

“A House on the Sand”:
American Theological Liberalism
From the 18th – 21st Century

Part III – 1900 – 1960’s

Introduction:

We pick up the story of American theological liberalism this morning with a look at five men who were absolute titans in the development of theological liberalism. Rauschenbusch, Mathews, Fosdick, Niebuhr, and Tillich. These five names are colossal and taken together, they exerted a massive influence on the direction of the academy and the church in the 20th century. An entire seminar could easily be done on any one of these men in their own right. So the look we will get this first hour will necessarily be brief and introductory. As I reflect on the import and impact of these individuals, I can’t help but think of a line from one of my favorite films: *The Princess Bride*. After the Dread Pirate Roberts (Westley) separates Inigo Montoya from his sword in a duel, Inigo begs his opponent to “Kill me quickly”. Remember that? The Dread Pirate’s response to Inigo is beautiful, he says: “I would sooner destroy a stained glass window as an artist like yourself. However, since I can’t have you following me either...[and he clubs over the head with the butt of sword, knocking him out].”¹ As we launch once more today out over the face of the deep of American liberal theology, you need to know something about my approach. I respect these men. In many, many ways I have come to admire them. I find their passion and their stories moving, and not a little awe-inspiring. By and large, I believe their theologies to be absolutely dangerous and wretched. Let’s be clear. But my *attitude* toward *them* is a lot like Westley’s toward Inigo. I would sooner destroy a stained glass window as a theologian the stature

¹ <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i-would-sooner-destroy-a-stained-glass-window-as/349038.html> . Accessed 11-07-13 @ 8:33am.

of any of these men. However, since I can't have my family, my church, or my community following them, I do want to deliver a knockout blow of sorts with this seminar. When Karl Barth was lecturing theology students on the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (with whom he profoundly disagreed), he told his listeners by way of caution: "He who has never loved here... may not hate here either."² I agree. So as I move toward the speck in the eye of mainline thinkers, I am increasingly aware of the fact that they are *people* made in God's image that I am called to love. Men with wives and kids, and dads and neighborhoods. I would sooner destroy a stained glass window as an artist like these men.³ However, since I can't have you following them either... Let's begin with Walter Rauschenbusch.

1. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918)

Walter Rauschenbusch was born in Rochester, New York in 1861 and he died Rochester, New York in 1918. He was only 56 years old. Rauschenbusch was the central shaper and figure of what became known as the Social Gospel Movement. The Social Gospel is a phrase that's typically spoken with a roll of the eyes from your average evangelical, but at least in theory, it need cause no such reaction.⁴ The Social Gospel Movement was an attempt to take seriously the practical implications of the biblical message of

² *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*. Richard Burnett, editor. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2013. p.199.

³ Another way to say this is the way Dr. Carl Trueman commended a recent volume written by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield entitled: *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into the Christian Faith*. Crown & Covenant Publishers: Pittsburgh, PA. 2012. Trueman writes: "I cannot recommend this book highly enough. *I do not agree with everything she says; but I did learn from everything she wrote*. It deserves the widest possible readership. (emphasis mine)"

⁴ Part of the proof of this lies in the resurgence of interest on the part of evangelicals in recent years in the areas of compassion and mercy ministry. Historically, conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists have struggled with the social entailments of the gospel message. This was made nowhere more plain than in Carl F.H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. (1947) 2003.

the kingdom. The corporate, ethical dimensions of the gospel as applied to issues such as poverty, ethnic inequality, crime, and education. These issues moved Walter Rauschenbusch very deeply. He literally wrote the book on the subject called: *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. A book that appeared in 1917, one year before his death. At end of the day, the death-knell of this movement wasn't their passion for *social justice*, it was that they came to disdain *soul-willing*. They confused the *entailments* of the gospel (compassion, mercy, justice) with the *gospel message itself*: the glorious announcement concerning the life, substitutionary death, burial, and bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The social gospellers were nobly committed to Jesus' heart for alleviating *earthly suffering*, it's just that they completely lost their grip on his warnings related to *eternal suffering*.

