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Making sense of the sources

In this first chapter the question *how* Christians might make sense of sex is discussed. First, several barriers to understanding are named and removed. Second, the sources that are available for Christians to use for making sense of sex are described. Third, the approach of Liberal Theology to making sense of sex is outlined.

Making sense of *sex*?

Making sense of sex is a very tall order indeed. This volume belongs to a series of 'Making Sense of' books. God's love, the Bible, and so on, are subjects we can try and make some sense of. But when it comes to sex, *we* are the subjects. We are *sexed*: we have a sex. Many of us *have* sex. The puzzle is of a different order because we ourselves are part of the puzzle.

All living creatures are sexed. They need to be roughly male or female in order to reproduce. But human beings are reflective, self-conscious creatures. When we want to have sex, we know we do. Human beings belong to societies where traditions about who can have sex with whom, and how, and when, are centuries old. Powerful instincts are hedged about with regulation and constraint. But these constraints, and our acceptance of them, are not, like God, everlasting. Conventions change, yet still our innermost desires often conflict with them.

Making sense of sex assumes that there is some possible way of understanding it, and so of arriving at a *rational* grasp of some of our basic instincts and drives. Even this assumption is problematic. Not only can the power of desire overwhelm our moral convictions, the argument over which is the stronger – reason or passion – is an old and inconclusive one. Sex seems to elude codification and control.

Having sex cannot be separated out from wider issues of gender, and so of power and dominance, powerlessness and surrender, vulnerability as well as ecstasy, and often fear, comedy and tragedy. Rowan Williams summed up the multiple ambiguities of sex by asking:

Why does sex matter? Most people know that sexual intimacy is in some ways frightening for them, that it is quite simply the place where they began to be taught whatever maturity they have. Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself. Plenty know that it is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless. Culture in general and religion in particular have devoted enormous energy to the doomed task of getting it right.¹

Is getting sex right doomed from the start? Williams is clear that we are never going to get sex right. But the inevitable failure to get it right does not amount to a sexual pessimism about sexual encounters or relationships. It is the beginning of a proper and theological understanding of sex. He continues: 'I want to try and understand a little better why the task is doomed, and why the fact that it's doomed is a key to seeing more fully why and how it matters – and even seeing more fully what this mattering has to do with God.'

Not getting sex right, on this view, is the key to making sense of it. Through our failings and fumbblings we may become wiser.

Barriers to understanding

Very many people, including not a few Christians, do not find the Christian tradition very helpful for making sense of sex. It is not that people wilfully forsake a demanding sexual ethic for a more easy-going worldly one. It is that they often cannot see the point of its 'demandingness'. The Roman Catholic Church has the strictest teachings of all denominations. Plenty of Christians, including Catholics, cannot see the point of remaining within a marriage that is spiritually dead, or forbidding the use of condoms to millions of people in the grip of the HIV & AIDS pandemic. Plenty of lesbian and gay Christians cannot see the point of the teachings raised against

them. Plenty of Christians cannot see the point of refraining from sex until marriage (usually in their late twenties, or early thirties) or from masturbating if they feel like it.

Christians try to *obey* God. The problem, of course, is that the will of God must first be known before it can be obeyed. The Christian faith is changing, and the Christian understanding of the character of God is changing too. Many Christians just can't make sense of a God who requires constant heroic resistance to the very desires that God has placed in us. It is not that the counter-cultural demand of Christian witness is being refused. Radical obedience requires radical reasons for it to be sustained. Traditional teachings about sex and gender are one of the reasons why people left the Church in the 1960s.²

Dualism

There are at least three other reasons why the Christian tradition, especially in its conservative forms, may be thought to be unhelpful in making sense of sex. These can be labelled *dualism*, *sexism* and *pessimism*. Dualism is any view that assumes that one thing is really two things (*duo* in Latin). A standard Christian view, held by a clear majority of theologians, is set out in the Roman Catholic *Catechism*:

The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.³

This view (standard since St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century) is obviously not dualistic, for it combines soul and body, and spirit and matter within a 'unity'. It has the name *holism* (from the Greek, *holos*, 'whole'). The problem is that much Christian thought is holistic in theory, yet thoroughly dualistic in practice. It can maintain the unity of the person while allowing a disastrous devaluation of the body in relation to the soul.⁴

Nearly 20 years ago I analysed dualism by means of six pairs of opposites. They were:

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Soul	Body
Reason	Passion
Will	Desire
Spirit	Flesh
Culture	Nature
Public	Private ⁵

It is easy to see the havoc that these pairs of opposites can cause for human self-understanding. The first four terms on the left have come to represent the spiritual side of the person, that which is eternal, incorporeal and most like God. The first four terms on the right have come to represent the temporal, corporeal side of the human person – mortal, frail and fallen. The terms on the left are *privileged* in relation to their counterparts on the right. All six pairs are often depicted as in conflict with each other, so that the person becomes the site of conflict between opposing forces; between a ‘microcosm’ (a tiny world) within and a ‘macrocosm’ (the world further out).

Sexism

It has become clear that soul/body dualism fosters another kind of dualism, *male/female* dualism, or (to use a contemporary term) *sexism*. In the last 20 years *gender*, ‘the relations between women and men,’⁶ has been intensively studied and the Christian tradition has been shown to be lacking in its contribution to taking seriously the full personhood of women. Many contemporary Christians, I suspect, have little idea of how women have been regarded in Christian tra-

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dition. The attitude of Jesus towards women was very different from that of theologians in the intervening centuries between the Bible and our own times. Until recently men were thought to be closely associated with

soul, reason, will and spirit; women with body, passion, desire and flesh. That explains why men were identified with culture, women with nature; men with the public, women with the private world (the fifth and sixth pairs of opposites). It also explains why men got an education, occupied the professions and ran the world.

'Incarnation' or 'excarnation'?

Christianity is distinctive by its belief that God has come and lived among us. John's Gospel says, 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1.14). The name given to Christ's coming among us as flesh is *incarnation*. An incarnational faith might be thought to be lived out in the encounters of fleshly bodies. However, another concept, *excarnation*, has recently appeared, and it well captures what has happened to Christianity in the last 500 years. The flesh has been ejected in favour of a faith that is much more, if not completely, cerebral in its reception and expression. Charles Taylor (in a very long and dense book) shows how 'official Christianity has gone through what we can call an "excarnation", a transfer out of embodied, "enfleshed" forms of religious life, to those which are more "in the head"'.⁷ In a prophetic passage, he says:

We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings: of experience, of beauty . . . even the ethical: we think that the only valid form of ethical self-direction is through rational maxims or understanding.

We can't accept that part of being good is opening ourselves to certain feelings; either the horror at infanticide, or agape as a gut feeling.⁸

There are, of course, reactions to this longer-term historical process. Late modern promiscuity is a good example of a *return* to incarnation (but hardly a 're-incarnation'!) where living in and through the heightened experience of the body has become the supreme good. A believable Christian faith must own up to its part in bringing about this excarnation, and offer its adherents an alternative to the fleshly indulgences of a decadent capitalist culture. The alternative must make sense both of the God-given pleasures of intimacy and the enormous responsibilities that accompany the sharing of it. This book tries to do this.

Donna Freitas' recent study of sexual experience on college campuses in the USA, *Sex and the Soul*,⁹ indicates the necessity of a balanced theology of sex which avoids the extremes of the 'hook-up culture' on the one hand, and the 'no-sex-thank-you-we-are-evangelicals' on the other. Only in evangelical colleges is there serious opposition to the hook-up culture and Freitas rightly commends them for this. However, there is a high price to be paid among the students – in her terms, the drastic sundering of sexual experience from their souls.

