

Church History

- Up through the 15th century, the Church had always approached the world with revelation as the primary authority, but it was aided by both tradition and reason. These two supports functioned as chaperones to our understanding of revelation. Things like creeds (tradition) formed boundaries that helped keep people from misinterpreting revelation. Reason was employed to test these things and seek understanding from Scripture. In the Reformation, the Reformers had heavily questioned tradition, since its function within the church had been corrupted. Though they absolutely did not reject tradition (and continued to value the creeds) they did devalue it since it had threatened to overwhelm revelation as the authority.

The Enlightenment was a revolution in the minds of humanity that spanned the 17th and 18th centuries. Its roots were found in the Humanism of the Renaissance. While the earlier movement sought to move away from the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages and rediscover and reemphasize Greek and Roman learning into Christian Europe, the latter movement, in part, sought to do away the foundations that had supported the Christian worldview. The Enlightenment questioned revelation as a legitimate source of knowledge and authority. All things were to now be subject to reason as the ultimate litmus test as to the veracity and acceptability of ideas.

With tradition weakened and getting weaker, now the very heart of the church was being assaulted by the armies of Enlightenment reason. In the minds of people, Scripture itself was rendered obsolete and suspect. This, then, was the root of liberal theology and thought it would take a few centuries, ultimately led to the demise of the main traditions that grew out of the Reformation, leaving the vestigial “mainline” denominations we see today.

Important terms:

Enlightenment: An intellectual movement that emphasized reason and individualism over tradition.

reason: the ability of the mind to form concepts, think, judge and understand things.

epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regards to methods, scope and validity.

Rationalist: a person who believes that reason, instead of experience is the foundation of knowledge.

Empiricist: The belief that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience.

- I. The Enlightenment upended the traditional order of understanding the world, replacing the way knowledge is acquired and what stands as an authority over people. Prior to the Enlightenment, revelation was considered authoritative but was supported by tradition and reason. Both of these secondary elements were subservient to the revelation and error was achieved when this order became unbalanced. The Enlightenment was a near-permanent replacement of this order of the world.
 - A. Though a strong foundation for the Enlightenment was found in Renaissance humanism, it really began with the work of the French philosopher Rene Descartes. He famously posited *cogito ergo sum*, which is Latin for “I think, therefore I am”. This statement was an assertion on how to gain knowledge with certainty, which, notably, lacks any connection to revelation. Ultimately, the

Enlightenment would be divided up between two camps, one supporting Descartes, the other arguing against him. Both rejected revelation as a source of knowledge.

1. The camp of Descartes are the Rationalists, who argue that simply by thinking, without any connection to experience, can one come to a true understanding of the world.
 2. The response to this came from the Empiricists, who argued that only through interacting with the world, by absorbing it through our senses, can we then bring reason to bear and understand the world.
- B. Both groups reject revelation as an accurate source of knowledge. Indeed, these twin tracks argued for the rejection of revelation as having authority. To Enlightenment thinkers, revelation was neither rational nor worthy of true experience and, thus, was to be discarded. Henceforth, all true knowledge was to come from the self and through self-focused investigation.
1. Immanuel Kant famously asserted *sapere aude*, Latin for “dare to know!”, which was an assertion to be brave and have your own understanding. This is a dangerous assertion that focuses truth on the subjective self, not on an external, objective source.
 - a. Kant would ultimately go further and claim that the spiritual world was ultimately unknowable. Even though he emphasized reason over experience, he ultimately set boundaries on reason and recognized that there were things that were unknowable. Ideas of God could be considered but were ultimately deemed unknowable.
 - b. This ultimately left the rationalists at an impasse, with uncertainty becoming prevalent. Still, Kant saw value in religion as an ethical system.
 2. The Enlightenment kicked the Scientific Revolution into high gear, accelerating the bounds of humanity’s understanding of Creation. However, with revelation removed from the mix, the essential truth of creation was rejected and nature itself became the end goal. Once again, the Creator was rejected in favor of the creation. Hollbach said that “Man is unhappy because he is ignorant of Nature”. Revelation, Scripture, theology and all else relating to God was demoted to mere superstition.

- II. While some in the church responded to these attacks on the foundations of the church with increased piety and devotion to the Scriptures, there were those within the church who responded in the opposite manner. Rather than devoting themselves to preaching the word, they sought to save the church by changing it. The father of this movement was the German theologian Freidrich Schleiermacher.

- A. Schleiermacher was born into a family that was deeply involved in the Pietist movement that was, in some ways, connected to the revival of the First Great Awakening. As a young man, he spent time studying with the Moravians, a protestant group that traced its roots all the way back to Jan Hus.
- B. However, Schleiermacher ultimately fell under the sway of the rationalist faction of the Enlightenment and was ultimately turned away from the Scriptures as a source of authority.
1. He ultimately found that reason made it difficult to accept the doctrines of things like the Trinity, the virgin birth of the Jesus, the Incarnation as the God-man and the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.
 2. As a result, Schleiermacher’s Christian worldview was gutted and left with a form but no content, since revelation had been so deeply undermined by rationalism. However, he lost none of his devotion to the form and remained a principle feature of his worldview.
- C. In the absence of content but the maintenance of form, Schleiermacher employed his rationalist understanding of the world to, in his mind, salvage Christianity in the face of the attacks upon it

made by the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, in so doing he turned “Christianity” on its head, warping it into something unrecognizable from the faith of the Reformers.

