

**Church History**  
**Lesson 39 - The Church and Modernity**  
**(Chapters 31-32)**

**Introduction**

- We have looked at the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries from various aspects already, including the Enlightenment, religious wars, colonial expansion, and the revolutions in America and France.
- Another key issue arising during this time was modernity, and the various responses of Christians to modernity.
- What is modernity? What are some of the major ways the church responded to modernity?

**1. Modernity and the Protestant Church**

- 1.1. Modernity is a very important, but very broad, concept. In general modernity refers to the ideas, attitudes, practices, and cultural norms that arose in the wake of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. In general, the influence of the Renaissance and Enlightenment are particularly pronounced.
  - 1.1.1. Modernity had intellectual, sociological, and political implications, and each of these had great effects on the church, and called for a response from the church.
  - 1.1.2. We will try to give a broad overview of each of these areas, and how the church tried to respond.
- 1.2. The intellectual challenge of modernity
  - 1.2.1. The intellectual flow of modernity
    - 1.2.1.1. Rene Descartes – 1596-1650 – looked at science and religion as two paths to knowledge. Deeply affected by scientific discoveries of his time. Wanted to find path to grasp true, timeless truth. The path he discovered was radical skepticism – doubt everything. The only thing that had certainty was his own existence – I think therefore I am. This is radical subjectivism.
    - 1.2.1.2. John Locke – 1632-1704 – British empiricist. Does not follow extremes of skepticism. Senses can be trusted. Our mind is a tabula rasa – blank slate – at birth. Inform mind through senses. This radically changed anthropology and denied original sin.
    - 1.2.1.3. David Hume – 1711-1776 – brought in radical skepticism again, but doubted even causality. No way to know that the sun will rise again tomorrow. We only assume it will. No such thing as certainty. All we have is different bundles of perception, from which we draw conclusions, but we can never know these things.
    - 1.2.1.4. Immanuel Kant – 1724-1804 – Read David Hume as a young man, which awakened him from his dogmatic slumber. He wanted to answer radical skepticism and radical empiricism. Trying to be faithful to Christianity. Wanted to keep God as a viable category. Talked about 2 categories: 1) noumenal 2) phenomenal. Phenomenal is the world around you; what is experienced through senses. The noumenal is the spiritual, metaphysical world. Kant says that you can not move from noumenal to the phenomenal. He thought this would protect

Christianity. You can only doubt phenomenal; the noumenal is out of our reach. Set stage for separation of physical and spiritual.

1.2.1.4.1. For Kant, all men as the image of God can study and learn truth from the phenomenal world. However, one can not move from this knowledge to the spiritual (noumenal) realm. This can not be approached from our level of knowledge or truth; it is simply accepted by faith. The spiritual realm is radically privatized and subjectivized. Kant was doing this to protect Christianity in the new, modern world.

1.2.1.5. Charles Darwin

1.2.1.5.1. Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was first published in 1859, and it fell like a bomb on the intellectual landscape of Western Civilization. By proposing a method in which all life could be explained without reference to god, the idea of evolution took hold. This idea soon began to spread far outside of its original realm of biology. Indeed, the very idea of evolutionary progress took such hold that it affected virtually every field of study. It also took hold in the popular mind so that what was newer was seen as superior to that which was old.

1.2.1.5.2. This had a profound affect on the Christian faith in the West for two reasons. First, it seemed to call into question the doctrine of God as Creator, or at least how the early chapters of Genesis had been traditionally understood by most Christians.

1.2.1.5.3. Second, it called into question all older philosophies and faiths as early stages of development in humanity that should be discarded as we evolve. Christianity must either change or be left behind, since by definition everything must evolve - including our understanding of humanity, morals, history, etc.

1.2.1.6. The effect of all of this was to cause grave doubts among many as to the truth of Christianity. It was either outright false, or it was at best something that was not able to be proven, and was therefore private and internal, and of no public consequence.

1.2.2. The response of the church

1.2.2.1. Protestant liberalism - Certain Christian thinkers leaders, especially within Germany, began to react to these challenges by proposing new way to understand the faith. Some tried to apply the philosophy of Kant to theology. If you can not work in noumenal, then even our study of theology is in the phenomenal realm. It is in now way "objective" or "verifiable" but restricted to the private, subjective realm. Furthermore, the pressure from Darwin and new scientific discoveries led them to naturalize theology, and to think of the development of the faith and Scripture itself in evolutionary terms.

