



## Session 8 – Theological Liberalism

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One more counterfeit gospel and we're going to fly through this one—theological liberalism. This is a belief system that Richard Niebuhr described as, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Niebuhr wrote Christ and Culture, which may be one of the most significant theological and missiological works of the 20th century. In it he talks about how Christians have related to culture throughout history. This is important when we're thinking about theological liberalism, because it's an attempt to adapt Christianity to a changing culture. So let's spend some time defining the term “theological liberalism.”

### What is Theological Liberalism?

First of all, we're not talking about liberal views on the government, tax policies or other similar political issues—so get that out of your mind. We're also not talking about every Christian who disagrees with you about something in Bible. Just because somebody disagrees with you about anything doesn't make them a theological liberal. We're also not talking about people who reject Christianity altogether, whom we would say are not Christians.

What we are talking about is people who call themselves Christians, yet they deny Scripture and orthodox Christian teachings on the primary doctrines of Christianity. Admittedly, that's a broad definition—in some ways, it's even broader than what we were talking about with the prosperity gospel. Theological liberalism encompasses a variety of beliefs from a variety of theological traditions. In a sense, we don't have an official description here. Theological liberalism looks different in different parts of the world and at different points in history.

But we can use this broad picture. They are people who call themselves Christian, yet they deny Scripture and orthodox teachings on the primary doctrines of Christianity, often in an attempt to either adapt to a changing culture or appeal to an increasingly non-Christian culture. Both those are important when it

comes to the motives. Many theological liberals claim to be making Christianity more respectable or believable for the culture at large. They'll say things like "Christianity must change or it will die." Or, "We want people to actually consider and believe the gospel, but if we don't modify our message, then the culture will see us as completely irrelevant."

The attempt is often to adapt to a changing culture or appeal to an increasingly non-Christian culture, often using language that appears to be biblical, yet their teachings undercut Scripture. You might hear the line, "Well, that's just your interpretation," or, "That's an old interpretation. We have new wine for new wineskins." But just because somebody quotes a verse doesn't mean their claim is biblical. I hope we've seen that to be biblical means we interpret any part of Scripture in light of the rest of Scripture. It's context.

We measure our interpretation of major doctrines, like the ones we've looked at tonight, not in isolation, but against the backdrop of 2,000 years' worth of Christians in church history who've gone before us. We aren't the first people to interpret the Bible with the Holy Spirit. It's a picture of humility and wisdom not to throw everything out that those who have gone before us have said. But that's just it. Theological liberalism oftentimes uses language that claims to be new and contemporary. It claims to be innovative or enlightened.

The most common word is "progressive," "progressive Christianity." Theological liberalism uses language that claims to be new, contemporary, advanced, progressive, when in reality it merely rehashes old heresies. Don't be deceived by the new and popular—it is old and parasitic.

## **What Beliefs Characterize Theological Liberalism?**

Again, this will just be a general overview. I won't be giving you tons of quotes between these points, because this looks different in different streams of Christianity. We could unfortunately quote all day from mainstream Christianity here, from many Methodist to Episcopalian to Lutheran to Presbyterian to various Baptist streams. But these are the common characteristics to look for.

Theological liberalism rejects the final authority of God's Word. A common thread woven through all kinds of variations of theological liberalism is the interpretation or reinterpretation of Scripture according to modern experiences. To take a simple obvious one in our day: marriage. Obviously, in the United States, we have redefined marriage in our courts in a way that is different than the Bible's definition of marriage. So it's one thing when the culture redefines marriage. It's a whole 'nother thing, though, when the church—in response to the culture—then takes the Bible and reinterprets the Bible according to the culture, as if the culture and our modern experiences are now the authority.