Rauschenbusch was born to conservative Lutheran parents. His father, August Rauschenbusch, was described as a "headstrong, highly irritable, religiously zealous [man]...[and] prone to self-pitying meanness. His nervous bullying made him a bad husband and, at best, a difficult father...[His] biographer [who had personal ties to the family] claimed that August was also a drunk."⁵ That was Rauschenbusch's father. Let's be careful throwing stones at this stained glass window. I don't what it's like to grow up with a father like his. My earthly father *loves* me. You know how I know? Cause *tells* me. My father is *proud* of me. You how I know? He *tells* me. And makes *really big difference* in my life. He's hundreds of miles away. I'm 36 years old and I still straighten up when he says he's proud of me! It matters. Walter Rauschenbusch simply knew his father as a man who was impossible to satisfy. Though I do not know, I have to imagine that it is no stretch to believe that the boy Walter Rauschenbusch never heard the words from his earthly father that Jesus heard from his heavenly Father in Luke 3:22 – "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

⁵ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2003. pp.74-75.

Though Rauschenbusch didn't experience fatherly encouragement from his dad, he did receive much of it at the hands of his teachers at Rochester Seminary. Under the influence of such men during his years at Rochester, Rauschenbusch's doctrinal deterioration was swift. He embraced Darwinian evolution, rejected the infallibility of the Bible and he also dispensed with the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross. Eventually, he'd give up the transcendence of God, the authority of Scripture, and even the deity of Christ. He confessed early on during his theological formation:

"I am just beginning to believe in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, not exactly in the shape in which the average person proclaims it as the infallible truth of the Most High, but in a shape which suits my needs, that I have gradually constructed for myself..."⁶

Both his father and his mother felt great grief at his emerging liberalism. But he reassured them with statements like: "I believe in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ with all my heart. What this gospel is, everyone has to decide for himself, in the face of his God."⁷ Incongruously, he was drawn to the preaching ministry of D.L. Moody and was a frequent attendee at his conferences and revival meetings. In fact, Rauschenbusch actually linked up with Ira Sankey (Moody's song leader) and together they produced a German edition of Sankey's *Gospel Hymns No. 5*. Rauschenbusch translated over 100 of the hymns including "I Need Thee Every Hour" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus".

The one constant in Moody's central message (*personal* salvation) was conspicuously absent in Rauschenbusch's concept of *social* salvation. He felt that concern over individual salvation was a "one-sided half-gospel".⁸ Conservatives frequently took issue with his burgeoning liberalism and its influence on the American public. William Bell Riley (founder of Northwestern Bible College here in the cities) was especially critical. Rauschenbusch replied to one of Riley's criticisms: "When you

⁶ Rauschenbusch quoted in Dorrien, p.79.

⁷ Ibid, p.79.

⁸ Rauschenbusch quoted in Dorrien, p.84.

charge me with ‘denying the Lord that bought me’ you hurt me just as if you charged me with being false to my wife or cruel to my children.”⁹ Rauschenbusch died of colon cancer on July 25, 1918. Though he was the chief architect of the Social Gospel Movement, Rauschenbusch was far from its only advocate. One of the academic heavyweights of the movement was the University of Chicago’s Shailer Mathews.

2. Shailer Mathews (1863-1941)

Shailer Mathews was born into a Baptist home in Portland, Maine in 1863. In time he became the premier scholar of the University of Chicago, a school literally bought and set in motion by the money of John D. Rockefeller and dedicated to propagating cutting edge liberal theology. Mathews was raised in an evangelical context. A graduate of Colby College he then transitioned to study in Berlin at the age of 27 in the year 1890. Mathews found the cultural openness and academic freedom in which he was immersed in Germany to be life-giving and possibility-creating. He was drawn almost instinctively to liberalism. When he finally returned home to New England, he felt the context in which he was nurtured as a young man to be provincial and constricted by comparison. So upon the completion of his studies in Germany, he accepted the invitation to join the faculty at the University of Chicago. By the 1920’s, Shailer Mathews became one of the greatest targets of conservative criticism while at the same time mounting an impressive attack of his own.

His most capable opponent was Princeton Theological Seminary’s J. Gresham Machen. In 1923, Machen fired a shot across the bow with his book *Christianity and Liberalism*. The title says it all – his whole thesis is there in those three words: *Christianity* and *Liberalism* (as in – these are two different things). Machen boldly stated:

⁹ Ibid, p.124. Using the categories and language of 2 Peter 2:1-3, Bell was informally charging Rauschenbusch with heresy. I’m afraid, unlike with the case of Charles Briggs, the charge suits Rauschenbusch.

