

ARPTalk (7)—Attachments

[1]

EDITOR'S NOTE: The views expressed by Dr. Bell in this paper do not reflect the views of *ARPTalk*. The paper is nothing more than a cherry-picking of Dr. Leith's writings in an attempt to prove a point that cannot be proved. Dr. Bell must be the only academic in the world that reads John H. Leith's writings and fails to see his debt to Neo-Orthodoxy. The author knew Leith. Leith acknowledged that he was in the tradition of Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy. Scholarship is not a word that comes quickly to mind for this paper. Nevertheless, here is a copy of an *incredible* paper and the reader can judge for himself/herself.

John H. Leith vs. Neo-Orthodoxy

A Brief Sample of Leith's Writings with Regard to the Covenant (Jacksonville) ARPC Memorial

The memorial from the Session of the Covenant ARP Church, Jacksonville, NC alleges that John H. Leith “affirmed, believed, wrote, and taught Neo-Orthodoxy as an acceptable position” Among the “false teachings” Leith is purported to have supported are: 1) a low view of the authority of Scripture, 2) universalism (“all men are saved”), and 3) a low view of conversion—particularly redemption and predestination. The Session provided no supporting evidence of its claims. The following statements from Leith's writings are offered as evidence to demonstrate clearly that Leith did not hold to such false teachings, and neither does Erskine Theological Seminary uphold such false teachings.

March 8, 2008

From John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), Chapter 20 – THE BIBLE, 270-272:

The Holy Scriptures are both a means of grace and the norm of the church's life.¹ The Bible is the church's memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, of those events that are the foundation of the Christian life in history. It is the church's witness to the gospel and the content of its preaching. In the church the Bible is read devotionally as a means of God's grace. In theological reflection, it is the warrant for Christian doctrine.

The Word of God Written

The Bible is the original witness to and interpretation of God's revelation and work “for us men and for our salvation” in Jesus Christ. In this sense the Bible is the

church's memory reduced to writing by the prophets and the apostles who were the original witnesses of and believers in God's revelation and work that constituted his people. More specifically, the Bible is the forward- and backward-looking testimony to Jesus Christ and as such sets the boundaries and is the unique authorization for Christian theology and life.

The Bible, however, is more than the original and authentic witness to God's revelation. It is, as the Westminster Confession of Faith declares, "the written word of God." This confession was adopted by the Westminster Assembly in 1646. The first paragraph was done with such care and precision that it can be affirmed today.

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased (1.1).

[Note: According to Dr. Randy Ruble, he once asked Leith about his view of Scripture; Leith responded that he knew of no better description of Scripture than that contained in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith.]

The authority of scripture is that it is the word of God written, or, as John Calvin and the Westminster Confession declare, "God is its author."

[The scriptures] attain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.... It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial.³

The Authority of Scripture

The authority of scripture is that it is the word of God written, or, as John Calvin and the Westminster Confession declare, "God is its author."

[The scriptures] attain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.... It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial.³

The Testimony of the Holy Spirit

The authority of scripture cannot be guaranteed by the church. The scriptures, under the power of the Holy Spirit, are self-authenticating. As Calvin put it, “Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”⁴ The credibility of doctrine “is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author. Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.”⁵ No human authority can guarantee the authority of scripture.

We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reason, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.... Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.⁶

Having asserted that the holy scriptures are self-authenticating as to their authority and that this self-authentication comes from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, Calvin turns to arguments to bolster the assertion that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God. These arguments are inconclusive, but they point to the truth that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not in contradiction to human judgment. In other words, the Holy Spirit does not testify that something is true when we know that it is not true. The testimony of the Holy Spirit does not contradict human reason or require believers to sacrifice the integrity of the human mind. The conviction that the Bible is the word of God is reasonable and is validated in the lives of intelligent people as they read scripture.

Believers have become convinced that the scriptures are the word of God not so much by taking a course in the New Testament or the Old Testament but by reading the scriptures in the context of the worshipping, believing community. No scholar and no scientific study of the New Testament can ever convince anyone that it is the word of God. Yet highly intelligent critical persons reading it with affection in the context of the church's worship and faith become convinced that it is God's word written and the means of God's revelation to us today.

