerging liberalism at Harvard. By the time that Bushnell was enrolled at Yale over a century later, it too would become embroiled in theological controversy. The New Haven Theology (or the New Divinity) as it came to be called was a modified version of the modifications that Samuel Hopkins had already made to the theology of Jonathan Edwards. Hopkins (you may remember from last hour) was the pastor of the 1st Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island where William Ellery Channing grew up. Through the further influence of administrators and faculty members like Timothy Dwight (who happened to be Jonathan Edwards's grandson) and Nathaniel William Taylor, Yale Divinity School was carving out a new place on the theological spectrum. One brief (but faithful) summary of the approach of the New Divinity at Yale from the publisher at The Banner of Truth Trust said of the New Haven Theology: "...its leading ideas were a revision of teaching on the fallen condition of man, the nature of the atonement and the extent to which man is dependent upon the Holy Spirit for regeneration."² Now, if these don't seem like big

² From the "Publisher's Introduction" to *Princeton Versus The New Divinity: The Meaning of Sin, Grace, Salvation, and Revival*. The Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, PA. 2001. p.vii.

issues to you or you fail to see why they might be the source of controversy, then I know something about you. Your vision of the Christian faith is big tent. In other words any amount of doctrinal purity that you might have to sacrifice in order to maintain organizational unity on *these* issues, is worth the sacrifice to you. While you may have *personal* convictions on these matters (the nature of sin, the nature of the atonement, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the new birth) you may have a *position* on these topics, you're just willing to allow for differences of opinion on them for the sake of church unity. This is where Bushnell found himself. Now what's interesting is that this tension at Yale didn't last. The New Divinity quickly gave way to full-blown liberal theology within a generation at Yale. Interestingly, Unitarians like William Ellery Channing looked on with a sort prophetic grin. He was positive the New Divinity wasn't a sustainable theological vision for Yale and he turned out to be right.

Now, Bushnell was not an *institution* he was an *individual*. And he was a paradox if there ever was one. On the one hand, he'd say things like: "...the most contradictory book in the world is the Gospel of John"³. Or when addressing the classic Chalcedonian definition of Jesus Christ as 'one person, two natures' he said: "This theory...only creates difficulties a hundred fold greater than any that it solves."⁴ And though he didn't explicitly deny the orthodox formulations of the Trinity, he was uncomfortable with affirming them as they stood. He felt that Nicene Trinitarian Orthodoxy was: "presumptuous, possibly even absurd."⁵ In brief, Bushnell's position was frequently one that lacked doctrinal definition. While he'd want to stay doggedly with the Bible, he was (most of the time) absolute mud about formulating propositional truths based on it. He plead with his fellow believers to "...stay by the Scripture and trust ourselves to

³ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2001. p.145

⁴ Bushnell quoted in Dorrien, p.152.

⁵ Bushnell quoted in Dorrien, p.153.

no constructive reasonings on the subject.”⁶ He also said: “I have as little care as possible to secure a shelter under any form of orthodoxy.”⁷ Gary Dorrien (accurately, I believe) called Bushnell’s theology “a liberal-leaning experiment in progressive orthodoxy.”⁸ Roger Olson (himself an advocate of progressive orthodoxy) recently wrote of Bushnell: “I think if Bushnell were alive today he would find himself most at home in a postliberal, narrative type of theology...[not surprisingly, Olson says] what we need today is a new Bushnell...[Olson concludes] I think his example of moderate progressivism or progressive moderation...is a good model for contemporary theology. May his tiny tribe increase.”⁹