Dualism rules once more. The evangelical ethos (among its many other characteristics)

exacts demands on students that can be severe, debilitating and often unrealistic. The pressures to marry are extreme for women, and college success is often determined by a ring, not a diploma. Because of the strong hold of purity culture, many students learn to practise sexual secrecy, professing chastity in public while keeping their honest feelings and often their actual experiences hidden.¹⁰

These attitudes are not confined to American campuses; they are common in the Church. Again, this book offers a middle way, drawing on the resources of Liberal Theology in order to promote a mature union of spirituality and sexuality together.

Pessimism

Some Christians are deeply pessimistic about the social trends towards greater sexual freedom. We have just discussed the distressing prevalence of promiscuity. It is possible to see pre-marital sex, rising divorce rates, abortion, promiscuity, the tolerance of homosexuality, the legalization of civil partnerships, and so on, as evidence of late modern decadence. Sexual sins are thought to be evidence of the weakening of religious faith, of growing secularization, and of a falling away from a proud and devout Christian past. In fact the situation is immensely more complicated. There is another way of reading social changes, where the acknowledgement of human rights and the increase in social justice have made steady gains over racism, sexism, patriarchalism and colonialism (all of which derived much succour from Christianity). It is no longer a requirement to remain locked in a destructive marriage. Marital rape is now a crime. There is no longer a need for foundling hospitals to care for abandoned children. Bastardy, that terrible stigma, is dismantled.¹¹ Reproductive life can be regulated – an absolutely necessary ability if the earth is not to exhaust itself. Love and commitment between same-sex partners is now legally recognized.

Jeffrey Weeks' book *The World We Have Won* actually celebrates the achievements of late modern culture in the sphere of sexual intimacy. Looking back to developments since 1945 the author believes 'the long revolution to have been overwhelmingly beneficial to the vast

majority of people in the West, and increasingly to people living in the global South whose lives are also being transformed dramatically'.¹² He calls this 'the democratization of everyday life'. That judgement is at least a possible one to consider, even though serious problems of promiscuity and injustice for children remain. It is not necessary for Christians to be pessimists about sex (or about anything else). They can be grateful realists instead.

Sources for making sense of sex

In the next two sections, theological sources and the character of Liberal Theology are discussed. Readers who want to get straight to the sex and gender issues that occupy the rest of the book, without worrying about prior considerations, can safely skip to Chapter 2 now.

Scripture, Tradition and Reason

It might be helpful to say there are six of these sources. The first three are Scripture, Tradition and Reason.¹³ Most Christians agree about these, but disagree about the extent to which each is valued in relation to the others. All Christians agree that the Bible is our primary source for learning about the Faith. They disagree about what the Bible is, and about the authority it has in, and over, the churches. Anglican bishops recommend a twofold reading strategy. When discussing 'the use of the Bible in sexual ethics', they commend reading it

as a witness to the grace of God through which salvation is offered to us in fulfilment of God's covenant promises, and as guide to the path of Christian discipleship . . . In terms of the specific issue of human sexuality it means reading the Bible in such a way as to discover how God's will for human sexual conduct gives expression to his grace.¹⁴

The problem the bishops do not discuss is the obvious incompatibility between reading the Bible as a *witness* to God's actions in Jesus Christ, and reading the Bible as a *guidebook*.¹⁵ The main problem is the confusion between being a *witness* to the Revelation and being the Revelation itself. (Think about being a witness to a crime. Witnessing a crime is utterly different from committing a crime.) This is a sticking point for liberal Christians. They are unlikely to say that

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the Bible is the Word of God, not because they think that the Bible is unimportant, but because it confuses Jesus, who *is* the Word of God in the flesh, with the *witness* to the Word of God which the Bible is.

Once the Bible becomes the guidebook to sexual conduct, looking up passages to see what is forbidden or allowed becomes an irresistible temptation.

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches give equal weight to Scripture and Tradition. The Roman Catholic Church believes that there are ‘two distinct modes of transmission’ of God’s revelation – ‘Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture.’¹⁶ Scripture ‘is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit’. Tradition ‘transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit’. Catholics derive ‘certainty’ from both, and each ‘must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence’.