“...naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all...Christianity is based...upon an account of something that happened, and the Christian...is primarily a witness...The important thing is that he tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. If we are to be Christians, then, it does make a vast difference what our teachings are, and it is by no means aside from the point to set forth the teachings of Christianity in contrast with the chief rival of Christianity. The chief modern rival of Christianity is ‘liberalism.’...Christianity is founded upon the Bible...Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men.”¹⁰

And if we think that Machen made this critique like an ostrich with his head in the sand of conservative reformed evangelicalism we would be mistaken. Like Shailer Mathews and many other American theologians, Machen also studied in Germany. And his experience at Marburg under the teaching of Wilhelm Herrmann was as electric as anything Mathews experienced – if not more so. Listen to Machen (who did grow up within conservative southern reformed Presbyterianism) listen to him describe his encounter with Herrmann (who rejected almost everything essential to the Christian gospel). This is a combination of statements he made about Herrmann in private letters written to his mother and father and brother back home in America. Machen writes in 1905:

“...the first time that I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered – overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion. Herrmann may be illogical and one-sided, but I tell you he is alive...I can’t criticize him, as my chief feeling with reference to him is already one of the deepest reverence...He speaks right to the heart; and I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says – so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years...certain I am that he has found Christ; and I believe that he can show how others may find him – though, perhaps afterwards, in details, he may not be a safe guide. In fact, I am rather sorry I have said even so much in a letter; for I don’t know at all yet what to think...Herrmann, in his religious earnestness and moral power, has been a revelation to me...Herrmann affirms very little of that which I have been accustomed to regard as essential to Christianity; yet there is no doubt in my

¹⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. New Edition. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. (1923) 2009. pp.43, 45, 67.

mind but that he is a Christian, and a Christian of a peculiarly earnest type...It is inspiring to see a man so completely centered in Christ...In New England those who do not believe in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus are, generally speaking, religiously dead; in Germany, Herrmann has taught me that that is by no means the case...Perhaps Herrmann does not give the whole truth – I certainly hope he does not – at any rate he had gotten hold of something that has been sadly neglected in the church and in the orthodox theology.”¹¹

I cite those letters of Machen just to demonstrate where his critique came from. It came from a man who knew what he was setting out to correct. 20 years later he wrote *Christianity and Liberalism*.

Well, Machen was not the only scholar who knew how to defend his position in forceful terms. We need need to hear the way Mathews did it, too. Shailer Mathews said:

“The world needs new control of nature and society and is told that the Bible is *verbally inerrant*. It needs a means of controlling class strife, and is told to believe in the *substitutionary atonement*. It needs a spirit of love and justice and is told that love without orthodoxy will not save from *hell*...It needs to find God in the processes of nature and is told that he who believes in *evolution* cannot believe in God. It needs faith in the divine presence in human affairs and is told it must accept *the virgin birth* of Jesus Christ. It needs hope for a better world order and is told to await the *speedy return of Jesus Christ* from heaven to destroy sinners, cleanse the world by fire, and establish an ideal society composed of those whose bodies have been raised from the sea and the earth (emphasis mine).”¹²

So you see that these men (Machen and Mathews) are standing at complete opposite ends of the spectrum. In fact, the image of a single spectrum is itself misleading. Honestly, they don't even share a spectrum in common. These aren't two different ways of

¹¹ Machen quoted in Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*. 50th Anniversary Edition. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, MI. (1954) 2004. pp.82-83.

¹² Mathews quoted in Dorrien, p.205. Mathews didn't chose this doctrinal platform willy nilly. These beliefs were laid down in writing in a series of pamphlets between 1910 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. Thus, in context, this statement from Mathews is tantamount to saying: 'I reject as fundamental to the Christian faith each of these doctrines. Verbal inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, creation *ex nihilo*, the virgin birth and the return of Christ are not teachings fundamental to Christianity.' It is a sweeping claim.

looking at the same religion. Machen and Mathews believed in two different religions. They both knew it. And they both felt the other deeply mistaken.

Now while Shailer Mathews provided academic theological fire power for the advance of liberalism, on a practical and popular level it was Harry Emerson Fosdick that brought it home to the masses.

3. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)

Harry Emerson Fosdick, born in Buffalo, New York in 1878 was the single greatest popularizer of liberal theology in America of the 20th century. He pastored the Riverside Church, an interdenominational, ecumenical fellowship overlooking the Hudson River in northwest Manhattan. Fosdick's perch at Riverside was (once again) singlehandedly financed by billionaire philanthropist John Rockefeller. He preached at Riverside from 1931 until 1946. Fosdick also maintained strong ties with Union Theological Seminary and so was influential among seminary students as well as people in the pew.

