

Church History

Lesson 40 - The Church In America in the 19th Century

Introduction

- Last time we looked at modernity (the ideas, attitudes, practices, and cultural norms that arose in the wake of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.) We saw that modernity posed intellectual, sociological, and political challenges to the Church.
- Last time we also looked at the Roman Catholic response which was to largely act well into the 20th century as if modernity simply did not exist and the sweeping changes it brought could simply be ignored and rolled back.
- We also look at extreme Protestant liberalism, which might be better called the higher-critical response. This group responded with radically new understandings of Scripture and the Christian faith. These changes largely began in Germany, but eventually spread throughout Europe and then to North America.
- Today we want to look at the larger Protestant response to these challenges, especially in the United States. These may be seen in two major camps: Protestant liberalism, and evangelicalism/fundamentalism.

1. The Protestant Church in America in the 19th Century - General Trends

- 1.1. In large part, the Protestant Church occupied a place of privilege and power throughout most of the 19th century in the United States. Most citizens were broadly Protestant, and many if not most cultural institutions were either directly Protestant, or were led by Protestant ministers.
- 1.2. Because of this overall cultural privilege and power, a growing distinction in what the Gospel actually stated and what should be the focus of Christian ministry initially went largely overlooked.
- 1.3. The major exception to this was the issue of slavery, but this issue largely split churches geographically rather than between denominations. Slavery and the Civil War obviously created severe rifts within Protestantism in the United States. This focus tended to cause the growing effect of modernity in Europe to be overlooked in the United States. At the very time that the revolutions of 1848, the publication of Darwin's *Origins*, and the growth of higher criticism were happening, the focus in the American church was largely on slavery and the Civil War.
- 1.4. After emerging from the Civil War, America entered what is often called "The Gilded Age." Historian George Marsden has stated this was very appropriate for "A veneer of evangelical Sunday School piety covered almost everything in the culture, but no longer did the rhetoric of idealism and virtue seem to touch the core of materialism of the political and business interests. It was a dime store millennium."
- 1.5. Thus, outwardly the cultural position of Protestants seemed to be as great as ever. In fact, the numbers belonging to the major Protestant denominations tripled between 1860 and 1900. Underneath, however, problems were brewing.
- 1.6. All of this was a harbinger of troubles to come.
 - 1.6.1. Modernity had arrived on America's shores, with the same intellectual and sociological problems it had caused in Europe. Unlike her sister in Europe, the American church had not yet really begun to grapple with modernity.

- 1.6.2. To these were added the growing power and wealth of America which often called for allegiance over that of the Gospel and tended to undermine a vital prophetic voice. In Europe growing democracy had posed a challenge to the old structures of the church and its relationship to government. In America, democracy did not call forth a conflict with the church but rather a potential subversion of it as many Americans became more committed to the American capitalistic and democratic dream than they were to the Kingdom. Whereas in Europe democratic capitalism often seemed to be at odds with the church, in America they were fully embraced by the church and threatened to seduce her.
- 1.6.3. Finally, the growing number of immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, threatened Protestant hegemony. And even those who were Protestant brought the European response to modernity, which was very different than the typical way American's approached their faith. Over time, this all began to make Protestants feel as if their way of life was coming under threat.

