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Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens

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Theological liberals do not intend to destroy Christianity, but to save it. As a matter of fact, theological liberalism is motivated by what might be described as an apologetic motivation. The pattern of theological liberalism is all too clear. Theological liberals are absolutely certain that Christianity must be saved...from itself.

Liberalism: Saving Christianity From Itself

The classic liberals of the early twentieth century, often known as modernists, pointed to a vast intellectual change in the society and asserted that Christianity would have to change or die. As historian William R. Hutchison explains, “The hallmark of modernism is the insistence that theology must adopt a sympathetic attitude toward secular culture and must consciously strive to come to terms with it.”^[1]



This coming to terms with secular culture is deeply rooted in the sense of intellectual liberation that began in the Enlightenment. Protestant liberalism can be traced to European sources, but it arrived very early in America—far earlier than most of today’s evangelicals are probably aware. Liberal theology held sway where Unitarianism dominated and in many parts beyond.

Soon after the American Revolution, more organized forms of liberal theology emerged, fueled by a sense of revolution and intellectual liberty. Theologians and preachers began to question the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, claiming that doctrines such as original sin, total depravity, divine sovereignty, and substitutionary atonement violated the moral senses. William Ellery Channing, an influential Unitarian, spoke for many in his generation when he described “the shock given to my moral nature” by the teachings of orthodox Christianity.^[2]

Though any number of central beliefs and core doctrines were subjected to liberal revision or outright rejection, the doctrine of hell was often the object of greatest protest and denial.

Considering hell and its related doctrines, Congregationalist pastor Washington Gladden declared: “To teach such a doctrine as this about God is to inflict upon religion a terrible injury and to subvert the very foundations of morality.”^[3]

Though hell had been a fixture of Christian theology since the New Testament, it became an *odium theologium*—a doctrine considered repugnant by the larger culture and now retained and defended only by those who saw themselves as self-consciously orthodox in theological commitment.

Novelist David Lodge dated the final demise of hell to the decade of the 1960s. “At some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn’t.” University of Chicago historian Martin Marty saw the transition as simple and, by the time it actually occurred, hardly observed. “Hell disappeared. No one noticed,” he asserted.^[4]

The liberal theologians and preachers who so conveniently discarded hell did so without denying that the Bible clearly

teaches the doctrine. They simply asserted the higher authority of the culture's sense of morality. In order to save Christianity from the moral and intellectual damage done by the doctrine, hell simply had to go. Many rejected the doctrine with gusto, claiming the mandate to update the faith in a new intellectual age. Others simply let the doctrine go dormant, never to be mentioned in polite company.

What of today's evangelicals? Though some lampoon the stereotypical "hell-fire and brimstone" preaching of an older evangelical generation, the fact is that most church members may never have heard a sermon on hell—even in an evangelical congregation. Has hell gone dormant among evangelicals as well?

Revising Hell: A Test Case for the Slide into Liberalism

Interestingly, the doctrine of hell serves very well as a test case for the slide into theological liberalism. The pattern of this slide looks something like this.

First, a doctrine simply falls from mention. Over time, it is simply never discussed or presented from the pulpit. Most congregants do not even miss the mention of the doctrine. Those who do become fewer over time. The doctrine is not so much denied as ignored and kept at a distance. Yes, it is admitted, that doctrine has been believed by Christians, but it is no longer a necessary matter of emphasis.

Second, a doctrine is revised and retained in reduced form. There must have been some good reason that Christians historically believed in hell. Some theologians and pastors will then affirm that there is a core affirmation of morality to be preserved, perhaps something like what C. S. Lewis affirmed as "The Tao."^[5] The doctrine is reduced.

Third, a doctrine is subjected to a form of ridicule. Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral, known for his message of "Possibility Thinking," once described his motivation for theological reformulation in terms of refocusing theology on "generating trust and positive hope."^[6] His method is to point to salvation and the need "to become positive thinkers."^[7] Positive thinking does not emphasize escape from hell, "whatever that means and wherever that is."^[8]

That statement ridicules hell by dismissing it in terms of "whatever that means and wherever that is." Just don't worry about hell, Schuller suggests. Though few evangelicals are likely to join in the same form of ridicule, many will invent softer forms of marginalizing the doctrine.

