

Theological Liberalism

Intro:

- Theological Liberalism in the SBC
- J. Gresham Machen - *Christianity and Liberalism*

What is Theological Liberalism?

Liberal theology replaces the traditional authority of Christianity (the Bible, creeds, confessions, etc.) with the enlightenment ideals of human rationality and experience. It seeks to remove all the supernatural parts of Christianity (all the actual good stuff!) and simply keep things which would be acceptable to human reason and experience.

Whereas historic Christianity focused on doctrine, liberal theology focuses on *personal experience, moral living, internal feeling, and social work*.

Social Justice - People don't need salvation from God's wrath. Rather, they need salvation from the oppression they experience in modern society. Therefore, social justice is the main focus of the gospel.

A theological liberal is different than a political liberal.

"Fundamentally it is the idea of a genuine Christianity not based on external authority. Liberal theology seeks to reinterpret the symbols of Christianity in a way that creates a progressive religious alternative to atheistic rationalism and to theologies based on external authority. Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the natural 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." -Gary Dorrien, Professor at Union Seminary

What does Theological Liberalism seek to do?

It is an attempt to save Christianity from intellectual dismissal by modern and postmodern audiences. It believes that, if major changes are not made to traditional Christianity, then it will become irrelevant to culture.

It attempts to avoid atheism (on the one hand), and to avoid historic Christianity - based on the external authority of the Bible - (on the other hand).

Where did Theological Liberalism come from?

-First, it has its roots in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is simply a replacement of truth being revealed to humanity by God with human reason and scientific inquiry. It put the *individual* at the center of the story.

"In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant transformed Christianity from a redemptive historical religion revealed in the Bible into a deistic moralism...People do not inherit original sin, but like the story of Adam every person subverts moral duty, which is ultimate, to lesser, subordinate priorities. Being "born again" (John 3:3) was not the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit but an act of the human will which reorients the human disposition toward moral duty. Jesus's divinity consisted of his being the archetype of moral good will, not the ontological Son of God. Jesus's work was not a substitutionary atonement. Sin, or what he called 'radical evil,' is so personal that it cannot be atoned by someone else but must be atoned only by the autonomous self." - Andrew HOFFECKER, Theologian

-Second, the movement today has roots in certain philosophical developments such as existentialism.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855) – A Danish philosopher who emphasized existence and the personal experience of wrestling with faith over the objective, logical system of thought in Christianity.



-Third, it comes from Romanticism. Romanticism was an intellectual and artistic movement that emphasized passion, subjectivism, the individual, and the transcendental. It was a reaction to the sterile reason and scientific materialism of the enlightenment.



-Fourth, it comes from the theology of F.D.E. Schleiermacher

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834)



-Schleiermacher is probably in the top 5 most influential theologians in church history. However, he is not a good guy (like Augustine or Luther). He is a bad guy whose thoughts have powerfully influenced Christianity for the worse. He is considered to be the “Father of Liberal Theology.”

-He was a German professor and one of the founders of the University of Berlin.

-Being influenced by Romanticism, he focused on the “divinatory” or “feminine” approach to understanding scripture. What this means is that instead of using a method to interpret scripture that was objective, concrete, and rules-based, he wanted one that was more suprarational and based on feelings.

-Whereas traditional Christianity focused on doctrines and beliefs, Schleiermacher shifted the focus to a feeling of dependence upon the divine (what he called “God-consciousness”). *To Schleiermacher, intuition gives you a surer experience of God than the creeds of the church. As*

an example of this, he put the doctrine of the Trinity in the very back of his systematic theology textbook (*The Christian Faith*), in the appendix.

“The essence of the religious emotions consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence.”
-F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*

-For example, Schleiermacher thought that the doctrine of creation was important because, when we remember we are created beings, this causes in us a sense of dependence on the divine. But the creation stories in Genesis can't be literal (they are hopelessly unscientific), so they are not what is really essential to the Christian faith.

-Religion is beyond traditional institutions like the Bible or the church and is more about internal spirituality. The Bible does not contain propositions of truth but rather just the religious consciousness of the biblical authors.

-Other theological liberals included F.C. Baur, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Rudolph Bultmann, Horace Bushnell, Walter Rauschenbusch, Julius Wellhausen, et. al.

What does Theological Liberalism teach?

It is a wide and varied movement but the following are some common beliefs:

Jesus was not the eternal Son of God but just a moral prophet.

