

The Great Divide: Enlightenment and Romanticism

As you know, I attempt to begin each class with a prayer from an appropriate person whom I am going to talk about in that lesson. But it is very difficult to find a prayer that I could actually pray from one of the Enlightenment leaders or one of the Romantics, so I am going to pray a prayer from a very orthodox Christian (you will be relieved to know that)—a man who grew up in the Reformed tradition but who was greatly influenced by pietism, which is the topic that we will look at next time. The man is Gerhard Tersteegen. His prayer is a prayer that is appropriate for this lesson because he lived during the time during which much of what I am going to talk about today took place. Also, the content of this prayer is appropriate, as this man prayed for wisdom and guidance and God’s blessing as he and other Christians faced the challenges of their time. And certainly we can join in the prayer from Tersteegen as we face the challenges of our day. Let us pray.

“O Prince of Life, teach us to stand more boldly on Your side, to face the world and all our adversaries more courageously, and not to let ourselves be dismayed by any storm of temptation. May our eyes be steadfastly fixed on You in fearless faith. May we trust You with perfect confidence that You will keep us, save us, and bring us through by the power of Your grace and the riches of Your mercy. Amen.”

This lesson we come to what C. S. Lewis called “the great divide.” Certainly it is a great divide in Western history, and it is a great divide in church history as well, because the forces unleashed by the Enlightenment and Romanticism are still with us. And from this point on as we study church history, we have to be aware that there are new ideas and new forces that influence the Christian church in one way or another. Some of those attempts were more successful than others, but as we make this transition, we will focus at first on the topic of “the great divide.” The great divide in church history is not the sixteenth-century Reformation. That is a great divide, and it divided Christians into Catholics and Protestants, and it divided Protestants into Reformed and Lutherans and Anglicans and Anabaptists and others.

“The great divide” came in the eighteenth century in the Great Enlightenment, as it is usually called, although I have noticed that Catholic apologists and philosopher Peter Kreeft keep referring to it as the “great darkness.” That was followed by Romanticism, and we will attempt to get some understanding of these two movements in this lesson. These movements have been so pervasive in Western cultural thought that an author being interviewed on the Mars Hill (a well-known American church) tape series recently made this statement: “We are all born in the Enlightenment and bred in Romanticism.” And what I would like to do for the next few minutes is to try to understand what he means by that statement: “We are all born in the Enlightenment and bred in Romanticism.”

We will look first at the Enlightenment, and I would like you to think about some pictures of Enlightenment figures beginning with Voltaire, perhaps the most famous of the French Enlightenment figures. There is a famous picture of Voltaire as an old man, and if you look closely you will notice that he is smiling. Another French Enlightenment leader was Diderot, of the Encyclopedia fame, and if you look at the most famous depiction of Diderot, you will see that he is smiling. Another Enlightenment leader is Thomas Jefferson, the American president, and he too is smiling in most of his portraits. Kenneth Clark in his book *Civilization* noted the fact that a number of the Enlightenment heroes are depicted in art as smiling. And in Clark’s book he talks about the smile of reason. Why are these people smiling? Well, they are smiling because they think that they and others like them are onto the answer, at

last, to human life, and that every problem of human life will be solved as mankind now uses reason to solve the problems of this world.

The promise of science comes very early and very high on the list of the important uses of reason marked by the leaders of the Enlightenment. We could talk about many scientists. Isaac Newton, of course, is one of the most prominent of the scientists whose work led into the Enlightenment. Newton was born in 1642 and died in 1727, and something of the impact of the discoveries that Newton made is felt, and we read the words of the poet Alexander Pope: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light." We were on the way in the Western world—at least people thought we were on the way—to solutions through science, through the technological age, through all its accomplishments and blessings. And certainly there have been many of those, so I do not want to give the impression in this lesson that I am down on the Enlightenment in everything that it accomplished. Much of the progress of humanity and the blessings that we enjoy in the modern world come from science and the Enlightenment, but along with all of that certainly, too, have come setbacks and disappointments. As the Jewish writer Chaim Potok put it, "This 300 years of modern paganism, or secular humanism, is probably the most creative, the most liberated, the wealthiest, the most dehumanizing, and the most murderous civilization in the history of our species."

Along with the promise of science there was the progress of philosophy. Philosophy began to emerge at this time as a separate discipline from theology. We really have not talked much about philosophy before this, except to mention the Aristotelian philosophy, which really was a kind of handmaid to theology, and before that Platonism, and later neo-Platonism. All of these philosophies were important in the history of the church, but they went along with theology in one way or another. But during the Enlightenment, philosophy began to emerge as something in its own right.