In the pulpit, his sensibilities were therapeutic and practical. Like Henry Ward Beecher a generation earlier, Fosdick drew massive crowds and his sermons were heard and called for by thousands. His disdain for the practice of biblical exposition was almost palpable. He said at one point, reflecting on the art and craft of preaching:

“To start with a passage from Moses, Jeremiah, Paul, or John and spend the first half of the sermon or more on its historic explanation and exposition, presupposed the assumption that the congregation came to church that morning primarily concerned about the meaning of those ancient texts. That certainly was not what my congregation...bothered about.”¹³

¹³ Fosdick quoted in Dorrien, p.363. I must bear witness to and rejoice in the fact that that's *exactly* what my congregation wants on Sunday morning. To start tomorrow morning with the Gospel of John chapter 5 and spend the first half of the sermon or more on its historic explanation and exposition. Many of people come to church in the morning primarily concerned about the meaning of ancient texts. The reason is simple: in those ancient texts are the pathway to life.

When he did preach theologically, it was generally in order to disparage traditional orthodoxy. By far his most famous sermon was a 1922 message entitled: “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” It genuinely ignited a firestorm and in many ways epitomized the bitter nature of the rift between conservatives and liberals.

Fosdick was unrelenting, however, in his theologically progressive posture. He once said: “They call me a heretic... Well, I am a heretic if conventional orthodoxy is the standard. I should be ashamed to live in this century and not be a heretic.”¹⁴ Part of his success as a popularizer was his wise adaptation of radio beginning in 1924. Fosdick would broadcast his sermons at RCA’s radio station WJZ. A few years later, NBC picked him up for their “National Vespers” – a program that ran weekly on Sunday afternoons for the better part of two decades.

Now one final observation about Fosdick before we move on to consider our final two biographies this hour. Theologically, there’s no getting around the fact that Fosdick was a liberal. No one questions this (least of all him). His message represented classic theological accommodation to mindset of the culture of his hearers. However, Fosdick’s *message* was also shot through with a deep concern for *morality*. This was owing to his therapeutic focus. His interest and involvement in a kind of preaching that would create piety and transform personal ethics was the dominant note that he struck. He wasn’t theological. And he wasn’t much of a social gospeller (at least in the terms that Rauschenbusch and Mathews were). But he became incensed particularly when people would warn him that his liberal message would lead to liberal morals. He was unwilling to believe that theological compromise had to lead to ethical compromise.¹⁵ Fosdick’s voice still today

¹⁴ Ibid, p.379.

¹⁵ Riverside Church still exists today and it is a stronghold of ethical compromise that would have scandalized Fosdick’s moral sensibilities. It is a doctrinal-ethical about face that nearly defies the imagination. The doctrines Fosdick abhorred are largely believed by many liberals today. But the wild ethical exploration and openness would have flabbergasted Fosdick. The website at Riverside today reads: “The Riverside Church is an open and affirming Christian church with extensive experience uniting...same-sex

rings out: “Underline this: *Sin is real*. Personal and social sin is as terribly real as our forefathers said it was, no matter how we change their way of saying so.”¹⁶ Fosdick’s shadow is a long one and it still hangs eerily, prophetically over that congregation. His message in time came to transform their mood, their methods, and their morals.

Now before we go further, I want to insert something here that I think will be valuable. I haven’t said much about Union Theological Seminary as an institution yet except to make the connection that Charles Briggs and Harry Emerson Fosdick were faculty members. In a few moments we’ll learn about Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich who also made significant contributions there. But right here I’d like for us to listen to an outside voice. It’s the voice of a man who would become a martyr for his Christian convictions in Nazi Germany in 1945. I’m speaking (of course) of the pastor, martyr, prophet, spy – Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The following excerpt is drawn from the 2010 Eric Metaxas biography of the same name. Listen to Bonhoeffer describe his experience at Union in 1930. He communicated these observations for a mentor back home in Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

“There’s no theology here...They talk a blue streak with the slightest substantive foundation and with no evidence of any criteria. The students...are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about. They are unfamiliar with even the most basic questions. They become intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases, laugh at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level...the lack of seriousness with which the students here speak of God and the world is, to say the least, extremely surprising...The theological atmosphere of the Union Theological Seminary is accelerating the process of the secularization of Christianity in America...I am in fact of the opinion that one can learn extraordinarily little over [here]...Things are not much different in the church. The sermon has been reduced to parenthetical church remarks about newspaper events...There’s no sense to expect the fruits where the Word really is no longer being preached...The enlightened American, rather than viewing all this with skepticism, instead welcomes it as an example of progress...In New York they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed, or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been unable to

couples.” <http://www.theriversidechurchny.org/about/?weddings> . Accessed 11-06-13 @ 7:35pm.