From Parker T. Williamson, “John Leith: A Theologian in Service of the Church,”
The Presbyterian Layman, May-June 1998:

“We have too many ministers who were educated in seminaries where a social agenda takes priority over the exposition of Scripture and teaching of Christian tradition. Our seminaries are not producing ministers with deep knowledge of the Bible and the historic Christian faith of the councils and creeds. These ministers do not declare with passion the fact that in Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh. They do not say that in Jesus Christ, God wrought our salvation and that in raising him from the dead he gave us the certain hope of eternal life.”

“The church rests its faith on the witness of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared as the crucified and risen Lord. Using the language of ordinary human experience, they testified that they saw him, heard him speak to them, commissioning them to go into all the world preaching, teaching, and baptizing. They testified to this not only with their words, but with their lives, and they bequeathed to us four monuments to the resurrection: the church, the Lord’s day, the last supper, and the New Testament. The church did not invent the resurrection. Faith did not call forth the resurrection. Every page of the New Testament declares that the resurrection established the church and called forth faith.”

“One of the saddest recent developments in our denomination is the report, *Building Community Among Strangers*, in which Jesus Christ is, at best, one of the mediators of God’s presence. This is a heresy to which the church refused to accede, even at the price of life itself, in the first three centuries of its existence. All of the power of Rome could not force the early church to accept what some of our church leaders are teaching today.”

From *The Layman Online*, “Letter to the churches from an old warrior,” April 26, 2001.

<http://www.layman.org/layman/news/news-from-pcusa/leith-letter-to-churches.htm>:

In his 15-page essay – 16 1/2 if you count endnotes – Leith tells why he believes the Presbyterian Church (USA) has dwindled from 4.2 million members in 1965 to 2.6 million in 1999 and what to do about it.

He attributes the decline to cultural factors, ranging from the industrial revolution to secularism, from the evils of the 20th century to the Church's failure to give a Scriptural framework for existence.

He has nine suggestions, which he attributes to his experiences during 14 years as a pastor and 31 years as a seminary professor: [4 of the 9 are cited here]

1. Recovery of the congregation as the worshipping, believing and giving community of faith. “The church comes into being when human beings hear the Word of God and obey it in faith and love.”
2. Recovering the language of the faith – including memorization work for young people. “The church is challenged to teach the scripture so that we learn not only the basic affirmations of our faith, but also the language by which we express those affirmations to others.”
4. In response to the notion that humans are basically good, the church needs to recover an “Augustinian understanding” of how deeply sin is “entrenched in the individual and society.”
6. Recovering critical judgment to respond to a number of issues, including the feminization of the church, the increase in divorce, the increase in size and power of bureaucratic institutions and the increasing bias against traditional Christianity.

From Letters to the Editor, *The Presbyterian Layman*, July-August 1998.

<http://www.layman.org/layman/the-layman/1998/july-august-98/letters-to-editor-leith.htm>:

It is difficult for me to understand how one can affirm that Jesus Christ is the authority for us without also affirming that he is the authority for all people, or to put it more theologically, that he is the Word of God made flesh.

From *The Layman Online*, “John H. Leith, theological lion at Union Seminary, dies,” August 13, 2002. <http://www.layman.org/>:

Simplicity – even in expressing profound theological concepts – marked his style. Professor Charles E. Raynal of Columbia Seminary says in his preface to a collection of Leith's writings and sermons, “In his writings, John Leith avoided the jargon, neologisms, and rhetoric flourish of many theologians.” On occasion, he rejected their theology as well when it was not grounded in the Biblical and Reformed understanding of the Christian faith.

In *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (1997), Leith defined the core problem in Presbyterian seminaries as “the loss of a passionate commitment to the Christian faith.” He publicly sparred with one of his colleagues at Union – Douglas Otatti, a theology professor who says Christians are not required to believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. While advocating racial justice and women's rights, Leith delivered withering attacks against pseudo, liberation theologies that were spawned by these movements. He called them “counterfeit gospels.”

From John H. Leith, “Reformed Theology and the Style of Evangelism,” *Union Theological Seminary*, n.d.:

The responsibility to bear witness to the gracious presence of God in Jesus Christ “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” has been the perennial task of the Christian community from the beginning. But the style and form of evangelism has varied according to time and place. There is no one way of evangelism as the history of Christians witnessing and confessing their faith makes very clear. The life of the Christian community has been and is enriched by a variety of evangelistic styles and by multiple theological confessions.

There is, however, a limit to possible Christian theologies, and the pre-eminent theological task of the Church is to test its proclamation by the Word of God in Jesus Christ, as attested in Scripture, to see that it is within the boundary. There is also a limit to the legitimate styles of evangelism. Some styles of evangelism corrupt and others strengthen the witness, but more significantly, style always betrays the real content. . . .