Now you might be sitting here and thinking: moderate (at least), liberal-leaning (yes), progressive experiment (okay). *Orthodoxy?* – I’m less persuaded. Was Bushnell *orthodox*? Well, that depends. He wouldn’t affirm an “orthodox” view of the nature God or the person of Christ. But the man had limits. He could draw lines. He was a *theist* (not an *atheist* like David Hume). He believed in a *personal God* (he wasn’t a *deist* like Ben Franklin or Thomas Jefferson). He wasn’t even a *Unitarian* (though I’m not honestly sure we could call him a *Trinitarian* either). He knew Channing, Emerson, and Parker – the Harvard Divinity School – and he genuinely thought that their views were menacing and harmful to the Christian faith. Bushnell (in the final analysis) was far more conservative than even Charles Chauncy (at least as it relates to the doctrine of universal salvation). Bushnell knew plenty of Universalists in his day. And he thought they were sincere, but sincerely *wrong*. Listen to him walk up to the precipice that hangs over the abyss of universalism and then wisely back away from it. Bushnell writes on the doctrine of eternal punishment that the biblical teaching on hell:

⁶ Bushnell quoted in Dorrien, p.153.

⁷ Ibid, p.155.

⁸ Dorrien, p.166.

⁹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/08/remembering-the-progressive-orthodoxy-of-horace-bushnell-part-one/>. The first of three blog posts on Bushnell. Accessed 11-06-13 @ 10:35am.

“...does not bring out the kingdom of God...[and] It certainly would be more agreeable, if we could have this hope [of universalism]; and many are resolved to have it without Christ’s permission, if they can not have it with...[Bushnell continues] They even make it a point of merit, to seize this honor bravely for God, on their own responsibility, and for it, if they must, defy the Scripture...[Bushnell concludes] *I think otherwise*, and could even count it a much braver thing, to willingly be less brave, and despite of our natural longings for some issue of God’s plan that is different, follow still the lead of the Master. (emphasis mine)”¹⁰

You know what this means. That despite his significant compromises theologically, Bushnell would not likely have endorsed Rob Bell’s *Love Wins*. Not likely. We’re interesting people aren’t we? Beyond his views of eternal punishment, it might also interest at least some of you to know that on the gender question Horace Bushnell was at least a strong complimentarian, if not a rather ridged traditionalist. In other words, Bushnell held views on a woman’s place in the home and the church so antiquated that he might make Wayne Grudem slightly nervous.¹¹ When it came to the issue of Roman Catholicism, Bushnell wasn’t just a solid Protestant, he was nearly a militant one. In 1843, he joined an anti-Catholic group called the Protestant League. In fact, Gary Dorrien says: “The Protestant Leaguers aggressively attacked the Vatican on religious and political grounds and declared forthrightly that their objective was to march on Rome and overthrow the papacy.”¹² So was Bushnell *liberal-leaning* and *progressive*? Not entirely. It depends. And *that’s* what this seminar is about. I want to simply stand here and point the finger everywhere I can (beginning with myself) as we sift carefully

¹⁰ Bushnell quoted in Dorrien, p.170.

¹¹ Bushnell quoted in Dorrien, pp.132-133. Bushnell taught that manhood meant: “Force, Authority, Decision, Self-Asserting Counsel, Victory...the forward, pioneering mastery, the out-door battle –ax of public war and family providence.” At the same time, womanhood said: “I will trust, and be cherished and give sympathy and take ownership in the victor, and double his honors by the honors I contribute myself...[she is marked by] the indoor faculty, *covert*, as law would say, and complementary, mistress and dispenser of the enjoyabilities.”

¹² Dorrien, p.133.

through these issues. We are contradictory, incongruous, paradoxical people. I am a We all are. So was Bushnell. Let's move on to another biographical sketch. This man possibly even more important to the shaping of liberal theology than Bushnell because he was a popularizer of theological liberalism. His name was Henry Ward Beecher.

2. Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

Henry Ward Beecher was born in Litchfield, Connecticut. Same town as Horace Bushnell (though Bushnell was 11 years older – Beecher was born in 1813). Beecher died in Brooklyn, New York in 1887 at the age of 73. His biographer called him “The Most Famous Man in America”¹³ Though that smells a little like hyperbole to me, it is certainly true that he was the most famous *preacher* in America during his day. He was the son of Lyman Beecher, himself a prominent pastor. His sister was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the celebrated abolitionist novel. Beecher was not a scholar. He was a popularizer, he was a pastor, and he was preacher. He *was* profoundly influenced by Horace Bushnell. Though not in any way approaching the size and scope of Bushnell as a theologian, Beecher began with many of Bushnell's more progressive instincts, pushed them further to the left, and then made them available to lots of people. The nature of his faith and the pulpit ministry he conducted owed much to his understanding God's love in the gospel. Listen to Beecher describe his understanding of God's disposition in love toward sinners. This is a way of understanding God that quite literally diffused itself through all of his preaching. Beecher writes:

“It pleased God to reveal to my wandering soul the idea that it was his nature to love a man in his sins for the sake of helping him out of them; that he did not do it out of compliment to Christ...or to a plan of salvation...that he was a Being not made mad by sin, but sorry; that he was not furious with wrath toward

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ward_Beecher . Accessed 11-05-13 @ 6:38pm.

the sinner, but pitied him – in short that he felt toward me as my mother felt toward me, to whose eyes my wrong-doing brought tears, who never pressed me so close as when I had done wrong...And when I found that Jesus Christ had such a disposition...I felt that I had found a God.”¹⁴

Beecher had not only found “a God” but in the Plymouth Congregational Church of Brooklyn, New York he had also found an audience.

Beecher pastored the Plymouth Church for 40 years while all the time committing to an increasingly full schedule due to outside speaking invitations. He was (in the words of David Larsen): “admittedly the P.T. Barnum of the pulpit... [Larsen observes] that it was hard for him to be serious...edification gave way to entertainment...Beecher began preparing his morning sermon an hour before the service...He preached virtually extemporaneously with much ad-libbing.”¹⁵ He wouldn’t use a pulpit, he preferred the sanctuary to be known as an auditorium. And it was a mighty auditorium – it could accommodate upwards of 2500 souls who would come to hear Beecher every week.

The theology that he expounded was a perfect fit for the post-civil war, coming of industrial age America. It was a far cry from the theology his father Lyman Beecher wanted for him. Henry Ward Beecher preached the power of positive thinking a century before the phrase was coined. His sermons were filled with lurid depictions of vice and the resplendent colors of good works. He would say things like: “Every charitable act is a stepping stone toward heaven.”¹⁶ And “God pardons like a mother who kisses the offense into everlasting forgiveness.”¹⁷ He was a wordsmith, it’s just that Bible didn’t provide his fund of language. He said in 1885 (two years before his death):

¹⁴ Beecher quoted in Dorrien, p.185.

¹⁵ David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era*. Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, MI. 1998. pp.531-532.

¹⁶ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/henry_ward_beecher.html . Accessed 11-05-13 @ 10:13pm.

¹⁷ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/henry_ward_beecher_4.html Accessed 11-05-13 @ 10:17pm.

“I believe that there is rising upon the world, to shine out in wonderful effulgence, a view of God... a better understanding of the nature of God... The frowning God, the partial God, the Fate-God, men would fain let die; [but] the Father-God, watching caring, bearing burdens... this nobler view of God... [is the God Beecher would preach]”.¹⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Beecher was *the* first public mainline preacher to embrace and give a ringing endorsement to Charles Darwin’s 1859 *Origin of Species*. Published during his pastorate at the Plymouth Congregational Church, Beecher’s push of Darwinian evolution lent untold credibility to the fledgling theory in America. Interestingly Horace Bushnell also lived through the publication of Darwin’s theory and he stood resolutely opposed to it until his dying day. Bushnell knew how to draw lines that Beecher routinely crossed.

Beecher’s *methods* and *message* were clearly liberal in the sense that we understand that term today. Sadly, too, it seems we must include in this assessment his *morals*. From the earliest days of his ministry, Beecher was not (in the words of the Apostle Paul of 1 Timothy 3:2): “above reproach”. Though he married Eunice Bullard in 1837, their marriage was never a strong one. Reports of adulterous relationships plagued him from the beginning. One historian comments that it was commonly held that: “Beecher preaches to seven or eight of his mistresses every Sunday.”¹⁹ The greatest accusation along these lines against Beecher came the form of the “Beecher-Tilton Scandal” (where Elizabeth Tilton – wife of Beecher’s friend Theodore – confessed to her husband an affair with Beecher). One author I read compared the story to a 19th century version of the O.J. Simpson trial. It was a media circus. The trial began in January of 1875 and concluded in July of that year – Beecher was exonerated of all charges. He kept his pastorate, and his marriage, though perhaps not his good name.