Do you see how subtly that happens? It's happening in all kinds of churches and we shouldn't be surprised. That was the very entrance of sin into the world. Satan came to Eve and said, "Did God really say? Let's reinterpret His word." Theological liberalism interprets Scripture according to popular reasoning and according to contemporary science. We talked about this a lot last year at Secret Church, so we won't camp out long there. Bottom line: theological liberalism exalts our experiences, our reasoning and our supposed discoveries over the authority of God's Word.

Second, and related to that, theological liberalism rejects God's supernatural and miraculous work in history. I hear this in popular supposedly evangelical Protestant preachers, casting doubts on miracles in the Bible. "This didn't really happen with Jonah. This didn't really happen with Joshua, or Moses crossing the Red Sea. It wasn't the literal splitting of a body of water; it's a metaphor for gaining freedom from oppressive political systems." Or even "the resurrection of Christ is merely a symbol of hope in the midst of difficult circumstances." I trust we realize these are not just disagreements about interpreting a particular verse. These are beliefs that undercut the very foundations of the Christian faith. Theological liberalism rejects the seriousness of individual sin before a holy God by either redefining sin or relegating it to a minor offense, making salvation from sin a minor need. The way this plays out practically is this—and here's how you can spot theological liberalism: Theological liberalism decries injustice while downplaying evangelism.

Whenever you hear professing Christians talking about issues of justice in the world, yet you don't hear them emphasizing the need to proclaim the gospel for forgiveness of sins, you're getting close to—if you're not already in the midst of—theological liberalism. That's the story of the social gospel, where social issues have gradually overtaken various Christian understandings of the gospel to the point where—instead of being the good news that we've explored tonight in the Word—the gospel becomes the good things we're doing in the world.

Another evidence of theological liberalism is an emphasis on general spirituality over ongoing sanctification—almost functionally New Age in practice. It prioritizes spiritual feelings and spiritual experience over increasing conformity to the image of Christ and belief in the truth of Christ.

Fourth, theological liberalism often rejects the Bible's teaching on the person and work of Christ. Theological liberalism sees Jesus as a good moral Teacher but not as the divine Son of God, or it sees the cross as an example of God's love, not as the propitiation of God's wrath. Theological liberalism denies that God has any wrath to be appeased or that man has a need for propitiation.

In these ways, it's not just the Person and work of Christ, but the character and attributes of God and the necessity and nature of salvation that are called into question. Which then, not surprisingly, leads to the next characteristic.

It rejects the Bible's teaching on judgment and eternity. Theological liberalism downplays or totally denies hell, in part because theological liberalism de-emphasizes the holiness and wrath of God. Theological liberalism has almost no category for the wrath of God.

And just a side note here: it's not that theological liberalism will necessarily come out and say, "God has no wrath." Instead, churches and pastors and Christians will just never talk about God's wrath. There are so many churches today where the Bible's teaching on judgment, eternity, hell, holiness and wrath, are hardly ever, if ever, to be heard. If you look at many of the fastest growing churches in the United States, that will be the case. They may not explicitly be spreading theological liberalism, but by their silence they are absolutely spreading the idea that God is not to be feared, judgment is not to be anticipated and hell is not to be dreaded.

Part of the reason theological liberalism spreads this way through silence is because it rejects certain teachings in Scripture when they become unpopular or ridiculed. Hell is certainly not popular. I spoke not long ago to a supposedly Christian university not far from where I'm standing right now. I just mentioned hell in the sermon and the dean at the school told me he couldn't remember the last time he had heard that word in a church or chapel service. I don't think he was saying he was glad I said it, because I have not been invited back since.

It's not just doctrine here, it's practice. Theological liberalism is particularly prone to discount or redefine biblical ethics. They're saying it's a new day; we have new morals and a greater understanding than we had a century ago. So they're revising what's good and evil, right and wrong. This is especially prevalent in views on contemporary sexuality. Just think, in many churches—not just in our culture—sexual practices are accepted and endorsed today with appeals to the Bible that would never have been accepted or endorsed ten years ago, much less the last 2,000 years of Christian history. But just like that, we're throwing aside not only plainly obvious interpretations of Scripture, but 2,000 years of Christians who have read those same Scriptures, because those Scriptures are now unpopular or ridiculed. But that's one of the characteristics here.