Karl Barth, the great Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, comments that in the theology of Tholuch, a German revival theologian of the nineteenth century, “the religious individual cannot be more important, all the rest cannot be more shapeless, biography cannot replace theology more emphatically, the Christian cause cannot be more thoroughly taken up into the person of the Christian man.”² For this reason, Barth goes on to say, revival theology can never be great theology. It is too absorbed with the state of the human soul and too little with the great reality of God. It is too eager to report the anatomy of feeling, or the state of the soul, to be able to proclaim adequately the mighty act of God. . . .

Calvinism also has been characterized by a passionate conviction that the *purposes of God* are being worked out in history. Predestination, writes Eustace Percy in his biography of John Knox, refers not so much to the ultimate destinies of heaven and hell but to human life in history.⁴ The elect person has been called to fulfill the purposes of God in time and space. For this reason the Calvinists became the great converters of culture and transformers of civilization. Christopher Dawson, the Roman Catholic historian of culture, declares that no Christian community has ever exceeded the Calvinists in their understanding of the cultural and historical role of the Christian.⁵ Wherever they went they carried with them the vision of holy community, and they sought to transform society into the Christian community. . . .

It is true enough that Reformed theology has always been concerned with personal piety, with evangelism as the salvation of the individual soul, and with eternal life as the fulfillment of human existence. But Reformed theology can never be satisfied with the definition of the Christian life simply in these terms. . . .

Closely related to this emphasis on integrity and simplicity is Calvin's rejection of magic in religion. Magic is on the one hand man's effort to master and control God by fastening the infinite and indeterminate to the finite and determinate. If God, who is creator of heaven and earth, can in some way be tied to what man can control in sacrament, or liturgy, or evangelistic procedure, then God himself can be controlled and manipulated. The control of God was the province of the ancient medicine man with his strange ways. This was also the temptation of medieval catholicism in development of the sacramental system. And it is the peril of some contemporary forms of evangelism, as the movie *Marjoe* illustrates.

The human counterpoint of magic as the attempt to manipulate and control God is magic as the endeavor to manipulate human beings and to bypass conscious, responsible decision. Modern psychology has made us aware of the significance of nonverbal communication and of the influence of many forces on personal life that are outside the range of personal awareness. Yet before the days of modern psychology, Luther and Calvin insisted that faith—a responsible, personal decision—was essential to participation in the sacraments. Today the possibility of by-passing conscious personal decision through personal charisma, oratory, or sacraments has been greatly enhanced by the skills of modern psychology and the techniques of

modern communication, including the mass media. The old Protestant slogan, no sacrament without faith, must be enlarged to include no evangelism without responsible, conscious, personal decision. . . .

Evangelism in the Reformed tradition must be concerned with sanctification and must never forget that the Gospel includes the law. The call of the evangelist is not simply to an ultimate destiny but to a way of life here and now in time and space.

Evangelism in Reformed theology is always an activity of the church, though not necessarily of the church bureaucracy. It is never the work of a lone-star ranger snatching solitary individuals from the pit and turning them to heaven. Evangelism on the horizontal level is the work of people who are the church, inviting other people to share in the common life of the body of Christ.

(a) Evangelism is incorporation into the community where the word of God is preached and heard and where the sacraments are offered and received. The simplest definition of the church is the community which hears the Word of God in faith and obeys in love, for the sacraments are the gospel acted out. There are many different kinds of communities, but the church differs from other communities in that in it the members share in a common life that is rooted in the word of God. . . .

The dilemma of the evangelists is that they cannot guarantee the church, for the church, like salvation itself, is always the gracious gift of God. As Calvin put it, the church is the elect. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Christian people, but it first of all is the work of God's free and sovereign Spirit. . . .

(e) Evangelism is incorporation into a community of worship. The one indispensable factor in the life of the Church is the Word of God, and the high and central event in the life of the church is worship when the community gathers to hear the Word of God and to receive the sacraments, to adore, and to give thanks. Worship is the personal center of the community of theological discourse, of moral discourse, of mutual assistance and support. In worship, common life in a shared community is expressed in common prayer, hymns, and faith commitments. . . .

