

PROPHETIC TRUTHS FOR TODAY

Unveiling the End-Time Events

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY

NEO-ORTHODOXY—A MISNOMER

THIS GENERATION has seen the phenomenal expansion of a peculiar theological emphasis which has been designated as neo-orthodoxy. It is clearly a misnomer since it is neither new nor is it orthodox. A much better name for it would be a new liberalism.

Sometimes neo-orthodoxy has been called Barthianism, or *crisis theology*. The crisis concept came out of the tragic world situation following the devastation of two world wars in one generation. Such a situation in the world tended to discredit the extreme optimistic position held earlier by the liberals.

Neo-orthodoxy does represent a strong reaction to the arrogant liberals who dominated the theological field some decades ago. The liberals held at the time that the golden age was just around the corner, and they believed that through men's ingenuity such a universal objective could be achieved by the church. In fact, the leaders of liberalism believed the church would conquer the forces of Satan in a kind of climactic triumph. But the unprecedented setback since 1914 all but eliminated the old postmillennial view which had been widely held.

Neo-orthodoxy was clearly a reaction from the unwarranted optimism of the liberals. To be perfectly frank, it should be said, neo-orthodoxy was a clarion call to the church to steer away from optimistic liberalism. Unquestionably Barth and his disciples have succeeded in dulling the theological edge of the optimistic liberals. Someone has said that Barth succeeded in taking the chill out of liberalism. Let no one be misled in this regard, so as to believe or assume that neo-orthodoxy represents a return to evangelicalism. Unfortunately neo-orthodoxy has not moved in that direction.

LEADING EXPONENTS OF NEO-ORTHODOXY

The two outstanding European exponents of this school of thought have been Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and the most prominent American theologian identified with neo-orthodoxy is Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary in New York. The latter has views which are more extreme than those of Barth and Brunner. Not all of the theological productions of the well known European exponents of neo-orthodoxy are available in English.

Sufficient writings from Barth and Brunner are in our possession to make it possible to understand their major line of emphasis. The American theologian Niebuhr has shown a much greater interest in the social Gospel than the two Swiss neo-orthodox scholars just mentioned. It should be pointed out that not all neo-orthodox people of our time follow Barth and Brunner or some of the other leaders in detail. But there are sufficient points in neo-orthodoxy which are held in common that we may deal with it as a distinct theological concept of our time.

A REFINED BRAND OF LIBERALISM

A study of neo-orthodoxy will reveal its great subtlety. Again and again we find its adherents utilizing widely many evangelical phrases and terminologies. But a careful evaluation of their writings makes it perfectly clear that they do not mean the same thing as evangelicals, even though at times they use almost identical expressions. A close examination of those of a neo-orthodox persuasion reveals that they have more in common with the liberals than they do with the evangelicals, that is, in their interpretation of the Bible.

Both Barth and Brunner regard the Bible not as revelation itself, but as a “witness” or “testimony” of revelation. Presumably such a revelation occurs continuously whenever a personal encounter with God is conditioned upon a proper human response. This concept of revelation is nebulous, and it contradicts the full doctrinal revelation of God. It substitutes for the evangelical concept of revelation some kind of evolutionary and higher critical approach to the Scriptures.

The neo-orthodox people maintain, of course, that *the Bible is a very important part of God’s revelation, but that it does not represent His final revelation to man.* And logically from their position, both Barth and Brunner *reject verbal or plenary inspiration.* As one endeavors to epitomize their view of the Bible, it appears that they mean the Scriptures contain enough of God’s truth to overpower man and cause him to yield and to desire to go God’s way. According to Barth and most of the exponents of neo-orthodoxy, the Word of God is not synonymous with the Bible. In fact, the Bible is merely some kind of instrumental authority which points us to the revelation of Christ. Actually the neo-orthodox leaders talk about authority without a standard, and that is an untenable position according to all true evangelicals.

A HYBRID CONCEPT OF OPPOSITES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Invariably you will find the neo-orthodox people say they accept God’s Word but not all of the Bible.

Clearly, they part company with our Lord in this regard, for He accepted the Scriptures in their entirety. Usually those who hold the neo-orthodox position say that the significance of Christ’s person was not His virgin birth, but that He bridged the gulf between sinful man and God. Barth, while emphasizing the cross of Christ, does not place any importance in the blood which was shed. Barth and his disciples also say that the bodily resurrection of our Lord is not important, but the significant thing is the resurrection. Evidently they believe in some kind of spiritual resurrection. It seems to me all such reasoning is nothing less than sheer nonsense.