1.2.2.1.1. George Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel (1770-1831) – historian by training. Apply these ideas to history. Can't speak of God (noumenal) when looking at history (phenomenal). Analyze history through the dialectic. Three phases: 1) thesis 2) antithesis 3) synthesis.

- 1.2.2.1.2. Freidrich Schleiermacher – 1768-1834 – save religion in existential terms. Son of Reformed minister, read Kant; taught at Pietistic school; influenced by Hegel as well. Goes to Berlin in 1810 to be a professor. Truth for Christian is not found in Scripture, for it is not possible to have revelation in phenomenal realm. This truth should now be seen in experience, which is universal. Scriptural language is symbolic; cross speaks of universal experience of religion. Certainty is entirely subjective experience; no objective certainty is possible. The primary feeling in view is that of utter dependence on God. This is Christianity. Whether or not the events of Scripture happened is irrelevant; what matters is the experience of dependence upon god. This is what the various stories in Scripture are meant to produce.
- 1.2.2.1.3. F.C. Baur (1792-1860) - Follower of Hegel and his dialectic theory. Said Pauline doctrine of grace was thesis, Peter and law was antithesis, and Luke was synthesis. He also began rigorous study to determine the date and authorship of each book of the New Testament. As a result, he doubted Paul was author of anything other than Galatians, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians. Eventually, much of the New Testament was dated as much later than the time of the apostles, and the writings were viewed as the thinking and practice of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church.
- 1.2.2.1.4. Albrecht Ritschl - 1822-1884 – look at everything scientifically. Look at historical facts of Christianity. By finding this, we can find what is real. We study history only to find its value for our lives. All theological statements are to explain the phenomena of Christian life; not to present confessional statements or doctrine. Did not like to talk in traditional theological terms. Sin is merely the abuse of freedom. No need for redemption, so why did Jesus come? Who is real Jesus? Starts the quest for the historical Jesus. No real resurrection. Salvation is the actualization of your moral improvement. Christ's death provided an example of one willing to live moral life even to the point of death.
- 1.2.2.1.5. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) - Documentary hypothesis. Task of interpreter is to discover which part of Pentateuch belongs to which document (J, E, D or P). J – Jehovist from 9th century; E – Elohist from 8th century; D – Deuteronomist from 7th century (law); P – Priestly from 5th century. Final form of Old Testament text was not until 200 BC. This had a huge impact on the study of the Old Testament. The method is still alive and well even though early ideas have been disproved.
- 1.2.2.1.6. Adolph von Harnack – 1851-1930 – NT scholar and church historian. Spoke of kernel and husk. Must strip off husk (miracles, resurrection) to get at kernel of truth in Scripture.

Must demythologize Scripture. God and His kingdom is kernel. God is Father; humans have infinite value; must treat each others with value; social action is the heart of Christian living.

1.2.2.1.7. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) - Contrasted our worldview with that of Scripture. Our worldview came from assured results of criticism, theirs was based on fictional thought. He taught that we must demythologize the New Testament – get rid of the false NT worldview to get back to core meaning of New Testament. He was an existentialist, so for him the real core of the Bible was that these people made a decision, so life becomes meaningful when you make decisions, even if they are different from those made by biblical characters.

1.2.2.1.8. All of this left Christianity as little more than a philosophical system or a system of morals. The events described in Scripture were not historical, and in fact we have no way to even get back to the actual historical events. But this is not important. Scripture is a record of the evolution of men's thoughts about God and their experiences of the noumenal, and it provides a valuable moral system.

1.2.2.2. Protestant orthodoxy - Many more “conservative” Christian thinkers and leaders continued to teach that the faith should be understood in essentially the same way it always had by the Church in the past. The events described in Scripture had actually occurred essentially as described. Miracles were real, though rare, and were evidences of God's work for our salvation. The Jesus presented in the pages of the New Testament was the actual Jesus. The books ascribed to Moses in the Old Testament were not developed by different schools over time and did not contradict one another, but were largely the work of Moses (though there is evidence of later editorial comments and such). We will look at some specific streams within this response in a future class.

1.2.2.3. Protestant laity - It should also be noted that many of the ideas discussed above did not immediately seep down into the pew. Thinkers and leaders were engaged in these ideas, but many of the faithful in the pew were initially only tangentially affected by these ideas. However, over time the ideas would begin to seep into the church in such a way that everyone would have to deal with them. This would lead to the modernist/fundamentalist controversy that we will study in a future session.