There were two approaches to philosophy that came out of the Enlightenment, two quite different approaches. One marked philosophical thought more on the continent, and one marked philosophical thought on the British Isles. The first was the rationalism of Descartes. You know that Descartes attempted to start with the human mind and then reason everything out. Actually, we could say that Descartes began not with the human mind but with his own mind, which was a very fine mind. And he was able to produce some rather impressive ideas by doing what he claimed to be doing—at least most people thought that he was doing—and that is, beginning with just what he could think and doubting everything he could doubt to get down to the bare rock of reality and then think his way to God and to the external world. It was an impressive accomplishment, but the British were not altogether impressed. Lord Bacon said that Descartes was like a spider, producing cobwebs out of his own existence.

The hard-headed British approach was different. The empiricism of John Locke was in many ways a kind of antithesis to the rationalism of Descartes. Rather than beginning with the human mind, the empiricist began with the external world, and the human mind was simply that which would observe, understand, and organize data that would come to it from the external world. So the empiricist is not so much the thinker as the investigator, receiving and organizing the truth as he understood it by experiment.

Now, those are certainly different approaches. One man with his eyes closed is thinking out the truth. The other man, the empiricist, with his eyes wide open, is looking through a microscope or telescope and trying to discover the real stuff of reality through his empirical investigation. But in one sense it comes down to the same thing, does it not? And that is that the growing autonomy of human reason is emerging. Whether you are thinking yourself or doing the organizing of the raw data of creation, there is

a new focus in philosophy, and that is the human person. Human rationality became more and more supreme in determining what people believed. It was no longer the Bible.

Now I should say—because probably you are wondering why I have not said this sooner—that the early scientists particularly were not men who lacked faith in God. Isaac Newton was a devout Christian who spent a great deal of time studying his Bible and writing commentaries on books like Daniel, a fact which puzzles Lord Clark in his book *Civilization*, as to why such a brilliant man who could have spent time doing something more important would waste so much of it studying the Bible. But Newton realized that in his scientific work, as he said, he was thinking God's thoughts after Him. He began his work with the prayer that God would enable him to think God's thoughts after Him. He saw no clash and no problem between Bible study and scientific investigation. The two were one part of his life. But the doxological science of Newton, as it has sometimes been called, soon gave way to humanistic secular science, or to use the language of Frances Schaeffer, modern science, which is not by any means anti-Christian but is built on a Christian base. It became modern science, and that is where we have the problem in the beginning in what is sometimes called the battle between science and the Bible. All of this is from the Enlightenment.

The promise of science and the progress of philosophy led to the rise of rational religion. It did not lead immediately to agnosticism or, certainly not, to atheism (in most people), but it led to a new way of conceiving the Christian faith. John Locke wrote a book in 1695 that became the theme of the Enlightenment on its religious side for at least 100 years called *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Book after book attempted to set forth the fact that the Christian faith makes sense. It is a reasonable and rational faith. The mysteries began to evaporate, and the Christian faith began to look more like an Enlightenment philosophy. The theme of that new Christianity was the centrality of morality. You have the reasonableness of Christianity. Even the doctrine of the Trinity was explained in a way that made it seem reasonable, at least to some people. Although other people said they never doubted the doctrine of the Trinity until the rationalists tried to explain it, and then it was impossible to understand. But the centrality of morality, ethics, began to move to the fore. It was not so much about the mysteries of the Trinity, or the incarnation, or the atonement, but how we should live and what we should do. Matthew Tyndale found it at the center of Christianity in his book *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, and Thomas Jefferson found it in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, which is his revised version of the New Testament, the life of Christ shorn of all of the miracles.

All of this led to a new form of religion, which we call Deism. God is still there, but God is the great creator God who started it all and in some vague and distant sense rules over it, but basically by allowing the laws that He put into operation to function without interference. He is indeed the great geometrician, as someone called Him at that time. The promise of science, the progress of philosophy, and the rise of rational religion seemed to promise that the future of Christianity would be in the direction of Deism, but those smiles began to give way eventually to what I call the “frown of reason.”