For all of Beecher’s strengths, one area that was not a strong suit (as we’ve said) was scholarship. In fact, it is fascinating to realize that through the majority of the 19th century, American

¹⁸ Beecher quoted in Dorrien, pp.251-252.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ward_Beecher . Accessed 11-05-13 @ 10:40pm.

theological liberalism was still not the dominant view within mainline Protestantism. In order for that to happen, an academic movement needed to be put into place that would train ministers in their various denominations with progressive thought. What is amazing to see is how through the liberal capture of established schools and the establishment of new schools captured by liberalism, between 1865 and 1895, liberal theology became the majority view with Protestantism. And it's to this final topic that we'll turn this evening.

3. The Rise of the Liberal Academy (1865-1895)

Gary Dorrien fascinatingly observes that: “The country that made Beecher a national icon was ready for a liberal theology movement, but mainline American Christianity had no liberal theologians in 1876.”²⁰ That is a stunning statement, and conditions were soon to change. There are a handful of names and a handful of schools in the 19th century that are going to be incredibly crucial to the rise and success of modernism in the 20th century. Theodore Munger, Washington Gladden, and Newman Smyth were pastor-theologians and movement leaders. Charles Briggs was a Presbyterian Old Testament scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York and Borden Parker Bowne was the Methodist theologian of Boston University. The deepest irony in the development of this academic movement is that between Munger, Gladden, Smyth, Briggs, and Bowne, all of them (with the exception of Briggs) flirted with theological heresy their entire careers – and yet it was Briggs who was eventually tried and found guilty of heresy²¹ in 1891 by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

²⁰ Dorrien, p.279.

²¹ The word “heresy” was originally quite neutral. It was a Greek word that simply meant “an act of choice”. Eventually, a “heresy” became a synonym for a religious “party” or a “sect”. In time, it began to take on the negative connotations it carries today. When Peter uses the word “heresy” in 2 Peter 2:1, he couples it with the word “destructive” in order to bring out the meaning he intends. There's a difference, then, between destructive heresy and bad theology. Bad theology hurts people. Destructive heresy kills people. Bad theology is an unfortunate error. Destructive heresy is a lethal error. The heresy

As you read the histories (particularly the ones written by conservatives) the only name you typically hear of these five men is that of Charles Briggs – branded a heretic. But the more I learn of this man, the slower I am to draw that conclusion. Nevertheless, Briggs becomes the casualty of the early liberal academy. He was born in New York City in 1841. He was converted at the age of 17 during the Great Prayer Meeting Revival of 1858. His family encouraged him to join the Presbyterians because of their stalwart track record and resistance of theological liberalism. In a move that surprised his family, he chose the progressive Union Theological Seminary in New York over the orthodox stronghold of Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Like many young scholars of his day, he traveled to Germany for his doctoral work. In Berlin he was exposed to radical theological liberalism and it’s clear that it affected him in powerful ways. He said of his experience in Germany: “I cannot doubt that I have been blessed with a new divine light...I feel a different man from what I was five months ago. The Bible is lit up with a new light.”²² And yet despite these developments, he returned to America to take his first pastorate at the First Presbyterian Church of Roselle, New Jersey. And this is what he said at the outset of his ministry:

“What the Church needs today is the strong meat, the good, old, strong Calvinistic, Augustinian, and Pauline doctrines reiterated in all their sublimity and power...It is a mark of our degeneracy...that these grand old doctrines of the Reformation expressed in our Catechism are not brought out in as much force and prominence as heretofore.”²³

He was not a liberal. He didn’t like term. He sneered at it. And yet, because of his affinities for higher biblical criticism (birthed in his Germany experience) he couldn’t see his way to an honest affirmation of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. But he was a man of deep integrity. And of broad friendships and working

Peter references in 2 Peter 2:1 is “denying the Master who bought them.” It is well to consider how badly Charles Briggs was wronged when charged with heresy for his views on inerrancy. Denial of inerrancy is bad theology, even seriously bad theology – but it’s not destructive heresy.