Theological liberalism rejects consistent teachings from the church throughout history. It claims to have progressed in knowledge and understanding, implying at least ignorance, if not foolishness, in the Christians who have gone before us.

I was grieved the other night over dinner as I was discussing with some folks the movement among so-called "LGBTQ Christians"—men and women who are actively engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman, yet calling themselves Bible-believing, Bible-obeying Christians. This conversation was in the context of family members who are caught up in this. And the sad part is that churches—theologically liberal churches—are saying, "Yes, that's Christian" and actively encouraging

sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman, which God clearly speaks about. This is so dangerous.

## **How Should We Respond to Theological Liberalism?**

My first encouragement is to **recognize it for what it is: a non-Christian religion**. It is, in Paul's words in Galatians 1, "a different gospel." It's a distortion of the gospel when you reject the authority of God's Word.

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ (Galatians 1:6–10).*

Think about the five core threads of the gospel. Theological liberalism calls into question the very character of God, including His holiness and His wrath. It minimizes the sinfulness of man and the sufficiency of Christ—His identity, His work, His life, His death as our Substitute, His physical resurrection from the dead. It redefines faith according to what fits your preferences and feels good to you and adapts to your life.

It places no emphasis on the coming judgment before a holy God—a judgment that leads to hell for all those who have not turned from their sin and themselves to trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. J. Gresham Machen sums it up well. "Despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology, modern liberalism is not only a different religion from Christianity, it belongs in a different class of religions."

If you think about it, this makes sense. The root of theological liberalism is unbelief. It's a lack of belief in God and His Word. It's the exaltation of our thoughts about God's truth. That's what unites all these tenets together—the exaltation of our thoughts over God's truth. C.S. Lewis has a great quote here, especially near the end:

Liberal Christianity can only supply an ineffectual echo to the massive chorus of agreed and admitted unbelief. Don't be deceived by the fact that this echo so often 'hits the headlines.' That is because attacks on Christian doctrine which would pass unnoticed if they were launched (as they are daily launched) by anyone else, become News when the attacker is a clergyman; just as a very commonplace protest against make-up would be News if it came from a film star. By the way, did you ever meet, or hear of, anyone who was converted from scepticism to a 'liberal' or 'demythologised' Christianity? I think that when unbelievers come in at all, they come in a good deal further (C.S. Lewis).

Basically C.S. Lewis was pointing out that people don't come from unbelief to belief in theological liberalism, because there's nothing there to compel belief. By its very nature, it's unbelief. The root of theological liberalism is unbelief, which means the answer to theological liberalism is regeneration. The great need of men and women who are caught in this is a new heart.

*Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:3–8).*

So recognize theological liberalism for what it is: it's a counterfeit gospel. It's not the true gospel. It claims to be Christian, but it's not of Christ. It's against Christ.

So as a result, **reject theological liberalism when you read it in a book or hear it in the church.**

Paul didn't play with those who were making shipwrecks of other's faith and neither should we.

*This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18–20).*

Whenever you hear this, run—even if it seems popular. Just because a church is popular doesn't mean it's preaching the true gospel. In fact, if a church is popular, you likely have reason to question if it's preaching the true gospel.

The same with a book. Followers of Christ read so many books that are so un-Christian with a Christian label. So be on guard. Be on guard. Be on guard. Hear this quote from Richard Rorty who is adamantly opposed to Christianity, but he loves theological liberalism. Why? He says:

I'm delighted that liberal theologians do their best to do what Pio Nono said shouldn't be done—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.