Some people were not too sure that all of this was going to work the way the rationalists thought it would work, one being Hume. Hume was by no means an orthodox Christian, and in fact he was quite an enemy of Christianity, in particular of the miracles. But this eighteenth-century Scotsman argued that you really cannot trust your impressions, your senses. What goes on inside the mind may not exactly correspond with what you think is out there. So there is a big gap between what is out there and what you think is out there. That was a problem to Christianity, but it was really a problem to Deism as well, maybe more so to Deism because of the confidence the Deists had in their own rational religion. If you cannot be sure your mind is overcoming the barrier between what is inside and what is outside, then

rational religion does not seem to be on such a strong basis anymore. Hume's fellow Scots did notice that Hume did walk on the streets of Edinburgh just like anyone else. He did not duck when there was a low tree limb close to the sidewalk, even though he was teaching that you really cannot know whether anything is out there or not the way you think it is. And Hume's fellow Scot, Thomas Reid, developed Scottish sense philosophy, or Scottish sense realism, as an answer to the skepticism of David Hume's philosophy. But after Hume, people were not so confident.

Gotthold Lessing came along and taught that you cannot trust history. This is getting very serious now. The "big ugly ditch" of Lessing is placed between what we know now and what we read about the past. Lessing said a report of the past, the accidental report of history, is not the same thing as what happened. An account of a miracle is not a miracle. The Bible telling about prophecy is not prophecy. And so there is the added problem of understanding what has happened in the past and the great ugly ditch that stands between us today and everything that has taken place in the past. And even Voltaire, who was so optimistic early on that rationality would bring an answer to human life that Christianity had failed to provide, even Voltaire began to have second thoughts about whether this world is indeed the best of all possible worlds. His novel *Candide* or *Optimism* sets that out. Voltaire was stunned by the devastation of an earthquake in Lisbon, and after that the world and God did not appear to him so rational. But despite these checks and questions that some people were asking, Enlightenment was here to stay.

Another movement grew up alongside it. I used to think of Romanticism as a rejection of the Enlightenment, as a kind of competing movement, with the Romantic heart versus the Enlightenment head, and the Romantic artist versus the Enlightenment scientist. And there is something to that, but now I think of these movements more accurately as parallel movements, different but also alike in some ways. Remember the quotation that I began with: "We are all born in the Enlightenment and bred in Romanticism." If that is true, then Western people have an interest in both these movements and are affected by both.

The defining moment of Romanticism came when Jean Jacques Rousseau was sitting on an island in a lake and felt himself to be one with nature. Some sort of mystical experience that he had there brought him, he thought, in line with nature. This is a curious discovery to have been made in the middle of the Age of Reason, Kenneth Clark says, because Rousseau was saying, in effect, "I feel, therefore I am." Let me sketch out the Romantic creed: the importance of feelings. In Goethe's *Faust*, we have "feeling is all in all," you could even call it God. Now the center is in human emotion or feeling, not at all in the human mind as in the Enlightenment. Another part of the Romantic creed is the sanctity of nature. The Romantic poet Wordsworth speaks of the divinity of nature so that God is viewed as nature in a pantheistic direction. If the Enlightenment leads in a Deistic direction, to a distant creator God, the great geometrician, Pantheism is the direction of Romanticism.

Then, there is the role of the artist. It is not the scientist or the philosopher, but the artist who is able to mediate the truth of life to the rest of us. The artist has an inspired vehicle of truth. Romantic religion found expression in a number of important sources. There was the rational romantic philosophy of Immanuel Kant. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is his book, which focuses not simply on Enlightenment reason but Romantic attitudes as well. And Romantic religion also found an important expression in the inner-religion of Friedrich Schleiermacher, his feeling of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher taught that our understanding of God in the Gospel does not come from our minds thinking it out, nor does it come from revelation, reading it in the Bible, but it comes from inner feeling of absolute dependence as we find ourselves dependent upon God. And we have this feeling. People have puzzled ever since as to what exactly what that feeling means. And somebody said, perhaps not too

kindly, in Schleiermacher's religion, a dog would be the best Christian, who has a feeling of absolute dependence on his master. But Schleiermacher did turn the corner in many ways in theology so that after Schleiermacher, as we talk about theology, there is going to be a great deal more subjective understanding of Christian theology: how it impacts me; how I feel; how I think. It is not so much now "thus saith the Lord" or "the Bible says," which we have been hearing from the Reformers and the Protestant orthodox believers. But "I think, I feel, I believe" became the focus of modern theology after the time of Schleiermacher. And Romantic religion found another expression in the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with his rejection of orthodox and even eventually Unitarian theology for "the fire within," his inner inspiration and belief and doctrine.