### 1.3. The sociological challenge of modernity

1.3.1. Modernity also produced great sociological changes. As science progressed, the industrial revolution was born. This led to increased urbanization, which had a major effect upon the church. This effect happened for two reasons.

1.3.1.1. First, the mass movements of people and the gathering of people into urban areas caused people to come into contact with others who did not share their beliefs. This not only caused Christians of various groups to live and work with one another, but also Christians and those of different religions or even of increasing skepticism. In short, specific

doctrinal convictions seemed less plausible in the modern, urban, cosmopolitan, multicultural setting than they had in the earlier more rural and cloistered setting.

1.3.1.2. Second, the movement of people in to urban settings produced huge sociological changes.

1.3.1.2.1. Traditionally, people were born, lived, and died in the same village, and the nuclear family and extended family were paramount. However, this mass movement and concentration of people throughout the West weakened the traditional nuclear and extended family. As family ties were loosened, so was the transmission of values and traditions - including the Christian faith.

1.3.1.2.2. The gathering of people into urban areas to work in newly created industries caused the rapid growth of cities. This in turn often led to poverty, disease, and crime. Furthermore, children were often required to work, undermining the recent emphasis on education. However, though these problems were severe, faith in the Darwinian notion of progress was also great, and it was believed that technology would solve all of these problems.

1.3.2. The response of the church

1.3.2.1. As people gathered into more urban, cosmopolitan, multicultural settings and began to lose ties to the faith of their families, many became more willing to change their former affiliations. This led to the growth of some groups and the shrinking of others. Furthermore, it also strengthened the intellectual movements noted above.

1.3.2.2. Both orthodox/conservative/evangelical and more liberal groups attempted to address the social problems associated with modernity. This period saw the creation of Sunday schools to address religious educational needs, of the YMCA to address socialization and recreation needs, and the Salvation Army to address poverty issues. However, the problems were so large, that many of the charitable and social functions provided by the church seemed to require the intervention of the government to help.

1.4. The political challenge of modernity

1.4.1. As we noted last time, the American and French revolutions had a major effect on the political thought of the West and the desire for freedom and democracy. This desire continued to foment in the following years, and ushered in major political changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

1.4.2. In 1848 a series of revolutions swept across Europe. The revolutions were not coordinated, and each had its own features, but the sheer number of revolutions was electric in its effect, which would continue to be felt for years. The basic thrust of these revolutions was democratic, liberal, and nationalistic in nature. The desire was to remove the old monarchies, establish new levels of personal liberty and freedom, and the creation of new independent nation states out of the old multi-national empires. They also often desired new economic structures and policies to combat bias towards the wealthy.

- 1.4.3. Although the revolutions of 1848 themselves failed, in their wake a stunning series of political changes occurred. Monarchies eventually gave way to democratic forms of government, personal freedoms grew, and new nations such as Germany and Italy formed in the 1860's and 1870's. Finally, old economic systems continued to give way to various forms of capitalism and eventually socialism as well.
- 1.4.4. Furthermore, modernity brought the growth of the idea and practice of secularism. Originally "secular" simply referred to the current age as opposed to eternity, but over time it came to denote a marginalization or outright hostility to the church. Buoyed by the Kantian ideas which led to the privatization of faith, the church and even religious faith itself, became increasingly marginalized. The separation of church and state, which initially meant that there simply would not be a state church and that the church and government would not be wed at the hip, gave way to the idea that religious faith should be increasingly privatized, having little voice or effect in the public square at all.
- 1.4.5. The Protestant response
  - 1.4.5.1. The Protestant church in general was more open to these changes than the Roman Catholic Church, which will be discussed below. Though responses varied across countries and over time, Protestants were not opposed to democracy, nationalism, or capitalism. In part this was due to the fact that most Protestant churches were predominately associated with one or a few countries, while Roman Catholicism with its long history and hierarchical structure culminating in the Pope found it more difficult to accept these changes.
  - 1.4.5.2. However, it should be noted that these changes, combined with the intellectual challenges noted above, had a corrosive effect upon the notion of Christendom and the place of the church within the various countries it represented.
  - 1.4.5.3. The response to secularism was also varied. Some groups saw it as a threat, though others were more willing to accept it as long as they maintained a privileged position within the culture. Oddly, the official state churches suffered worse under the secularizing tendencies of modernity than did the "free", non-established churches.