Rorty is absolutely right that theological liberalism leads to a wishy-washy faith that nobody has ultimate interest in, because it won't address the deepest need of their hearts. God, help us to hear this. For God's sake and by God's grace, don't tolerate a pastor who preaches theological liberalism, either explicitly or implicitly. As a member of the church, address this. If leadership in the church promotes theological liberalism, then go to a church where the gospel and God's Word are proclaimed. Reject this whenever you read it in a book or hear it in a church.

**Trust the Word of God over human wisdom, experience and reason.** Trust the Word of God. Realize that we're prone to suppress truth.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Romans 1:18–23).*

We're prone to suppress truth, particularly when we don't like it or we don't want to see it.

In our own sinfulness, we're limited in our own understanding. Our minds are small and sinful.

*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Ephesians 4:17–19).*

Meanwhile, God is infinitely wise, absolutely truthful and perfectly faithful.

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Romans 11:33).*

*For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness (Psalm 33:4).*

So **teach the Word of God, then, with honest compassion and humble boldness.** I pray for both of these in my life. I don't presume in any way that I have them perfectly, but we need both: honest compassion and humble boldness. So teachers—pastors, small group leaders, Bible study leaders, children's and students' and men's and women's ministry leaders, even just in disciple-making relationships with individuals, parents with your kids in your homes or wherever—don't shrink back from teaching God's

Word with humble boldness, not based on your authority, but based on the authority of God's Word, and with honest compassion for the people you are leading and teaching.

*And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24–26).*

Teach the Word, and as you do, **believe God's supernatural works in history**. “Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles” (Psalm 105:5). Our entire faith is based on God's supernatural and miraculous works in history.

Believe God and **revere God's holiness**. Do not let theological liberalism rob you of an awe of God. Stand in awe of Him.

*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28–29).*

*But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness (Isaiah 5:16).*

Revere His holiness and **recognize our sinfulness**. Don't minimize the seriousness of sin in your life. That's the fruit of theological liberalism: the minimization of sin's offense. Don't let it happen in your heart. Hate sin—even that which you perceive to be the smallest of sins. Hate it. Don't rationalize it. Run from it.

*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3:23).*

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5).*

Recognize our sinfulness, and when you do, **refuse to minimize the Person and work of Christ**. That's the beauty: the more you see sin for what it is, the more you will love and adore and worship Christ for Who He is and what He has done. Don't let theological liberalism rob you of the glorious, majestic, true, breath-taking, mind-blowing view of Jesus Christ and a solemn view of the future.

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15–20).*



*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*

*...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25–26).*

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit... (1 Peter 3:18).*

**Realize that heaven and hell are at stake in what we believe and teach.** The stakes couldn't be any higher—for you or for the people around you. So hold fast to the truth of God's Word.

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).*

*...who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21).*

**Respect the beliefs of Christians who have gone before us.** Do not think that Christianity sure is glad that you and other people around you have come on the scene to figure things out that for 2,000 years other Christians haven't been able to get. You have far too high a view of yourself and your progressed thinking. This is particularly true when you are rehashing centuries of people whose objections to the Bible have come and gone. Stand with the line of those who have trusted God's Word through changing cultural tides for 2,000 years.

*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).*

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14–15).*

**Risk opposition, ridicule and even persecution in the culture around you for the sake of Christ in you.**

*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11–12).*

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16).*

I think about even a couple friends here tonight who are in major legal battles that are reaching to the highest levels of our country because they're operating their businesses on convictions they hold in Christ, at great risk to themselves, their families, their livelihood. I praise God that they're not caving in to theological liberalism in the form of, not just the culture, but churches and supposed Christians who would tell them to put aside their convictions from God's Word. I praise God that they're standing on God's Word, along with a long line of men and women (Matthew 5:12) who have gone before them and have held fast to faith in God's Word, with God's love, for the spread of God's gospel. That's part of the point of tonight. We have brothers and sisters around the world right now who are not backing down in the face of persecution.

God help us—particularly those of us who are gathered in places where we're free to worship—God help us not to trade in our confidence in God's Word just because of some changing cultural tides around us. May it never be so.

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