1. Schleiermacher followed those who had preceded him in the Enlightenment, employing tools from both the rationalist and empiricist camps. However, the former discipline formed the chief building block of his approach to the Church. This way of viewing things meshed neatly with the similar work being done by the romanticists.
 2. He defined true religion as the being the *feeling* totally dependent on God. Feeling indicate a mere emotion in this sense but rather the overwhelming consciousness that a person is, in some way, connected to God and is dependent on God.
- D. Consequently, Schleiermacher’s Christianity was focused on the emotional experience one had and believed that theology was less the study of Scripture and more the reflection on the way an individual experienced God. The end result was the Christianity, to Schleiermacher, became an utterly subjective endeavor and one could cast aside objective forms like Scripture, creeds and doctrine.
1. Religious experience replaced ancient teaching and ethical standards were completely undermined.
 2. Truth became the department of human consciousness, not the domain of Scripture and the truths the church had taught sense the Apostles.
- E. According to this view of Christianity, Schleiermacher taught that God did, in fact, exist but was not a separate being and power but was, rather, immanent in everything. In this way he foreshadowed and led the way for the transcendental movement that would gain strength through the 19th century. According to Schleiermacher, God was not separate from the world but was utterly a part of it. So diffuse was God that he did not consider God to be personal.
- F. Christianity, as taught by Schleiermacher, was the most exceptional religion because of Jesus Christ. Jesus was unique among humanity because of the great extent of his God-consciousness, which is to say that more than any other person in history, Christ had the *feeling* of dependency on God. It was to follow Christ’s model of feeling and dependence that Schleiermacher maintained the value of the Christian faith and did not follow other religions.
- G. In the end, the effect that Schleiermacher had was that he dispensed with Scripture as divinely inspired, dispensed with doctrines held by the church, eliminated the God-man and ultimately reduced the Christian faith to a feeling as experienced subjectively by individual people. Ultimately, he was reductive for he attempted to cast Christianity as a series of assertions that nearly anybody could accept in the world of the Enlightenment.

III. Following after Schleiermacher, there was a new school of liberal protestant theologians that built on the foundations he established. While there were many who continued its development, two of its avatars were Albrecht Ritschl and Adolph von Harnack.

- A. Adolph von Harnack, was not a theologian per se, but was rather a historian. However, his work in the history of the church was conducted from a position that was at home in Schleiermacher’s assessment of the Christianity.
1. He asserted that the history of the church had early on abandoned the faith of the early church. Its development was a movement away from the teachings of Jesus and towards the teachings about Jesus.

2. In Harnack's view, Christ had emphasized the fatherhood of God, universal brotherhood of humanity, and the commandments to love. In effect, he is largely limiting the scope of the Christian teaching to the ethical teachings of Christ, and dispensing with the theological assertions of the Scriptures.
 - B. Though Harnack codified these teachings and made them mainstream, they originated with Albrecht Ritschl, who had followed in Schleiermacher's footsteps. He continued in the vein of Schleiermacher's feeling, but expanded into somewhat more concrete areas of the mind, expanding on the role of ethics as the essence of Christian importance. In short, Ritschl claimed that authentic religion consisted of a series of value judgements about God and the subsequent moral and ethical implications they have.
 1. Ritschl thought that Schleiermacher's *feeling* was a little too subjective and he pulled back somewhat from that and asserted that the supreme value of Christianity was that it was practically lived out in a moral life and offered a path to that end.
 2. What offered the particular distinctive of Christianity was that it was based on historical events and offered practical ways for the organizing of humanity on the basis of love.
 3. In this way Ritschl departed from Schleiermacher, since he argued that the role of the community must not be lost in the midst of the personal feeling of God and the personal understanding of faith.
 4. This will ultimately have profound impact on later liberal theology, since it formed the foundation of Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel.
- Ultimately, the teachings of Schleiermacher, Harnack, Ritschl and others will be adopted by mainline Protestant denominations. This will eliminate Scripture as authoritative in these groups and allow all manner of error and sin to permeate. There true dedication is to experience, to self and to self-affirmation.
- IV. The Enlightenment's negative impacts on the Church were not limited to the abstract. The Enlightenment gave rise to critical scholarship as well, which was brought to bear on the Scriptures themselves and challenged their historical veracity. There were several approaches to this attack but one of the chief and most influential was the work of Julius Wellhausen, who is credited with developing the documentary hypothesis. However, there were those within Enlightenment intellectual circles who brought some of the tools of that era to bear in the defense of Scripture and the Church. In the end, they provided a sound basis for Christian's defense of the Bible as the authentic and authoritative Word of God.
- A. One of the first scholars who sought to take up this work was Constantin von Tischendorf, a German scholar and adventurer. He traveled widely throughout Europe and the Levant, questing after ancient manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. It was his desire to get as close to the original text as possible. The result of his efforts was the discovery and acquisition of what is now known as Codex Sinaiticus. This is the earliest, complete copy of the New Testament we have today. It can be dated no earlier than AD 325.
 - B. While Tischendorf made critical discoveries of actual texts, the hard, intricate work of the discipline known as textual criticism was undertaken by the British scholars Wescott and Hort.

1. Textual criticism is the gathering of documents, in this case manuscripts containing the Greek New Testament, evaluating their extrinsic and intrinsic qualities, and ultimately reconciling them so as to return as closely as possible to the original text.
2. Westcott and Hort were the 19th century progenitors of the practice and their influence looms large over modern translations of the Bible. They produced a critical edition of the Greek New Testament that still, to this day, forms the basis of modern translations of the Bible. Through their work, the Scriptures remain accurate. The Church still affirms Scriptures authority.