The renewal of the church, humanly speaking, and by the same token the renewal of evangelism, depends upon the theological competence and dedication of its ministers more than it does upon any other single factor. There is no possibility of any evangelism congruent with classical Reformed theology that is not supported by and informed by a theologically competent minister and a theologically literate congregation. For this reason a great deal of the energy expended in seeking some new theology of evangelism or some modern technique of evangelism could more profitably have been used in basic Biblical and theological study. The same point must be made concerning studies of church management and the dynamics of groups. The church welcomes and uses all knowledge and techniques that are effective and agreeable to its convictions about God and man. But no mastery of group dynamics

and process will ever make an evangelist out of a person who has not mastered the Biblical material and who cannot or does not read serious theology. . . .

Evangelism is the church's witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. No one has ever become a Christian apart from a witness who tells the story of God's love for that person in creation and redemption. Evangelism is the witness and the context in which a person comes to a knowledge of God in Jesus Christ—a knowledge which saves and transforms life. This knowledge of God's presence in Jesus Christ may come through years of gradual maturation in the church. It may come in the dramatic crisis which radically shifts the whole orientation of life. The work of evangelism is done when a person comes to confess that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord.

God alone is the Savior. Neither the Christian community nor the witness saves except in an instrumental sense. No Christian tradition has emphasized this more than the Reformed. Yet this does not mean that human works are unimportant. Evangelism is the human works which have their warrant in the New Testament that provide the ordinary occasion for human salvation. Changes in our society make it critically important that the people who are the church must be very busy in the works of evangelism and Christian witness. For on the human level, the whole existence of the church is increasingly at risk in our society. Evangelism is telling a story. The stories which have shaped American life are now being challenged. On the secular level, there are the chants on university campuses that western civilization has got to go. The underlying assumption is that all cultures are equally good. In ecclesiastical and theological circles, pluralism is a new orthodoxy. The underlying assumption is not only that all forms of Christian faith are equally good, but that all religious stories have equal validity. This is the triumph of the Enlightenment notion that many roads lead to God.

Evangelism grows out of the conviction that in the providence of God, Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, that on the cross He bore the sins of all people and that God raised Him to be the Lord not, simply of the Christian community but of all human history. Evangelism is not just a church program or a technique but the passionate conviction that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh for our salvation.

The church in recent years has had difficulty in saying that faith in Jesus Christ is crucially significant, not only for life on this planet but for human destiny. On the level of the church as the people of God, that is the congregation, the issue is much clearer. Apart from the passionate conviction that the story of the Bible culminating in Jesus Christ is my story and that God, in Christ, is my Savior, there is no convincing reason why a person should worship God in Christian churches or be the church at all. Evangelism finally will become alive not through Assembly actions or bureaucratic pronouncements but through the recovery of a passionate conviction. . . .

It must be said again, as the conclusion for this paper, that evangelism is the work of the Spirit of God who speaks when and where he chooses and whose work can be neither programmed nor guaranteed. There is, however, the promise of God; and if

we in the church do certain things, then it is more likely that the Church, which is the gift of God's grace, shall grow in our midst.

Regarding the term “Neo-Orthodoxy” itself, one popular source notes:

Neo-Orthodoxy can also refer to a form of Orthodox Judaism following the philosophy of "Torah im Derech Eretz", and can additionally refer to the ideas of late 20th century Eastern Orthodox theology, e.g. by Christos Yannaras' 'It is widely known that brief moments of Karl Barth's early work may be understood under the title, 'Neo-Orthodox', but as Barth's thought matured he moved far from those in this camp, indeed to the point that his mature thought bears no resemblance whatsoever to 'Neo-Orthodoxy'.

Neo-orthodoxy is very distinct from both liberal Protestantism and evangelicalism, though its language has much in common with the former, and in partial doctrinal assent with the latter. Neo-orthodoxy draws off various denominational expressions in an attempt to rehabilitate Christian dogmas largely outside the restraints of Enlightenment thought. The broadness of the term "neo-orthodox", however, has led to its abandonment as a useful classification, especially after new emphases in Protestant theology appeared during the 1960s.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-orthodox>

See also: H. Martin Rumscheidt, “Neo-Orthodoxy” in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, Donald McKim, ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 154-56.

Presbytery should note that all full-time faculty at Erskine Theological Seminary must, and do, subscribe *ex animo* to the ARP General Synod's “Definition of an Evangelical Christian,” and to the mission statement of Erskine Theological Seminary, as defined by the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees examines and approves all full-time faculty members prior to appointment to the Seminary.

Prepared for First Presbytery by Robert W. Bell, Dean – Erskine Theological Seminary
& Member of First Presbytery