²² Briggs quoted in Dorrien, p.341.

²³ Briggs quoted in Dorrien, p.343.

relationships. Over the years, he collaborated with old Princeton's A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield on the editorship of a theological journal known as the *Presbyterian Review*. This was not an enterprise without its hiccups, but Briggs was determined to make it work. Eventually the partnership became strained over the doctrinal matter of biblical inerrancy.

Briggs would not affirm inerrancy and was not shy about explaining why. He said: “*Verbal...plenary* Inspiration... imperil[s] the doctrine of Inspiration itself by bringing it into conflict with a vast array of objections along the whole line of Scripture and History...[He also said] What an awful doctrine to teach in our days when Biblical criticism has the field!”²⁴ He was so convinced of higher biblical criticism that he really failed to appreciate (or maybe he didn't care) how statements such as these would go down with the likes of Hodge, Warfield, the Princeton School, and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. He was reckless (at times) in the way he disparaged inerrancy. Briggs said that the doctrine brought “peril to precious souls...[He went further saying] No more dangerous doctrine has ever come from the pen of men...[he said that inerrancy was] a ghost of modern evangelicalism to frighten children...[Briggs claimed] It has cost the Church the loss of thousands [I don't know if that's dollars or people – probably both, he said] It will cost us ten thousand and hundreds of thousands unless the true Westminster doctrine is speedily put in its place.”²⁵ Do you hear him? He's not interested in doctrinal novelty. He wanted what he took to be the traditional Westminster Confession of Faith (which he felt at any rate did not teach inerrancy). Now whether Briggs was right on that score is highly contestable. In fact, if you read the careful work of John Woodbridge in his 1982 work *Biblical Authority*, you find that Briggs was writing a historical theological check that he simply could not cash.²⁶ Now the Presbyterians knew it. And they accused him of heresy.

²⁴ Briggs quoted in Dorrien, pp.348, 354.

²⁵ Briggs quoted in Dorrien, p.354.

²⁶ John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers / McKim Proposal*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI. 1982. pp.102-118.

Briggs's friend and eminent church historian Philip Schaff (author of *The Creeds of Christendom*) said: "In Germany Dr. Briggs would be classed with the conservative and orthodox... He is, in fact, a Calvinist in everything except the questions of higher criticism..."²⁷ The overtures of conservative allies like Schaff were not nearly enough to dim the chorus of voices crying heresy and he was condemned a heretic by the General Assembly of the PCUSA (as we said in 1891). Eventually, Briggs joined Episcopal Church and was ordained a priest in the year 1899. Ironically, Briggs lived to see the genuine liberal turn of Union Theological Seminary and grieved it very much. He also went on to complete the famous Hebrew-English Lexicon that bears his name alongside Francis Brown and S.R. Driver (he's the "Briggs" in the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon – BDB for short).

Conclusion:

So what do we learn from this page in the history of the development of American liberal theology? What do Bushnell and Beecher and the rise of the true liberal academy (men like Munger, Gladden, Smyth, and Bowne – the guys we didn't talk about – and the schools at Union and Boston). What does their existence tell us? What's the lesson of the heresy trial of Charles Briggs? There are many. One thing is for sure, by the turn of the 20th century, most of American mainstream Christianity was prepared, it was ready for liberal theology. And that includes the PCUSA which will make a dramatic about face by the middle of the 1920's and become a lightning rod for yet another (even greater) storm – the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. So tomorrow we'll tackle the impossible, we'll try and wrap our minds around the major developments in American theological liberalism over the last hundred plus years. But right now let's have finish with some discussion.

²⁷ Schaff quoted in Dorrien, p.363.