Well, we are all born in the Enlightenment and bred in Romanticism. I think what that means is that since the eighteenth century, Western man and woman have an Enlightenment mind and a Romantic heart till we are brought under the control of Jesus Christ so that our minds and our hearts are now given to Him. We have this split personality with an Enlightenment mind and a Romantic heart. The Enlightenment mind means that people believe that we can solve problems. We can find an answer eventually to everything. Problems are there to be solved. And we have succeeded in solving so many of them that at least for a while there was a hope that we could solve all of them. Frances Schaeffer put it this way, "The enlightenment mentality expresses it something like this: it can be done. Give me until tomorrow," which means that sooner or later, we will find the answers to all the problems of life. But of course in our time now, there are some signs that we are coming to the end of that Enlightenment road—the end of the modern period, the end of that trust in rationalism—into a new period that people are already calling the period of post-modernism. But whatever that means, or wherever that is going, there is still a great deal of Enlightenment thought that still affects us in our world today. We can do it, just give us time.

But along with that there is the Romantic heart. You see, the Enlightenment does not really feed the soul much. Give the mind something to think about, but sooner or later there is an emptiness in the soul, in the heart. The Romantics taught us, while we are solving problems and thinking great rational thoughts, to live life according to our feelings, our desires, what we want to do. I was staying with some friends not long ago, and they were telling me about their daughter. They have a girl who is four or five years old, and one day the mother was correcting the child, telling her what she should do and should not do. And the little girl responded, "But I want to obey me!" It sounds very much like ex-theologian Emerson's maxim, "Obey thyself." This four-year-old girl had not read Emerson, but there is something there in the heart of all of us, and certainly bred by Romanticism, that says the real authentic person is the person you are, and you should obey yourself, express yourself, and live for yourself.

But by the time we go 100 years, 200 years, certainly 300 years, something has gone horribly wrong with all of this. And the most optimistic rationalist and Romantic must realize that things have not turned out quite the way that mankind had hoped. The Enlightenment mind has solved some great problems, things that years ago our ancestors would not have believed could have been solved, in terms of transportation, medicine, and the modern computer age. It would stagger the mind of people not too long ago to think that we know and can do the things that we can do and that we know today. But if the Enlightenment has solved some very big problems, it has not solved the biggest problems. They are still with us. And the Romantic heart has proven to be what Isaiah calls "the deluded heart" as people realize sooner or later that to obey yourself is not a good idea.

I want to close with a poem from W. H. Auden. All the Romantics said that the artist was the mediator of truth; so let us listen to an artist who certainly understood both the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

He wrote a poem at the end of the year 1939. It is entitled “September 1, 1939,” at the end of what the poem calls a long, dishonest decade, the 1930s. Let us use it to end this lesson as we come close to the end of this millennium. It is a kind of last sad word, commentary, on these developments that I have been talking about today. This is a world that Pascal certainly would have understood, because he predicted at the very beginning that it would turn out like this. He saw the way it was going. Here is part of the poem, “September 1, 1939,” by W. H. Auden:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Now that may be the last word I can say on the Enlightenment and Romanticism, but not the last word I want to say about everything, so let me conclude with this:

“Grass withers, flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

I will now address some frequently asked questions. Was Emerson a theologian? He was a theologian and a pastor. He moved from a congregational Trinitarian period to a Unitarian period as Harvard moved from Trinitarianism to Unitarianism, but then shocked his liberal Harvard friends by rejecting Unitarianism and then moving into something we usually call transcendentalism, so that even Unitarianism looked conservative compared to where Emerson ended up.

What do I mean by the autonomy of reason? I do not mean that philosophy becomes autonomous in the sense that Platonism and Aristotelianism are not autonomous, but that in the history of the church—the history of Western culture since the time of Constantine, with Christianity being the great integrating factor in culture—philosophy played a secondary role. And it could be used as the medieval person did—Aristotelianism was used to support Christianity. So these philosophies in themselves were autonomous, but the function that they played in history was subordinate to Christian faith. But by the time we come to the Enlightenment, now there is not concern on the part of the philosophers always, and increasingly less and less concern, to see how this supports Christianity. It is something different from and eventually opposed to the Christian faith.

What can be said on the development of Romanticism? The early Romantics certainly used the word “God” a lot, but when you look at what Rousseau means, or Goethe, or even Wordsworth, their word for God almost evaporates in any kind of traditional sense. It can be beauty, it can be nature, it can be one’s inner light. So from the beginning, “God” becomes a very generalized word, and truth and/or purpose in life is explained using the word “God” but in a very indefinite sort of way. I suppose one way to look at this is if the Enlightenment people, the rationalists, the Deists, still have God, He is so far off that He really does not have much to do with us anymore. So rationalists really had a hard time thinking of prayer, because they did not think of God as being concerned to hear our prayers and answer them. God

was the great watchmaker. He made the watch and wound it up, and now it is running on its own. God is very far off. But the Romantics, on the other hand, thought God so close and so much a part of their Romantic sensitivity that God disappears within. On the one hand He is lost without the world, and on the other hand He evaporates within the Romantic consciousness within the world. So I do not see either movement as having a good, proper understanding of God and then declining. From the beginning, both the Enlightenment and Romanticism had very unorthodox and un-Christian views of Him.