Fourth, a doctrine is reformulated in order to remove its intellectual and moral offensiveness. Evangelicals have subjected the doctrine of hell to this strategy for many years now. Some deny that hell is everlasting, arguing for a form of annihilationism or conditional immortality. Others will deny hell as a state of actual torment. John Wenham simply states, "Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice."^[9] Some argue that God does not send anyone to hell, and that hell is simply the sum total of human decisions made during earthly lives. God is not really a judge who decides, but a referee who makes certain that rules are followed.

Tulsa pastor Ed Gungor recently wrote that "people are not *sent* to hell, they *go* there."^[10] In other words, God just respects human freedom to the degree that he will reluctantly let humans determined to go to hell have their wish.

Apologizing for Hell: The New Evangelical Evasion

In recent years, a new pattern of evangelical evasion has surfaced. The Protestant liberals and modernists of the twentieth century simply dismissed the doctrine of hell, having already rejected the truthfulness of Scripture. Thus, they did not enter into elaborate attempts to argue that the Bible did not teach the doctrine—they simply dismissed it.

Though this pattern is found among some who would claim to be evangelicals, this is not the most common evangelical pattern of compromise. A new apologetic move is now evident among some theologians and preachers who *do* affirm the inerrancy of the Bible and the essential truthfulness of the New Testament doctrine of hell. This new move is more subtle, to be sure. In this move the preacher simply says something like this:

"I regret to tell you that the doctrine of hell *is* taught in the Bible. I believe it. I believe it because it is revealed in the Bible. It is not up for renegotiation. We just have to receive it and believe it. I do believe it. I wish it could be otherwise

but it is not.”

Statements like this reveal a very great deal. The authority of the Bible is clearly affirmed. The speaker affirms what the Bible reveals and rejects accommodation. So far, so good. The problem is in how the affirmation is introduced and explained. In an apologetic gesture, the doctrine is essentially lamented.

What does this say about God? What does this imply about God’s truth? Can a truth clearly revealed in the Bible be anything less than good for us? The Bible presents the knowledge of hell just as it presents the knowledge of sin and judgment: these are things we had better know. God reveals these things to us for our good and for our redemption. In this light, the knowledge of these things is grace to us. Apologizing for a doctrine is tantamount to impugning the character of God.

Do we believe that hell is a part of the perfection of God’s justice? If not, we have far greater theological problems than those localized to hell.

Several years ago, someone wisely suggested that a good many modern Christians wanted to “air condition hell.”^[11] The effort continues.

Remember that the liberals and the modernists operated out of an apologetic motivation. They wanted to save Christianity as a relevant message in the modern world and to remove the odious obstacle of what were seen as repugnant and unnecessary doctrines. They wanted to save Christianity from itself.

Today, some in movements such as the emerging church commend the same agenda, and for the same reason. Are we embarrassed by the biblical doctrine of hell?

If so, this generation of evangelicals will face no shortage of embarrassments. The current intellectual context allows virtually no respect for Christian affirmations of the exclusivity of the gospel, the true nature of human sin, the Bible’s teachings regarding human sexuality, and any number of other doctrines revealed in the Bible. The lesson of theological liberalism is clear—embarrassment is the gateway drug for theological accommodation and denial.

Be sure of this: it will not stop with the air conditioning of hell.

I am always glad to hear from readers and listeners. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

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Footnotes:

¹ William R. Hutchison, ed., *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968), p. 4.

² Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), p. 18.

³ Dorrien, p. 275.

⁴ Martin E. Marty, “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 78 (1985), 381-398.

⁵ See C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001 [1948]).

⁶ Robert Schuller, *My Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 127.

⁷ Schuller, p. 127-128.

⁸ Schuller, p. 127-128.

⁹ John Wenhan, *Facing Hell: An Autobiography* (London: Paternoster Press, 1998), p. 254.

¹⁰ Ed Gungor, *What Bothers Me Most About Christianity* (New York: Howard Books, 2009), p. 196.

¹¹ See “Hell Air Conditioned,” *New Oxford Review*, 58 (June 3, 1998), p. 4.

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