2. Famous Preachers - A Preview of Future Trends

- 2.1. Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)
 - 2.1.1. Beecher was the most famous preacher of his day. His father Lyman Beecher was one of the most famous preachers of his day, and his sister Harriet Beecher Stowe was famous for her book Uncle Tom's Cabin.
 - 2.1.2. Henry Ward Beecher rejected the Calvinism of his father, for doctrines such as total depravity and unconditional election did not sit well with modern American temperaments.
 - 2.1.3. George Marsden states "Beecher, the chief popularizer of the 'new theology' reassured his audiences that Christianity progressed with the modern age. One need not worry about the literal accuracy of biblical doctrines. The oaks of civilization, he said, had evolved since biblical times. Should we then 'go back and talk about acorns?'"
 - 2.1.4. The appeal of this approach was immense. Beecher did not deny traditional doctrines - he simply ignored them. The focus of his preaching was to identify Christianity with the ideals of respectable middle class culture. Christianity was not a prophetic voice to speak against the world as embodied in America; rather, it was wed to it.
 - 2.1.5. Beecher was so popular that he even survived a scandal in 1874 when he was accused of having seduced the wife of a church member. Furthermore, when Beecher was accused of heresy by his denomination, he simply left it. As Marsden observes "The individual had become more important than the institution."
- 2.2. Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)
 - 2.2.1. Brooks preached a "positive thinking" gospel. His message was that you should believe in yourself, and reverence your human nature. Salvation was found in human nature, not a deliverance from fallen nature.
 - 2.2.2. This was the exact opposite of the Calvinist doctrines of total depravity and salvation.

- 2.3. Russell H. Conwell (1843-1925)
 - 2.3.1. Conwell saw the growing urban areas as the main focus for Christian mission in America. Accordingly, his church became a center for social services including a gymnasium, athletic programs, reading rooms, day nurseries, a college (which eventually became Temple University) and the Conwell School of Theology.
 - 2.3.2. Conwell's actual message, however, was one of self-help and prosperity. According to George Marsden, Conwell delivered his lecture "Acres of Diamonds" over 6,000 times! This lecture taught that each of us had acres of diamonds in our own backyards, and it was our duty to mine them and become rich.
- 2.4. Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899)
 - 2.4.1. Moody was by far the most famous professional evangelist of his day. He came to wield large influence in both the United States and Great Britain.
 - 2.4.2. Moody was a story of American success. He was not from a wealthy or prominent family, but he built a very successful shoe business in Chicago. From this business background he turned to evangelism.
 - 2.4.3. Moody and his singing partner Ira Sankey traveled to Great Britain for a modest preaching tour. They became a sensation, however, and the tour lasted from 1873-1875. After returning to America as heroes, they continued crusades for the rest of their lives.
 - 2.4.4. Moody was not a sensationalistic revivalist like Finney before him or Billy Sunday after him. Rather, he was a business man and brought that sensibility to his labors.
 - 2.4.5. Moody's message was very simple, stressing 3 R's: Ruin by sin, Redemption by Christ, and Regeneration by the Holy Ghost. Saving souls was the preeminent goal of his life, saying "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'"
 - 2.4.6. Moody was not directly associated with a single denomination, but rather built his own organization, free from any ecclesiastical control. It was a para-church ministry rather than a ministry of a local church or denomination.
 - 2.4.7. Moody was also pre-millennial in his eschatology and did much to help popularize this scheme within America. He did this through his preaching, conferences, and through schools he or his followers founded.
 - 2.4.8. Moody's evangelistic zeal also led to the founding of the Student Volunteer Movement, which was key part of the new missions movement. This led to a massive interest in missions, and huge wave of missionaries going around the globe, and the ultimate expansion of the Church to many new lands.
- 2.5. From these examples one can certainly see future trends in American theology! The church in America has tended to eschew strong denominational ties, has often utilized business principles, stressed success, been very comfortable and non-reflective towards democratic capitalism, and had a strong strain of positive thinking and prosperity theology.