There are several problems with these assertions. Assuming we can identify ‘Tradition’, some pretty ghastly teachings and practices are inescapably embedded in it. Was the Inquisition, or the burning of heretics, an authentic transmission of God’s Word? There needs to be a way of discerning which bits of Tradition authentically transmit the Word of God. Protestants don’t generally give Tradition much time. But they neglect it at their peril. It is through Tradition that every generation of Christians has a direct link to the founding events of the faith, and beyond, through the First Testament,¹⁷ into the infancy of the human race. Christians have *made* Tradition, and there is much we can learn from their wisdom, as well as from their mistakes.

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And Tradition goes on being made. We make it ourselves. The Anglican bishops helpfully remind Christians of the ‘need to test tradition against the Scriptures themselves and against the moral convictions of contemporary society, and remember that even the most venerable traditions can be wrong or inappropriate for today’.¹⁸

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Anglicans also hold Reason as a source of theology, sometimes seeing it as the third leg of a 'three-legged stool'. Reason is very important for liberal Christians, including at one time most Anglicans, because what we can find out about ourselves and our world by asking questions, developing hypotheses, performing experiments, and so on, also helps us to find about God and God's ways with the world. There are things that God reveals to us because we are otherwise incapable of finding them out; but most things we know we can find out for ourselves. Christians who stress the importance of Reason do not want to abandon the conviction that God is revealed in Scripture and Tradition, and supremely in Christ. They say that there is no obvious contradiction between Reason and Revelation, between human inquiry and divine disclosure, between science and theology. Liberal Christians have an important place for Reason and Tradition because they see many Protestant churches placing an exaggerated emphasis on the Bible, and on a literal reading of it, to the neglect of what God allows us to know by other means.

Experience, Conscience and Wisdom

A fourth source is Experience. There are inconclusive arguments about whether Experience is a separate source or whether it is better included in the category of Reason. I am convinced that Experience should be regarded as a separate source,¹⁹ especially when trying to make sense of sex, for our sexual experiences may be the most character-forming experiences we ever have. Writers who subsume Experience within the category of Reason may be too swayed by the idea that the image of God in humankind is better expressed by our rational faculties than by any other. While not denying reason is a gift of God, I don't think reason can be privileged over passion, for God is passionate too.

Our sexual experiences may be the most character-forming experiences we ever have

A fifth source is Conscience. Religious and secular thought alike hold to a faculty which helps us to distinguish between right and wrong actions, and leads to feelings either of rectitude or of remorse. Conscience (in Latin, Greek and English) is literally a 'knowing together with', which rather contradicts the idea that conscience is best

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understood as an ‘inner voice’ or moral alarm bell that rings unexpectedly. It is rather the ability to acquire moral knowledge in co-operation with other people, and especially with people who are affected by our actions. Conscience helps us to turn regret into resolve – into an opportunity not to repeat past mistakes and vices.

Finally, Wisdom is a source of theology and ethics. The early Anglican theologian Richard Hooker wrote of God’s Wisdom:

As her ways are of sundry kinds, so her manner of teaching is not merely one and the same. Some things she openeth by the sacred books of Scripture; some things by the glorious works of Nature: with some things she inspireth them from above by spiritual influence; in some things she leadeth and traineth them only by world experience and practice. We may not so in any one special kind admire her, that we disgrace her in any other; but let all her ways be according unto their place and degree adored.²⁰

These words of Hooker are themselves wise. Wisdom teaches us; that is what wisdom does (Proverbs 8). The wisdom here is God’s but it is imparted to us, and Hooker’s account of the way wisdom is imparted is very significant. Wisdom is broader than even Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Wisdom uses Scripture to teach us. But She also uses our knowledge of the ‘works of Nature’. Sometimes She influences us directly; at other times She uses our involvement in the secular world (‘world experience and practice’) to confront us with new but divinely sourced knowledge. Wisdom lies at the root of all the other sources of theological knowledge, and She is honoured when discovered appropriately in each one.

