

## UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND OF TODAY AND ITS REMEDY

The background in which we live is called a post-modern one. We have to try to get at the underlying nature of the thought-climate of today. Let us look at a number of aspects of it. One is humanism, the idea that human reason is paramount. Another is subjectivism, the idea that the feelings of the individual are paramount. The results of post-modernism appear in toleration of all doctrines, opinions, and life-styles, and, because all knowledge is relative, a pervading scepticism or cynicism, in which people turn instead, positively, to tangible things like entertainment, accumulating wealth, and instant gratification, or, negatively, to self-destruction, risk-taking, alcoholism, and drug-taking. It is not enough to deal with single aspects of post-modern thinking, but strike at its roots.

Humanism treats this world as people see it, without God or His revelation. It is secular. To meet this we have to assert that reason is not an enemy of faith, but inferior to faith. Reason can serve faith, but it is not a master over God's revelation. Like the Law of God, it can demonstrate the wretched condition of human beings, their sin, death, and need for salvation. Reason does not make us wise or save us. Faith is above and beyond reason, because the Holy Spirit witnesses in the hearts of believers through words that are taught by the Spirit of God. God has dealt with the human problem through particular events, which seem trivial. We have to be clear about both the content and the form of the Word of God.

For the content of the Christian faith we see the Son of God Himself taking on the human nature itself that God wanted to rescue as a seemingly insignificant man in a backwater of a small country; and we see human beings trumping up a charge of blasphemy against Jesus and having him executed, because they wanted to preserve their own positions in the nation of Judea. Yet in His crucifixion we see God grasping His opponents' weapons and using them against them in order to save them. This is the offence of the cross. The incarnation of God the Son and His cross are the central and gracious acts of God in human history. Unlike these, the ideas coming from human reason and philosophy are just unsure theories.

Secondly, to meet humanism we also have to assert that matters of the faith are not ideas that flow from reason, but anchored in history. Not only the Son, but the Holy Spirit condescends to speak to human beings in human language. The Holy Spirit lowered Himself when He became a historian of smallest, and apparently insignificant events on earth, in order to reveal the decisions, mysteries, and ways of God to human beings in human language, and about human affairs. Through the apparently trivial record of the history of Israel, the inspired Word of God opens people's ears, so that in faith they heard God speaking to them. We need to learn 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16 off by heart and apply the difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. God is known through Jesus, that insignificant man in human history, and through the Spirit who condescended to use human words about human history, or God is not known at all. We must not shrink from the word of God.

One of the chief pervasive forms of humanism today is the theory of evolution. Because people accept it, they despise the Bible. The remedy is not retreating into a shallow rationalism, or assuming that reason and science have nothing to do with the faith. We have to call evolution what it is, superstition, which has no solid evidence to support it. It is natural man's attempt to shake off responsibility for ignoring God as the Creator, and responsibility for his own sin. It is an unexamined faith, not fact, not science, but resting on unproven premises.

When people read their Bibles subjectively they, not the actual words, decide what the meaning is. We have to say that experience is not the ground for certainty before God. An experience of joy and peace is an outflow from faith, not foundations for it. This subjectivism lies at the base of liberal approach to Scripture, which says that because miracles and prophecy don't happen now, they didn't happen in Bible times, either.

This subjectivism is also apparent in charismatic circles, where drumming up of emotion is so important. There faith is not seen as knowledge and trust, humble reception of Christ's atonement, but as power that produces results. We have to insist that we trust in Scripture and Jesus' redemption even when our feelings are low. The source of all Christian knowledge is faith in God's historical word, not self-found knowledge or feeling, or grand experiences. We may never experience a miracle this side of the resurrection, but we cling to what looks like foolishness to human reason, the cross of the Lord of glory. A proper view of reason should mean that we do not turn our backs on human history, but learn from the lessons of the past. As Pietism or Puritanism resulted from a movement that opposed true Christianity and at last found its way into the church, something similar is evident in the charismatic movement. They emphasise the fruits of faith rather than the object of faith. They concentrate on what faith does, rather than on what faith receives. They so strongly emphasise the need for lives to be perfect that they undermine the fact that a believer is justified and a sinner at

the same time, and the Law takes the place of the Gospel. Saying that a holy life is absolutely necessary then affects the Gospel and the sacraments as the means of salvation, the ministry, and the Gospel itself.

Though, when we say this, we seem to them to be defending ungodly living, we must insist that there is a difference between not caring about sin and defending Christian freedom when something is neither commanded nor forbidden. We shall refuse to say that, because a person drinks a bottle of beer, he is not born-again. Legalism about trivial things can lead to the ignoring of more important things. The query whether a person has really been born again, genuine as that concern may be, replaces the objective view of the Christian faith with a subjective one. We insist that being judgmental is not evidence of right evangelical faith, but legalistic religion.

Toleration of every religion, doctrine, and life-style has to be seen, as it really is, propaganda for being indifferent. Proper tolerance ought to be based on firm conviction, not abandoning conviction. We have to say that the person who believes everything believes nothing! People who are indifferent to right doctrine and religious truth are just being children of their time, this post-modern age. This loss of doctrinal substance is not the recipe for the church to go forward, for indifference attacks people's hearts. That is why the doctrinal compromise in the Ecumenical movement leads directly to loss of faith and decline of genuine Christianity. The result will not be victory for true Christianity, but that people of the world are entrenched in their secularism, and will become more indifferent to the church.

Cynicism and scepticism have their roots in doubts about Scripture, and we may blame a subjective starting point, partly, on Descartes and Kant, but ultimately on the devil himself. They have to be countered by the content of Scripture: Christ as the centre of the Old Testament, the clear message about Christ's cross and triumphant resurrection, and the hope that the Saviour has brought. Disillusionment about politics should simply remind us that a new heaven and new earth, where righteousness will dwell, eternally, will replace the world and its present structures.

Because the remedy for all the destructiveness in post-modern thinking is the conviction that God moves our wills through knowledge of His Word, we shall insist that God deals with us through His word. His divine word has come to us in human words as communication. Here human language has become the language of heaven. Here God has expressed the highest truths through the lowest of means. There is no naked or direct truth; it comes enclosed in words, ultimately in the Word who became flesh. The Spirit has also come in letters, in human words, not of human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit. What is genuinely spiritual is not far-removed from this earth, but like Jesus, in flesh, and in the case of the Holy Spirit, in the inspired human words of the Scriptures. The only gateway to the invisible things of God is what is visible. There is real danger in hankering for more than the Word and the sacraments. We must refute those who refuse to content themselves with "This is My body" and the mysteries of God revealed in human words, because they think that there is another and better way to what is unseen. That means that, for ourselves and our children, we ought to restore reading of the Bible and other home devotions around the table wherever the practice has been discontinued. It is a perennial tendency of the natural human mind to shrink from the Word of God. It is not merely a manifestation of post-modern thinking. We ought to be concerned where people neglect hearing the preaching of the Gospel and reception of the Lord's Supper, and not only be concerned, but warn them. If we don't, who will?