## **2. The Roman Catholic Response to Modernity**

- 2.1. While the theologians and church leaders in the Protestant world had a variety of responses to modernity, the Roman Catholic church initially tried to keep modernity and its effects at bay by simply ignoring or condemning it. This was mainly done due to the Roman Catholic claims to temporal power, which conflicted with the newfound effects of modernity.
- 2.2. The Roman Catholic response to modernity began with the French Revolution. The Pope and the RCC hierarchy did not like the philosophies that were part of the French Revolution, and they also viewed its desire for liberty as a threat to the power of the Church in France, and therefore the Pope did all he could to oppose the Revolution in France. This eventually led the French to invade Papal territories, and

- they took Rome and declare Pope Pius VI was no longer the ruler of the area. Pius died a year later, virtually a prisoner of the French powers.
- 2.3. Eventually however, Napoleon restored relations with the RCC, and the Pope even went to the coronation of Napoleon as Emperor - and Napoleon took the crown from the Popes hands and crowned himself!
  - 2.4. After the French Revolution failed, the succeeding Popes were theological and political conservatives, preferring the old order. During this time, the Pope and the RCC hierarchy undermined local Catholic attempts to support republican and democratic ideals.
  - 2.5. During this time nationalist desires grew in Italy as well, and the Pope undermined these as well, losing support among the nationalist leaders and much of the populace.
  - 2.6. Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) had the longest pontificate in history. Early in his reign the revolutions of 1848 took place. When it spread to Rome, a republic was proclaimed and Pius was expelled from the city. He remained in exile until he was restored by the French. After his restoration, Pius did not try to mollify the republicans, but tried to rule as an absolute monarch. He also continued to clash with people working to unify Italy. However, in 1870 after Italy was unified the troops of the new kingdom of Italy took control of the Papal States. Pius did not recognize this, nor did his successors for a long time. However, this marked the end of temporal rule for the Popes, except for the few palaces which Italy allowed them to maintain.
  - 2.7. Around the same time, Bismarck was also taking measures to restrict papal power in Germany, and other European leaders were doing the same. Thus, the pontificate of Pius XI marks the end of the power of Popes which had reached its zenith under Innocent III around 1300.
  - 2.8. Ironically, Pius was the Pope who increased Papal power in spiritual matters. In 1854, he proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (that Mary was conceived without and taint of sin). Although this dogma had been debated for centuries, the most momentous aspect of the declaration is that Pius did it unilaterally, without the support of a council. This was the first time in history this had been done. Pius also continued to fight against modernity on a variety of fronts. In 1864, he issued the encyclical *Quanta cura*, accompanied by a *Syllabus of Errors* that listed eighty propositions that Catholics must reject. Some of the errors listed there show the mood of the papacy in the nineteenth century:
    13. That the method and principles by which the ancient scholastic doctors developed their theology are not compatible with present needs or with scientific progress.
    15. That each person is free to adopt and follow that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.
    18. That Protestantism is simply another form of the same Christian religion, and that it is possible to please God in it as well as in the true Catholic Church.
    21. That the church does not have the power of defining dogmatically that the religion of the Catholic Church is the only true religion.

24. That the church has no authority to make use of force, nor does it have temporal power. . . .
30. That the immunity of the church and of ecclesiastics is based on civil law.
37. That it is lawful to institute national churches, separate and completely independent of the Roman pontiff.
38. That the arbitrary behavior of the popes contributed to the break between the Eastern and Western churches.
45. That the entire management of the schools in which youth are educated in a Christian state, with the sole and partial exception of seminaries, can and should be in the hands of the civil power, in such a manner that no other authority be allowed to intervene in the management of schools, the direction of studies, the granting of degrees, or the selection and certification of teachers.
47. That the good order of civil society requires that public schools, open to children of all classes, and in general all public institutions devoted to the teaching of literature and science, and to the education of youth, be free of all authority on the part of the church, of all its moderating influence, and be subject only to civil and political authority, so that they may behave according to the opinions of civil magistrates and to the common opinion of the time.
55. That the church ought to be separate from the state, and the state from the church.
77. That in our time it is no longer convenient that the Catholic religion be the only religion of the state, or that every other religion be excluded.
78. That it is therefore praiseworthy that in some Catholic countries the law allows immigrants to practice publicly their own forms of worship.
80. That the Roman pontiff can and should be reconciled with, and agree to, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.
- 2.9.** As can be seen from these statements, Pius continued to steadfastly resist the Reformation, and also modernity. In essence, he called upon all Roman Catholics to live as if the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the growth of democracy and capitalism, and the growing call for the unification of various countries had never happened. The Roman Church was firmly set against such innovations as separation of church and state, public schools, freedom of worship, and freedom of the press. Instead, everyone was to live in submission to the bishop of Rome.
- 2.10.** When the Papal act of unilaterally declaring the Immaculate Conception did not meet much opposition, the stage was set for the declaration of papal infallibility, which was