3. An Era of “Crusades”

3.1. Missions

- 3.1.1. As mentioned above, Dwight Moody was one of the most famous men of his day, and he had a crusading zeal for evangelism and missions. This, along with other factors, led to a crusade in missions, both at home and abroad.
- 3.1.2. At home, the growth of urban centers led to great social needs. To reach these new masses, many of whom were immigrants from Europe and not Protestant, Sunday schools became a major movement. The belief was that this would not only reach the children, but through them the families could be reached. This Sunday School movement tended to be trans-denominational. Combined training conferences sprung up, and a uniform lesson plan was devised so that local Sunday school teachers could meet together to plan the next weeks lesson - regardless of their denomination. The Sunday School became incredibly important, and Sunday School superintendents came to wield great power in their churches - sometimes even more than the pastor or other church leaders. And some Sunday schools became far larger than the sponsoring church.
- 3.1.3. Sunday schools also promoted evangelism at home. Slogans such as “Each one win one” became widespread, and led to great evangelistic efforts in America.
- 3.1.4. This was also the age of growing social work by the church. This is seen in the founding and growth of groups like the Salvation Army. This was originally done by both conservatives and theological moderates/liberals, but eventually the more liberal movement became the social gospel movement which will be discussed below.
- 3.1.5. As noted above, this was also the era of growth in Protestant Missions. Through groups like the Student Volunteer Movement, thousands of Americans became aware of the need for missions work overseas, and many Americans volunteered to take to Gospel to places like Africa, India, and China. This was one of the greatest missionary movements in the history of the Church.

3.2. The Temperance Movement

- 3.2.1. The temperance movement, which worked to ban the use of alcoholic beverages, also grew and reached its zenith during this period. Due to widespread social ills related to the abuse of alcohol, and especially the effects this had on wives and children, the temperance movement found support across many denominations, and even across the growing liberal-conservative theological divide. In fact, it even united some Protestants and Catholics in the crusade to ban alcohol!
- 3.2.2. Many groups were founded as part of this movement. Probably the largest and most important was the Women’s Temperance Union. This groups was important not only for its effectiveness in the fight against alcohol, but for the growth of the role of women in social and political movements.
- 3.2.3. The temperance movement eventually led to what became known as Prohibition. The U.S. Senate proposed the Eighteenth Amendment on December 18, 1918. Upon being approved by a 36th state on January 16,

- 1919, the amendment was ratified as a part of the Constitution. By the terms of the amendment, the country went dry one year later, on January 17, 1920.
- 3.2.4. In political terms, this was one of the most successful crusades in the history of the American Church. The desired goal of banning alcohol became a constitutional amendment. And the consumption of alcohol decreased during this period. However, the unintended consequence of underground criminal activity that flowed from this became such a problem, that Prohibition quickly lost public support. On December 5, 1933, ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment.
 - 3.2.5. The effects of all this continue on in the American Church in many quarters, however, where total abstention from alcohol is the norm. This is a distinct feature of the American church and the places where its missionaries have gone.
- 3.3. The Sabbatarian movement
 - 3.3.1. The Sabbatarian crusade was directed at creating and enforcing laws restricting commercial activities, industries, and places of amusement from operating on Sunday's. This had been the widespread American custom from the earliest days, but the influx of immigrants from Europe threatened to change this. These immigrants were not used to such Sabbath restrictions.
 - 3.3.2. The attempt to enact and enforce these laws was met with some support from those concerned about the welfare of poor laborers in industry. Many of these people were forced to work long hours 6 days a week. Sunday became their only reprieve as businesses were required to not work on Sundays.
 - 3.3.3. However, the call to stop all forms of entertainment was opposed by the workers themselves. Because Sunday was their only free day, they wanted the freedom to go to places of entertainment.
 - 3.3.4. These efforts included trying to force the very popular major Expos to close on Sunday's. By the end of the century the failure of the movement could be seen in the fact that its attempt to force the Columbian Expo in Chicago in 1893 was soundly defeated.
 - 3.3.5. The legacy of the movement remained in many "blue laws" which continued well into the 20th century. Obviously, however, there are very few restrictions left for Sunday activities, and many American Christians no longer practice any form of Sabbatarianism.
 - 3.4. The Women's Movement
 - 3.4.1. In much of evangelical Protestantism, the role of women in the home had an exalted status. Furthermore, women were disproportionately involved in churches.
 - 3.4.2. Furthermore, as noted above, women were an important force in the various crusades being discussed. This was especially true in the temperance movement.
 - 3.4.3. This led to the call for women to receive the right to vote. For some this was a practical matter - the best way to accomplish the desired social reform was to give women (who overwhelmingly supported the proposed social reforms) to be given the vote. Over time, however, many women came to view this as a simple matter of justice. This culminated in the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, which was adopted on August 18, 1920.