¹⁶ Fosdick in Dorrien, p.390.

hear it, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross, sin and forgiveness, death and life.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer's critique is withering. He saw right through American liberal theology. He weighed it, and he found it wanting. Well, before we pause for discussion, let's turn to the so-called "Neo-Orthodoxy" of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. First, Niebuhr.

4. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri in 1892. He would go on to become perhaps the most well-known, influential, American born theologian of the 20th century. His father, Gustav Niebuhr, was a pastor in the German Evangelical Synod (which was itself a merger Reformed and Lutheran churches). Niebuhr's father was a theological moderate (he was equally as leery of folks to his theological right as he was to his theological left). Reinhold Niebuhr's brother, Richard Niebuhr, became a theologian in his own right at Yale during the mid-twentieth century. In fact, it was Richard (not Reinhold) Niebuhr who famously critiqued liberalism with the scathing description: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹⁸ What statement. A God *without wrath* brought men *without sin* into a kingdom *without judgment* through the ministrations of a Christ *without a cross*. It's a broad brush and it certainly doesn't color every liberal, but the statement *is* reflective of a number of the commonly held beliefs that we've seen thus far in our study.

What's interesting about Reinhold Niebuhr is his story is one that represents a journey from liberalism to what became known as "neo-orthodoxy" and finally home to liberalism again. He's best known for his role in the American expression of neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy was (and is) a very diverse movement with roots in Europe – especially in the teachings of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Part of the reason we know this movement to be diverse

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer quoted in Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN. 2010. pp.101, 105-106

¹⁸ Richard Niebuhr in Dorrien, p.522.

is that Niebuhr rejected the theology of Karl Barth and Barth *was* neo-orthodox. Niebuhr's presence in the movement (though) made perfect sense in view of what he saw in his father, a pastor who attempted to offer a third way between conservative and liberal theology. Neo-orthodoxy began with a virulent and fierce critique of liberal protestant thinking but it could be equally as withering in its view of evangelical faith. Niebuhr's critique of liberalism sounded like this:

"I hold it to be the chief sin of liberalism that it has given selfish man an entirely too good opinion of himself...[liberalism] makes the central message of the gospel, dealing with sin, grace, forgiveness and justification, seem totally irrelevant...[he said that liberals ran the risk of simply preaching] that Jesus was a very, very, very good man...[He said] These moderns do not understand that they cannot transcend the relativities of history by the number of superlatives which they add to their moral estimate of Jesus."¹⁹

Now at this point, he sounds like he might be a conservative, but he truly wasn't. Just because you disrespect unbelief doesn't mean you value true faith. What's interesting is that Niebuhr disparaged conservatives, too. Nowhere is this more clear than his vision of the Christian faith as "true myth". Here's where Gary Dorrien's description of Niebuhr's position shines so I'll just quote him. Dorrien writes:

"Liberal theology rightly contended that the myths of the Bible [Genesis creation narrative, Noah's ark, the parting of the Red Sea, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself] are myths [in fact, Niebuhr said of the bodily resurrection: that it 'can of course not be literally true... There are very few theologians today who believe the Resurrection actually happened' Niebuhr said ...Dorrien continues:] Traditional orthodoxy was hopelessly wrong because it insisted on taking Christian myths literally, Niebuhr explained; liberal theology was equally wrong because it refused to take Christian myths seriously...If taken literally, the Christian myths of divine creation, the fall of humankind, and the double nature of Christ are absurd; but if taken as myths, they are religiously deep in meaning...Orthodox Christianity makes absurd claims about the fall as an historical event, but at least orthodoxy takes with utter seriousness the biblical notion that human nature is thoroughly corrupted by sin. On this count,

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr quoted in Dorrien, p.467.

traditional orthodoxy tended to be more profound, religiously, than liberal Christianity, which failed to take seriously the defining myths of Christianity.”²⁰

Niebuhr’s vision of Christian myth allowed him to simultaneously skewer those both to his right and to his left.²¹

What is perhaps most telling about his spiritual pilgrimage is that by the mid-1950’s, Niebuhr began qualify and to regret the nature of the attacks he made on liberalism at the beginning of his career. In fact, before it was all over, Niebuhr confessed:

“I find that I am a liberal at heart, and that many of my broadsides against liberalism were indiscriminate... There is no need for polemics today, and there was no need for them when I wrote. My polemics were of an impatient young man who had certain things to say and wanted to get them said clearly and forcefully.”²²

So Niebuhr ended up back where he began his journey as a theologian: a liberal, in nearly every sense of the term. I say “nearly” every sense of the term because there was one area of liberalism that didn’t fit him. His message, his methods, and his mood were liberal. But not his morals. In fact, it was liberal morality which led to a break between him and his colleague at Union Theological Seminary – Paul Tillich.