done by the First Vatican Council in 1870. They stated “we teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that divine infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that therefore such definitions are irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church.” It should be noted that this statement does not claim that Popes are infallible on everything they say, but only when they speak ex cathedra on doctrine. In reality, this purported power has only been exercised once, when in 1950 Pope Pius XII promulgated the dogma of the Assumption of Mary.

- 2.11.** Ironically, the doctrine of Papal infallibility was promulgated on July 18, 1870, and then on September 20, 1870 Rome surrendered to the armies of the new Republic of Italy. Pius refused to accept this new state of affairs, and declared himself a prisoner of King Victor Emmanuel. The official non-recognition continued for over fifty years, until papal authority recognized that it no longer ruled Rome and the papal States.<sup>e</sup>
- 2.12.** Leo XIII succeeded Pius and ruled from 1878-1903. He continued to fight against modernity. He ordered Italian Roman Catholics to not participate in the democracy of the new republic. In fact, in a Papal bull he declared democracy to be incompatible with the authority of the Church. In practice, however, he did allow Roman Catholics in France and Germany to stop their opposition to the republics there.
- 2.13.** The most important document of Leo’s reign was his bull *Rerum Novarum*, which was issued on May 15, 1891. In it he dealt with the subject of the proper relations between laborers and employers. Leo felt it was important to address this because of the “enormous fortunes of a few individuals and the extreme poverty of the masses.” He compared the resultant situation as little better than slavery for the workers. In this bull he spoke of the right of every laborer to a salary sufficient to sustain him and his family without being forced to work an undue number of hours. All of this seems to be a rebuke to the excesses of capitalism. However, he also spoke against socialism, for private property rights are established by God, and there are differences in wealth due to differences in natural abilities. What Leo is driving at is that the rich should practice charity and not take advantage of the poor, and the poor must not hate the rich and must practice virtue which often leads to prosperity. However, Leo also called for the creation of labor unions to defend the rights of the working class. Thus, in the bull Leo was attempting to address the economic effects of modernity and the industrial revolution.
- 2.14.** Leo also displayed a somewhat ambivalent position towards the forces of modern scholarship. On the one hand, he opened the Vatican archives to outside scholars and historians for research and even admitted there was some value in historical research of the Bible itself, but on the other hand he warned that no outcome of scholarship should be used to undermine the authority of the Bible or the church. Leo also promoted a return to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, making Thomas’ writings the basis for theological instruction in seminaries.

- 2.15. Pius X (1903-1914) succeeded Leo and was much more conservative. This furthered the gulf between the Roman Church and the modern world. At his direction, the Holy Office - the old Inquisition - issued a decree to condemn any using the new methods of research to study Scripture of theology. Pius then backed this action in a Papal encyclical. As a result, many modernists left the church, and others simply paid less and less attention to papal decrees.
- 2.16. As can be seen, the Roman Catholic Church tried to deal with the effects of modernity by largely ignoring or condemning them. This policy continued in large part until Vatican II in the 1960's.

### 3. Summary

- 3.1. Modernity brought about massive changes to the Western world. These had effects in every area of life.
- 3.2. There were a great variety of responses to modernity within the church. These ranged from completely denying modernity (Roman Catholic) to actively embracing it (liberal Protestantism). As we will see in future sessions, both of these approaches proved problematic and sapped the vitality of the respective churches.
- 3.3. Other churches tried to grapple with modernity and its effects while remaining faithful to classical, orthodox understanding of the Christian faith. This presented its own challenges and led to distinct approaches, which we will discuss in future sessions.

**Next Class: Missionary Movements, Fundamentalism, and Evangelicalism**

**Reading: Chapters 33 and 36**

**Date: November 24**