

BLOGS

Seven Characteristics of Liberal Theology



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What is theological liberalism?

Liberalism is both a tradition—coming out of the late-18th century Protestant attempt to reconfigure traditional Christian teaching in the light of modern knowledge and values—and a diverse, but recognizable approach to theology.

Like any “ism,” liberalism is not easy to pigeonhole. But Gary Dorrien’s magisterial three volumes on [The Making of American Liberal Theology](#) present a coherent picture of a movement that has been marked by identifiable hermeneutical and sociological commitments. Even if one wishes to avoid liberal theology, it would still be wise to know something about a movement that has exerted such considerable influence over the past two hundred years.

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Below are seven characteristics of liberalism that have been culled from the first volume of Dorrien's trilogy. The headings are mine; the indented text is from the book.

1. True religion is not based on external authority

What's more, Dorrien recognizes this rejection is something new in the history of the church.

Note that Dorrien does not believe inerrancy was a Princetonian invention.

2. Christianity is a movement of social reconstruction.

3. Christianity must be credible and relevant.

4. Truth can be know only through changing symbols and forms.

5. Theological controversy is about language, not about truth.

6. The historical accuracies of biblical facts and events are not crucial, so long as we meet Jesus in the pages of Scripture.

7. The true religion is the way of Christ, not any particular doctrines about Christ.

Dorrien observes that this kind of religion was a departure from historic orthodoxy.

The new progressive religion of liberalism understood Christianity quite differently.

Conclusion

Liberalism is not a swear word to be thrown around. It is a diverse, but identifiable approach to Christianity, one that differs significantly from historic orthodoxy, not to mention evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Liberals believe they are making Christianity relevant, credible, beneficial, and humane. Evangelicals in the line of J. Gresham Machen believe they are making something other than Christianity. That was the dividing line a century ago, and the division persists.

“The idea of liberal theology is nearly three centuries old. In essence, it is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority. Since the eighteenth century, liberal Christian thinkers have argued that religion should be modern and progressive and that the meaning of Christianity should be interpreted from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience. (xii)”

“Before the modern period, all Christian theologies were constructed within a house of authority. All premodern Christian theologies made claims to authority-based orthodoxy. Even the mystical and mythopoetic theologies produced by premodern Christianity took for granted the view of scripture as an infallible revelation and the view of theology as an explication of propositional revelation. Adopting the scholastic methods of their Catholic adversaries, Protestant theologians formalized these assumptions with scholastic precision during the seventeenth century. Not coincidentally, the age of religious wars that preceded the Enlightenment is also remembered as the age of orthodoxy.”

“One of the most influential definitions of theological liberalism was offered in 1949 by an able latter-day proponent, Daniel Day Williams: “By ‘liberal theology’ I mean the movement in modern Protestantism which during the nineteenth century tried to bring Christian thought into organic unity with the evolutionary world view, the movements from social reconstruction, and the expectations of ‘a better world’ which dominated the general mind. It is that form of Christian faith in which a prophetic-progressive philosophy of history culminates in the expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.” (xiv)”

“Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy heightened the Reformation principle that scripture is the sole and infallibly sufficient rule of faith, teaching that scripture is also strictly inerrant in all that it asserts. (xv)”

“Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the nature and social sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its favoring of moral concepts of atonement; and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people. (xxiii)”

“Bushnell debated various doctrinal points with his adversaries, claiming always that their disagreements were about language usage, not lack of belief: “All my supposed heresies, in reference to these great subjects, are caused by the arrest of speculation and the disallowance of those constructive judgments, or a priori arguments, by which terms that are only analogies, and mysteries that are most significant when taken only as symbols, are made to affirm something wiser and more exact than what they express.” (151-52)”

“Bushnell admonished that “all our difficulties and controversies” regarding the truths of revelation were caused by a basic failure to face up to what was known about the clothing of truths in signs and analogies. The problem was not peculiar to New England theology, he suggested; it was an “almost universal sin that infests the reasonings of mankind concerning moral and spiritual subjects.” Throughout the world, people treated the symbolic forms of their truths as the truths themselves. (151)”

“The Word of Christ is not a doctrine or the end of an argument, but a self-authenticating life; it is morally regenerative spiritual power claimed in Christ’s spirit... Moving beyond their mentor, the Bushnellians accented the humanity of Christ; Munger and Gladden lifted Jesus’ teaching above any claims about his person. In both cases, however, a self-authenticating moral image conceived as the power of true religion was in control. The true religion is the way of Christ. (399-400)”

“He cautioned that the faithful reader of scripture is not obliged to assume the truth of the Gospel narrative “by which the manner and facts of the life of Jesus are reported to us.” That was the matter in question, “We only assume the representations themselves, as being just what they are, and discover their necessary truth, in the transcendent, wondrously self-evident, picture of divine excellence and beauty exhibited in them.” Bushnell counseled that the biblical narrative is not very impressive aside from the extraordinary character of its pivotal figure, but the more that we study the figure of Jesus, “a picture shining in its own clear sunlight upon us,” the more clearly we are brought into the source and light of all truth: “Jesus, the Divine Word, coming out from God, to be

“Traditional Protestant orthodoxies place the substitutionary atonement of Christ at the center of Christianity, conceiving Christ’s death as a propitiatory sacrifice that vicariously satisfied the retributive demands of divine justice. (400)”

incarnate with us, and be the vehicle of God and salvation to the race.” (399)”

“By the end of Beecher’s life, it was almost prosaic for Munger and Gladden to assert that Christianity is essentially a life, not a doctrine. (405)”

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