In the end, all six sources present themselves to us as *resources* for enabling us, in common with other Christians, to love God, our neighbours, and ourselves, better than we otherwise would. They give us *doctrine*. Christian sexual ethics should take the core doctrine that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4.8, 16)²¹ much more seriously. Yet that supreme basis of the Christian life is often compromised by lesser appeals to regulation and prohibition. The Great Commandments of Jesus insist that *love* is the first and last requirement of his followers:

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’

(Matt. 22.37–40)

The approach of Liberal Theology

The approach to making sense of sex in this book is unashamedly and wholeheartedly *liberal*. The ‘Making Sense of’ series is self-consciously liberal in its approach to its topics, and the theological society that suggested the series, Modern Church, defines itself as an ‘organisation that promotes liberal Christian theology’.²² What then, is Liberal Theology?

What Liberal Theology is not

We can start by saying what Liberal Theology is not. It is not fundamentalist;²³ it is not conservative evangelical;²⁴ and it is not Roman Catholic. Fundamentalists think that the Bible is infallible, that every word of it is dictated by God the Holy Spirit to human authors. Fundamentalism is daft but dangerous. It ignores obvious problems such as the hundreds of contradictions in the Bible; the lack of any of the original manuscripts that are supposed to have been inspired; how to translate and interpret them so that infallibility is preserved, and so on.

The differences between liberals and conservative evangelicals need to be assessed carefully. Liberals will want to *conserve* everything in the Bible and Tradition that speaks compellingly of Christ, and either to revise or to abandon altogether those things that do not. Liberals also joyfully proclaim the Gospel, or *euaggelion*. Their differences with conservative evangelicals are principally about what the Bible is and how it should be read, and these affect everything else.

Conservative evangelicals call the Bible ‘the Word of God’. This is curious, for the Bible is very clear that *Jesus Christ* is the Word of God (John 1.14), and *not* ‘the scriptures’ (John 5.39). They treat the literal sense of Scripture as normative wherever possible. This way of reading Scripture was new at the Reformation, and has been retained

by large sections of Protestantism ever since. These unfortunate suppositions lead conservative evangelicals to suppose that the Bible can be read as a guidebook for Christian living, especially in matters of personal morality. These handicaps make it almost impossible for them to make sense of sex. There are scores of cases in the First Testament where the requirements of property and purity laws seem to us primitive, disgusting and demeaning,²⁵ but, if the Bible is to be read literally, these passages are highly problematic for those Christians who seek guidance from them. Equally difficult are the many calumnies against womankind: for example, being condemned by an angry god to excruciating labour pains because of the disobedience of the first woman: ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children’ (Gen. 3.16). Forever subject to their husbands, submission and childbearing is their route to possible salvation (1 Tim. 2.15).

These Bible passages and many others are very difficult for evangelical Christians to deal with, and cause consternation among them. They seek to lead a holy life and to conform to the will of a holy God, yet the Bible gets in the way! Issues such as ‘male headship’ or the ministry of women cause bitter divisions among them. Often such passages are ignored or their interpretation forced to conform to a semblance of contemporary assumptions about gender equality. The problems don’t end there. Evangelicals find in the Bible what isn’t there. The story of Onan, who ‘spilled his semen on the ground’ (Gen. 38.9) was once used to condemn masturbation (perhaps it

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still is), yet it is about the failure to fulfil the obligations of an institution that Christianity has never recognized – Levirate marriage.

Many liberals are Catholics, but liberals in the *Roman* Catholic Church are having a hard time since that Church lurched back into a rigid traditionalism following the liberalizing Second Vatican Council. Liberals often have a sense of the ‘catholicity’ (the worldwide scope) of Christ’s Church, and a deep respect for the Catholic Tradition. It is conservative interpretations of the Tradition that they find difficult (which usually amount to leaving men in charge and everything else as it always allegedly was). There are plenty of issues where Catholics

and liberals are at odds. Liberals think that the dogma of compulsory celibacy for priests is catastrophic, as is the denial of contraception to Catholics, whether married or not. These issues signal even greater fissures between Roman Catholics and Protestants, such as where authority lies in the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching.

