

## **Ethics: The Source of a New Theological Liberalism?**

The Old liberalism had its roots in the radical biblical criticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Old liberals doubted core Christian doctrines like the incarnation, Christ's death and resurrection, his ascension and second coming, the authority of Scripture, justification by faith and the Day of Judgment. The New liberalism is more orthodox on these things but sees ethical issues as being in the category of what Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8 & 10 and Romans 14, calls 'disputable matters' on which Christians can legitimately disagree but stay in fellowship. This workshop evaluates and critiques the damaging influence on Christian witness and discipleship of four 'Christian' views on ethics including Fletcher's 'situation ethics' and what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace'

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### **I. The Old Liberalism**

- A. Roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Darwinism and Biblical Criticism
- B. Rejection of the supernatural and the authority of Scripture
- C. Acceptance of biblical ethics (eg. sexuality, sanctity of life, economic ethics)

### **II. The New Liberalism**

- A. A UK Example
- B. Claimed acceptance of the supernatural and the authority of Scripture
- C. Reinterpretation of substitutionary atonement
- D. Rejection of radical biblical ethics

### **III. Four ethical challenges to evangelicals**

- A. Situation Ethics - 'All that matters is love'
- B. Cheap grace - 'We are not under law but grace '
- C. Diversity - 'Ethics is a secondary issue over which Christians may disagree'
- D. Personal pietism - 'The world's not our problem. We shouldn't impose our morality'

### **IV. Situation ethics**

- A. 'All that matters is love' (Joseph Fletcher)
- B. It's true that love sums up the law (Mt 22:37-40; Gal 5:6, 14)
- C. But love goes beyond the law (Mt 5:20, 23:23; 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Eph 5:1,2; 1 Jn 2:6)
- D. And the law against killing is upheld in the NT (Mt 5:21-22; Rom 13:9,10; Jas 2:8-11; Rev 21:8,22:15)

### **V. Cheap grace**

- A. 'We are not under law but grace'
- B. It's true that we are saved by grace through faith and not by good works (Rom 5:1,2; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8,9)
- C. But genuine faith is evidenced by repentance (turning from sin) and a changed life (Gal 5:16-26; Eph 2:10; Jas 2:14-26)

### **VI. Diversity**

- A. 'Ethics is a secondary issue over which Christians may disagree'
- B. It's true that there are secondary issues over which Christians may legitimately disagree (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8:1-13, 10:23-33)
- C. But this is nowhere taught, for example, about sexual sin or the shedding of innocent blood (Mt 5:21-22; Rom 6:15-23, 13:9,10; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Jas 2:8-11; Rev 21:8,22:15)

## **VII. Personal pietism**

- A. 'The world is not our problem and we should not impose our morality'
- B. It is true that we are not of this world but citizens of God's Kingdom (Heb 11:16; 1 Pet 2:9,10)
- C. But as aliens and exiles we are to seek the good of the city in which we are placed (1 Pet 2:11-17; Je 29:7) and have a duty to seek justice (Mi 6:8; Amos 5:14,15,24; Pr 31:8,9; Lk 4:18,19)

## **VIII. Key biblical correctives – a proper understanding of:**

- A. Relationship between Old & New Covenants (Je 31:31-34;Ezk 36:24-27;Heb 9:11-28)
- B. Christ as the fulfilment of the Law (Mt 5:17-20; 1 Cor 9:19-23; Gal 3:10-25)
- C. Salvation through substitutionary atonement (1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:4; 1 Pet 3:18)

C. Biblical grace and repentance (Rom 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9-14)

D. Discipleship as well as evangelism (Mt 28:19,20; Eph 4:7-16; Heb 5:11-6:3)

E. The relationship between faith and works (Eph 2:8-10; Phil 2:12,13; Jas 2:14-26)

F. The tension between the now and the not yet (Rom 8:18-24; 1 Cor 13:8-12)

G. Faithfulness in both rebuke and forgiveness (Mt 18:15-20; Lk 17:3-6; Jas 5:19,20)

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