On the other hand, we find Paul building the whole New Testament theology on the bedrock of truth, namely, the bodily resurrection of our Lord. And our Saviour Himself challenged Thomas to go all the way in securing the evidences that verified the Lord's resurrection. But the record seems to indicate that Thomas did not need to go so far as to actually touch our Lord's body, for he was quickly convinced of the Lord's resurrection, and exclaimed, "**My Lord and my God.**" Either Christ was truthful in all that He claimed to be, or He was a fraud.

We conclude this point with the assertion that neo-orthodoxy is neither New Testament theology nor Reformation theology. It is nothing more than paper theology, and indeed it cannot be classified as being Biblical. In fact, the best that can be said for it is that it represents some kind of pseudo-orthodoxy.

NEO-ORTHODOXY IS REFINED UNBELIEF

Emil Brunner rejects the doctrine of man's total depravity, and along with this he also rejects the historicity of Adam and the account of the fall of man as recorded in the Book of Genesis.

Reinhold Niebuhr has deviated even more than Brunner on the Biblical account of man's fall. He seeks to point out that the account of man falling into sin in the Garden is imaginary, but he goes on to say that it does properly depict the fact of sin. According to Niebuhr, the account of man plunging into sin in the Garden is much similar to the picture on Easter seals of crippled children. The seals are not real, but they do depict a terrible reality. One gets disgusted with such double-talk, or attempts at hair splitting in order to make a point. Why not call a spade by the name spade? The neo-orthodox people have detached themselves from the solid moorings of Biblical and evangelical theology.

CONVERSION OF SOCIETY IS EMPHASIZED

As one tries to evaluate the main line of emphasis among those of the neo-orthodox persuasion, it is obvious that one will find that they do not seek to promote individual conversion of men. *It is the conversion of society to which they are committed.*

Historically the modernistic elements in Christianity have followed an identical pattern ever since they emerged. Definitely this has been the historical emphasis of American liberalism from the 19th century to the present. Moreover, the whole present-day ecumenical movement also is geared to the same program, namely that of a transformation of society itself. Individual conversion is lost sight of by all who deviate from the clear blueprint as set forth in the New Testament, and the neo-orthodox group is no exception. Individual witnessing and soul winning, as well as house-to-house evangelism, seem too old-fashioned or obsolete as means of advancing God's program on earth. This is the reasoning of the neo-orthodox people.

THEY ARE UNFRIENDLY TO EVANGELICALS

Let us not soon forget that the leaders in neo-orthodoxy have not only hit back at the arrogant liberals, but they have struck even harder blows at fundamentalists or evangelicals.

They do not share at all the position held among the fundamentalists who believe Christians must defend the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints.

Unquestionably Reinhold Niebuhr is more liberal than Karl Barth in most respects. Not many months ago he severely censored certain Christian leaders because they were seeking to convert the Jews to Christianity. He went on to say, or at least imply, that the Jewish religion was as good as New Testament Christianity. This is nothing less than a repudiation of the message of Pentecost, and the declarations set forth by the leaders of the New Testament Church.

Neo-orthodoxy represents an unusual way of manipulating the Scriptures.

What mockery, what double-talk and hypocrisy when religious leaders insist on parading with evangelical phrases and terminologies and yet meaning something entirely different! This kind of poisoned theology is permeating many of the leading theological seminaries of our country. It is making inroads in some of the old citadels of evangelicalism in America. These promoters are wolves disguised in sheep's clothing.

The neo-orthodox wing of Churchianity constitutes the religious unbelievers of the latter days. Yet these men who champion the neo-orthodox position are succeeding in ascending to power in the higher theological circles. Personally, I have never known a man holding neo-orthodox views who has not also accepted evolution in some definite form. Invariably scriptural authority is diluted by them in favor of clever explanations, which are nothing less than a refined form of rationalism.

I predict that this trend will expand, and that new areas will be won to neo-orthodoxy; that is, many who are wavering at the present time regarding Biblical theology will more and more move over to this popular theological emphasis known as neo-orthodoxy.

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