The Bible is not the inerrant word of God but just a work of man. It can be studied and critiqued like any other book.

God is not a Trinity. The concept of the Trinity is logical nonsense.

The message of Jesus is not about salvation from sin, atonement, or resurrection, but a simple message about knowing that there is a higher power (God) and loving your fellow man.

There is no hell.

Angels and demons do not exist.

The miracles in the Bible did not happen.

Sin is equated with ignorance.

The immanence (but not transcendence) of God. Many liberals were actually panentheists.

Humanity arose through Darwinian evolution.

Humanity is progressing, and the world is getting better.

The signs and language of Christianity are not what matter. Rather, the essence behind them, which can be found in other places, are what is important.

Jesus' death was a moral example to teach us to trust God; it was not a substitutionary atonement to take away God's wrath.

Jesus was not literally raised from the dead, but was raised in the sense that we remember him in our hearts today when we trust God and serve others.

Jesus isn't literally coming back. Rather, we bring in the Kingdom of God now through social work and human advancement.

Religion should change based upon one's experience.

Christianity is not about doctrine but about social work.

We should adapt the doctrines of Christianity to make it relevant to each changing generation.

Great quotes about Theological Liberalism

“[In theological liberalism] Christian religion became little more than common grace dispensed through programmatic kindness...minority rights, international aide, self-help management techniques, and political activism.” – John Hannah, Church Historian

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministry of a Christ without a cross.” H. Richard Niebuhr

“I'm delighted that liberal theologians do their best to...try to accommodate Christianity to modern science, modern culture, and democratic society. If I were a fundamentalist Christian, I'd be appalled by the wishy-washiness of [the liberal] version of the Christian faith. But since I am a non-believer who is frightened of the barbarity of many fundamentalist Christians (e.g. their homophobia), *I welcome theological liberalism*. Maybe liberal theologians will eventually produce a version of Christianity so wishy-washy that nobody will be interested in being a Christian anymore. If so, something will have been lost, but probably more will have been gained.” -Richard Rorty, Postmodern Philosopher

Differences between historic Christianity and liberal Christianity

	Orthodox Christianity	Liberal Christianity
God	Trinitarian	Unitarian
Jesus	Eternal Son of God	God-conscious prophet
Authority	Bible	Experience, feelings
Salvation	Through Christ	Through education
Sin	Rebellion	Ignorance
Atonement	Penal, substitutionary	Moral example
Focus	Gospel	Social work
Bible	God's Word	A record of human religion

What role should acts of justice play in the role of the church?

Acts 6:1-4 - Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Phrases you hear in churches today that have been influenced by theological liberalism

Note: Not all the following phrases are phrases that the original theological liberals would have used, but they are things I've heard Christians imply today who have been influenced by liberalism. For example, the social justice thrust of theological liberalism has been linked to race and gender, and the "feelings" component of theological liberalism has been linked to personal experience.

"I don't attend a church, but I'm very spiritual."

"I don't have to listen to what you say because I don't like the way you are saying it."

"You can't tell me that because you are of a different race than me / are a different gender than me / didn't have to grow up the way I did / don't know what I've been through."

"People can be saved even if they don't consciously know Christ."

"Someone who has a sincere faith in a different religion can still find God."

"It is morally wrong for you to tell me something that is true if it offends me or we don't have a deep relationship."

"Our church will get more people if we are not as controversial."

“If we don’t make this doctrinal change then we won’t reach the next generation.”

“God told me in my heart (experience)...”

“Church leadership has too long been dominated by rich, white, straight men.”

“We preach the whole gospel which includes social justice.”

“Even if Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead, that wouldn’t affect my faith; I’d still love others.”

“White people have inherent privilege and cannot see what’s going on as clearly as black people.”

“God is always on the side of the poor, no matter how they got there.”

“The voices of women have been ignored in the past, so we need to right this wrong by elevating their opinions and claims.”

“What you say is just as important as how you say it.”

“Stop caring about all that doctrine and theology stuff and just get out there and help the poor.”

“I know that’s in the Bible, but that advice just doesn’t feel right to me.”

“Criminals commit crimes because of ignorance or their upbringing.”

“We should teach men to respect women; that will prevent sexual assault.”

“We need to stay credible and relevant.”

“It’s more important to live like Jesus than to believe correct doctrine.”

“Stop studying so much and listen to your heart.”

Theological Liberalism is again making inroads into the church