3.4.4. During this time, women also began to take new leadership roles in some Protestant churches. This happened in some of the more liberal churches, but also within the burgeoning “holiness movement” churches, which were very conservative theologically but viewed women’s ordination as the sign of a new age of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

4. The Roman Catholic Church

- 4.1. At the beginning of the 19th Century, the presence of Roman Catholics in American life was minimal. There were few Roman Catholics, and few Roman Catholics held positions of power.
- 4.2. Additionally, there was much distrust of Roman Catholics. This was due to several factors:
 - 4.2.1. Roman Catholics were the theological and often the political foes of British Protestants. Since most early Americans were from Britain, these old struggles and feelings came with them.
 - 4.2.2. Most Roman Catholics emigrated from countries that were culturally distinct from the dominant English culture out of which America had grown.
 - 4.2.3. Suspicions regarding the true loyalty of Roman Catholics made most Protestants suspicious. Were they really loyal to America - or to the Pope. The continued resistance of the RCC to democracy only exacerbated these suspicions.
- 4.3. As the century progressed, there was a large influx of Roman Catholic immigrants. Waves of people from Ireland and Italy, and to a lesser extent Poland and other places in Europe, led to a great growth in the numbers of Roman Catholics in America.
- 4.4. By the end of the century, the Roman Catholic Church was the largest single denomination in America. However, its numbers were far smaller than all Protestant groups combined. Furthermore, most Roman Catholics were still outside the power structure of the country.

5. The African American Church

- 5.1. Prior to the Civil War, most African Americans were part of the “white” churches of their communities. Surprisingly, the faith had taken deep roots among many of the slaves, despite the horrific experience they suffered at the hands of their white captors and masters.
- 5.2. After the Civil War, African Americans formed their own denominations. The two largest groups were initially Baptist and Methodist. These churches thrived and were the center of African American culture and life. This position of dominance continued through the 20th Century as well.
- 5.3. These churches tended to be very conservative in their theology. They believed and preached the Bible. However, they did tend to emphasize different ideas, especially viewing God as a Deliverer from oppression. There was a strong emphasis on heaven, but also on the importance of working to relieve oppression and help others in this life.
- 5.4. This experience of a completely separate church for different races is really unique to America. Due to the post-reconstruction experience all the way through Jim Crow laws, this system continued almost until the present day.

- 5.5. We will hopefully look more at the African American Church and experience in a future session.

6. The Rise of New Churches and Religions

- 6.1. The 19th Century in America saw the rise of many new denominations. Some of these were new denominations from immigrants. Among these would be various Lutheran churches, and also a variety of Reformed churches. However, there were also many new denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene, and the variety of Campbellite churches (Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ). These groups arose in America, but were also spread abroad through the missions movement.
- 6.2. The 19th Century in America also saw the rise of cults, most notably the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. These groups were not Christian, and rejected essential Christian doctrines such as the Deity of Christ and the Trinity. They were very American in their ideas and practices, but eventually spread to other parts of the globe as well. They were also rejected by larger American culture, and were often persecuted.

7. Summary

- 7.1. The 19th century in America was a time of great influence for the Protestant Church.
- 7.2. However many other groups grew during this time as well. And even Protestant church put a distinctive "American" stamp on the practice of the faith.
- 7.3. However, it was also a time of great transition. But most of this was not recognized at the time and only came into the open at the very end of the century and the beginning of the 20th century. This is especially seen in the modernist controversy that we will discuss next time.

Next Class: The Modernist Controversy in America

Reading: None

Date: December 29????