²⁰ Dorrien, p.455; and Niebuhr in Dorrien pp.481-482.

²¹ In 1997’s *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY pp.5-6), Garry Dorrien takes a Niebuhrian slant on myth while nevertheless recognizing that this slant is on an absolute crash-course with the biblical witness on the subject. Dorrien writes: “I shall argue for a positive approach to Christian myth, but one problem with this project must be noted at the outset. This is that scripture assumes an explicitly pejorative understanding of myth [i.e. the Bible expresses contempt or disapproval of myth]. The word occurs five times in the New Testament, and never in a positive light. 1 Timothy 1:4 and 4:6-7 equate myth with ‘old wives tales’ and other vain speculation; 2 Timothy 4:4 warns against the temptation to turn away from truth ‘and wander away into myths’; Titus 1:14 similarly warns against ‘paying attention to Jewish myths.’...[finally] the attitude of the later epistles toward myth as a whole is plainly summarized in 2 Peter 1:16: ‘For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses to his majesty.’”

²² Niebuhr quoted in Dorrien, p.480.

5. Paul Tillich (1886-1965)

Paul Tillich's sketch here will be brief but it's important we visit him. He was born in 1886 and raised in Germany, but escaped to America during the rise of the Nazi Party in the year 1933. He was 47 years old at the time. He didn't speak a word of English but learned it passably enough to find asylum teaching theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Tillich was broadly neo-orthodox but, like Niebuhr, exhibited many tendencies toward full-fledged liberal thinking. For example, he put very little stock in the importance of the actual historical *existence* of Jesus of Nazareth. For Tillich, it truly was a moot point to him whether Jesus lived, died, or was raised at all. So we have on our hands in Tillich a man whose vision of the Christian faith has little in common with the gospel preached by the Apostle Paul. In terms of his doctrine of God, Tillich was a pantheist, possibly an atheist. And as surprising as his theological concessions were, there were other theologians before and after who held such beliefs. What was especially alarming about Tillich was the sort of life he lived.

After 22 years at Union Seminary, Tillich accepted a post teaching theology at Harvard for seven years starting in 1955. Remember, this man had the responsibility of training *pastors*. Gary Dorrien writes: "Tillich prided himself on never going to church at Harvard."²³ You heard that sentence correctly. He was in Cambridge for seven years. And Tillich *prided* himself on never going to church at Harvard. Perhaps the most vivid liberalism that Tillich embraced was not his message, but his morality. His moral liberalism. Though he remained married to his second wife Hannah for nearly all of his adult life until his death in 1965, Tillich was serially unfaithful to her. On his lecture circuits and preaching tours, even among his seminary students, Tillich simply could not help himself when it came to his relationships with other women. His infidelity during his speaking tours rivaled that of some American rock stars during his era. Dorrien recounts:

²³ Dorrien, p.512.

“Eight years after his death, his promiscuity was exposed by Hannah Tillich...Having inherited his collected writings, unpublished papers, love letters, and photographs of his lovers...Tillich’s psychoanalyst friend and former student Rollo May...explained that Tillich only liked ‘good’ pornography, that he was not a sexual predator (women flocked to him), and that if he had lived into the 1970’s, his promiscuity would not have been controversial: ‘He was perhaps three decades ahead of his time’ [said Rollo May. Dorrien concludes with a word about Reinhold Niebuhr’s view on all this] Niebuhr took a different view. His personal friendship with Tillich cooled in the 1940’s, partly because he was appalled by Tillich’s sexual morality, especially by an advance that Tillich reportedly made toward one of Niebuhr’s female students.”²⁴

For all of his brilliance (and I don’t doubt that he was a genius) Paul Tillich remains one of the most tragic figures in the history of American theology. He is still read today. In fact, just a few weeks ago, I watched a video blog post of Jay Bakker (son of Jim and Tammy Faye) Bakker a major-league push to the works of Paul Tillich. Jay Bakker (for those who aren’t aware) is currently planting a church here in the Twin Cities called Revolution Church.

Conclusion:

Well, that’s hour three. From Rauschenbusch to Mathews to Fosdick to Niebuhr to Tillich. I wonder if you have questions, comments, critiques, concerns? Would like to talk?

²⁴ Dorrien, p.519.