What Liberal Theology is

Modern Church is well aware that 'liberal' has become a term of abuse. It is a casualty of relentless polemic. It has unfortunate associations with economics, where 'liberal' stands for free trade, the right of (wealthy) individuals to invest, and so for a market system that facilitates it. In politics, it is associated in Britain with the minority Liberal Party, which has its roots in the struggles of Protestant Nonconformists, for whom freedom of belief and the right to self-government in church matters were paramount. In theology, it is associated with a strand of thought known as Liberal Protestantism, which was influentially criticized by Karl Barth. Liberal Theology has also been overtaken by new currents in theology which, while drawing on many liberal principles, disguise the fount of ideas from which they spring. Whole movements in theology, like Radical Orthodoxy, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, even Postliberal Theology, all overlap with Liberal Theology even as they react to it or overtake it in impact in Church and world.

The place of Reason

Liberal Theology affirms all the sources of theology we have just considered, but gives a larger place to Reason than some other theologies do.²⁶ 'Reason' can mean 'argument', 'critical thinking', 'word', 'inquiry', and so on. The Greek word for reason is *logos*, 'word'. The appeal to reason is an insistence that the power of human thought is an integral step towards our apprehension and love of God. We have just referred to the commandment of Jesus himself to 'Love the Lord your God . . . with all your mind'. Liberals affirm the belief in the power of the mind to arrive at new truths. They think that the power of mind is given by God, and that within its limits it can be trusted. Liberals have always welcomed new scientific knowledge. Knowledge about origins, whether it is the origin of the universe, of species, or even of

the Scriptures themselves, are obvious examples. Reason does not *replace* Scripture, but is needed to interpret Scripture and to undertake the task of showing its relevance to contemporary faith and practice.

Liberal Theology stands in the mainstream of Christian theology in respecting and using the achievements of human inquiry as a source for thinking about God. Many great theologians have done this. Augustine (354–430) borrowed from Plato and the work of the

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Neo-Platonists. Aquinas (1225–74) was much influenced by Aristotle and the natural sciences of the time. All human knowledge that was not theology was once thought to be a type of philosophy – moral, natural, experimental, and so on. The contribution of Reason to our know-

ledge of sexuality is huge. Sexuality is studied by various academic disciplines (among them psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and biology). The conclusions of these disciplines are generally provisional and contested, but they assist greatly in helping to understand the human sexual condition. Any assumption that we know it all already because we have the Bible turns out to be arrogant, ignorant and very dangerous.

Liberal Theology is traditional, then, in its use of Reason. It shares two of its distinctive features with ‘Revisionism’,²⁷ another strand of contemporary theology. These are, first, ‘that methodological problems

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need to be faced at the outset’. It asks what we want to know, and how to go about it. Second, it ‘recognizes the importance and significance of modernity for theology’. That is

because ‘our texts were constructed in a pre-modern age. And the dramatic changes since the western Enlightenment need to be faced.’

Individualism

Another strand of Liberal Theology which requires some justification is its affirmation of individualism. It is awkward for liberals to own up to this because ‘individualism’ has become associated with neglect of

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community, with selfishness, with consumerism. The ‘me-generation’, plugged in to iPods, iPads, iPhones and iTunes is an easy target for the charge of disconnectedness and an obsession with the latest technological microgadetry. This is, of course, unfair. In Liberal Theology individuals are encouraged to make up their minds about what faith is, and how they are to apply it to their own lives. That is not to say that there are no boundaries to faith; it *is* to say that within those boundaries there is much scope for variety in individual belief and practice. Liberals and evangelicals actually share an adherence to individualism. Liberals make the obvious point that in order to accept the Faith one must at least begin to understand what one is accepting. Reason is needed for this to happen. Evangelicals stress the need for conversion, which requires the full response of the individual soul.

With this chapter the preliminaries have come to an end. We turn next to the issues.