How did the church react to all of this? As Descartes was writing and the other scientists and philosophers were at work, this is the period of the high orthodox that we talked about already, the Protestant scholastics turning out these huge tomes of Latin theology. Now those theologies did not interact very much with this new world, although Voetius did write about Descartes. And Descartes answered Voetius in a book called *A Letter to that Very Famous Man Gisbert Voetius*, which is a curious title because most people today have never heard of Voetius, but most everyone knows about Descartes. But in those days it showed that this theologian was viewed, even by a French philosopher who very much disagreed with him, as a great man. Someone has said that if the scholastics did not do a very good job of answering the questions of the philosophers, these are not the questions of the common man either, which is true. But they became the questions of the sons and the grandsons of the common man and even the sons and grandsons of the theologians. We know that after Francis Turretin there was one more Turretin in Geneva after four generations of Turretins, theologians in Geneva. Francis, the one we talked about the most, had a son, Jean Alphonse Turretin, who was something of a liberal and very much influenced by rational thought. He was not a full-fledged Deist, but it was not long before the whole Calvinistic tradition was lost in Geneva through the impact of Enlightenment Christianity on people of those times. I would say that one of the problems that Christianity had in trying to face this was that the major response was to sort of play the Enlightenment game and say, "Well, if rationality is the way you are going, let us show how Christianity goes that way too." So there is a kind of rationalizing of Orthodoxy so that it begins to look more like Deism. People try to answer the rationalist and answer the Deist—perhaps we can say, fight fire with fire—and that was not the way Pascal wanted to do it. That is not the way that a more effective answer could be given to rationalists. William Law, who influenced John Wesley so much, had a better approach, I think. That is to say that reason, rather than being such a great thing, may be the problem itself. As we begin to focus on the possibility of creating a rational religion, that becomes idolatry, and that becomes a problem itself. So we need to go back to a humble acceptance of God's truth, which is not irrational, but certainly in many cases it is above human understanding.

Churches did not do very well with the Enlightenment or Romanticism. Romanticism would influence theology and Christianity too, as in Schleiermacher. So what came out on the other side was very much a tainted form of Christianity. All of this is important I think to alert us to the fact that as we face another paradigm shift perhaps in Western culture, we need to try to do better.

What was Kant's basic belief? I think we will come back to Immanuel Kant later, but his basic thrust, I think, as it affected Christianity, was to agree with others, including David Hume, although he did not follow Hume exactly. He saw the problem between the thing out there and the thing in itself, so he raised a major question as to whether we can really think properly and understand properly about what is exterior to us. Scottish common sense philosophy tried to deal with all these metaphysical heresies by saying, "But people do know certain things; we do have certain foundational truths." We do have certain common sense consensus. We do agree on certain things, that there is something out there, that there is reality, and that our minds are made by God, who made what is out there, so the two things fit together. And even though we cannot perfectly understand what is out there, we are not deceived when we see

something or think something. That may raise some problems, too, for philosophers, and the validity of common sense philosophy has been debated all the way down to the present. But Kant put the big question mark there as to how much we could really know and tended then to turn inside, like the Romantics, to find within the place for true religion—not in facts and dogma and information and Bible and creed, but in the inner life, which we have direct access to.

How does the Westminster Confession reflect the Enlightenment or vice versa? You do not get much in the Westminster Confession that indicates that all of this was going on. The Westminster Confession looks to the past, to the history we have studied so far, in order to summarize and draw up its theological statements. So it does not reflect much of what was happening outside Westminster and outside of theology. But having said that, let me just close with this comment. There were several of the Westminster Divines who were also founding members of the Royal Society of Science, which was meeting about the same time in London. So there was not necessarily by any means an antipathy to the new thought, but it does not express itself in terms of the Confession itself: “God created all things out of nothing in the space of six days,” says the Shorter Catechism, which is what the Bible says. And any theories on creative days or astronomy or science are just not there. The Divines may well have been interested in all this, but they did not feel, fortunately, that the Confession was the place to put scientific theory or philosophical ideas.