

# **Dr. Roger Green, American Christianity, Session 18, Liberal Theology in America**

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This is Dr. Roger Green in his teaching on American Christianity. This is session 18, Liberal Theology in America.

I'm on page 15 of the syllabus. Just a reminder kind of about where we are. This is lecture number 14.

We're calling this Liberal Theology in America. This is part 4 of the course Modern America 1918 to the Present. So, lecture 14, Liberal Theology in America.

What I did was just a reminder. I gave an introduction about what life was like in America between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the beginning of the First World War in 1918. So, the kind of life that was in American broader culture was a progressive one. It was certainly a prosperous life for some people, no doubt.

Americans were very confident of the future and very confident of what the future would hold for them. So, there is a lot going on. We also mentioned, however, that there were a lot of changes taking place.

We mentioned Darwinism, and we'll talk about that again. A lot of historical changes took place, but especially social changes were taking place with people coming into the cities in great masses, working in the cities. How do you handle all of that? And increasing kind of secularization as well.

So now liberalism is what we, by the way, will call classical Protestant liberalism, just to give an exact label to it. Classical Protestant liberalism starts to take hold in the theology of Christianity in America in seminaries, pulpits, publications, and so forth. So, okay.

So, I think that's where we stopped, because I don't think we stopped with number B, three strategies for saving Christianity. We didn't start there, did we? We didn't get to that, did we? Okay, three strategies for saving Christianity. So let me give a quick introduction, and then we'll look at these three this morning.

What happens is that with the onslaught of the modern world and with the onslaught of all the things we've kind of talked about, a lot of Christians, well-meaning Christians, thought that Christianity was really in jeopardy. Christianity in America is in jeopardy. It is in jeopardy of kind of caving in, and especially it's in

jeopardy of caving in because you've got a pretty tremendous intellectual onslaught against Christianity in this kind of very progressive world in which we're living.

You've got people who doubt the authority of the Bible, people who doubt the authority of the church. And so, intellectually, Christianity is under attack. Now, what happens is there were people in this movement we call classical Protestant liberalism who what they want to do is they want to save Christianity.

They want to save Christianity. They want to make it a viable, healthy, intellectual religion in America. And so, what happens is that classical Protestant liberalism devises three strategies.

These are basically intellectual strategies, but there are three strategies for saving Christianity in America and making Christianity alive again in America in spite of all the onslaught. Okay, so the first one is called deifying the historical process. Deifying the historical process.

Okay, so first of all, when we use the word when we say if something is deified, what do we mean when we use that word? Something is deified. We mean what? You can tell maybe by looking at the word, but I'm sorry, made into a deity. Something is made into a deity. Something is held to be kind of godlike.

So, the first strategy was deifying the historical process. In other words, if we're going to save Christianity in America, let's look at the historical process and let's use that as a way of saving Christianity in America. In other words, if Christians could just understand the historical process, then they would understand what it means to be a good Christian in the modern world.

So, we call this deifying the historical process. Okay, so what these people preach then, now remember they're preaching this in pulpits, they're teaching this in the seminaries, they're writing about this in books, and so forth. What they are teaching is that God reveals himself primarily in history.

If you want to know about God and if you want to have a religion that is kind of God-centered once again, you know because they felt Christianity was in jeopardy. So, what you have to do is to understand that God reveals himself in history. And that's not new because when you look at the Old Testament, one of the ways in which God shows himself is by the way he has worked with the people of Israel.

So that's not a new thing. However, the new thing in a sense was that God revealed himself in history, but he also incarnates himself in humanity. Not through Jesus Christ but through humanity.

God, we look at humanity, and we see the incarnation of God in humanity. And it's humanity that kind of carries forth the history in which we see God, in which we understand God. Now, you should start to have some kind of question marks there already when I say that, but remember, they're trying to save Christianity, redeem Christianity, and this is the way they do it.

So now, these people also believe in Jesus. They have a view of Jesus, and there is no doubt about that. So, they don't discount Jesus.

They even call him Christ. Now the important thing about Jesus Christ is, however, is not that he was God. That's not the important thing about Jesus.

The important thing about Jesus Christ is that he was so at one with the deity, with God. He was so in touch with God. He was so kind and connected with God that he embodied a close relationship between the divine and the historical.

He's the embodiment of that wonderful relationship between God and history coming in Christ, and he is in Jesus. So therefore, the best thing you can do when it comes to Jesus is to imitate him. We shouldn't think about these people who are kind of teaching this now, deifying the historical process, that we shouldn't think about him as God, but we should think about him as a human being who is very much connected with God in touch with God, and who very much understood the historical process that God is working out in his world.

So, the best thing you can do is try to imitate Jesus. Try to be the kind of person who is also very much in touch with God and understands the historical process of God in the world. We should say these people also talked about the kingdom.

They liked the kingdom language. That's okay to use kingdom language as long as we understand the kingdom to be the continual unveiling of who God is in the historical process.

So, you don't need to understand the kingdom of God in some kind of theological way, something that was established by Christ. But if you understand the kingdom of God as an evolution of the historical processes of God in history and so forth, you're going to have a pretty good understanding of what Jesus was trying to teach you about the kingdom of God. So again, biblical language is used here, but it is used in a bit of a different way by these people trying to save Christianity.

Okay, another thing about deifying the historical process. These people read the Bible. They believe in the Bible.

They open up their Bible. They preach from the Bible. They teach from the Bible.

They believe in the Bible. They have not let the Bible go. However, as far as they're concerned, the Bible should never be seen as some kind of theological work.

If you're interpreting the Bible theologically, or if you're interpreting the Bible doctrinally, you're on the wrong course in terms of hermeneutics. When you open the Bible, you need to read it as a historical document. You need to read it as a kind of unveiling of God at work in history.

Now, for a lot of these people, the great way that God is at work in history is through religious experience, and we'll talk about that later on as well. Religious experience is the way in which you see God most dominantly at work in the historical process. So, they placed a great emphasis on religious experience.

Now, remember, for them, religious experience isn't sin, redemption, or sanctification. Religious experience for them is to be somehow connected with God the same way Jesus was connected with God, to have kind of the mind of God in you, and so forth. But you see that religious experience.

Okay, another thing then, and that is, you're going to read this document called the Bible, you're going to read it as a historical document unfolding history, and is there anything that you should get out of it in terms of the life that you're living? And the answer to that is yes. There are principles. There are basic principles in the biblical message that you should get out of the Bible.

So, those principles have been true all throughout history, and you should exercise them in your personal morality and in your social ethics. So, one principle obviously would be the principle of love. God is a loving God.

We see this in the historical narrative as the historical narrative unfolds, and we should be loving to one another. So, the principle of love, for example, is an eternal principle in the Bible from Genesis to the book of Revelation. So, get those principles and apply them to your personal life and social ethics, and you're going to be okay.

You're going to understand what the Bible is trying to teach you. Now, progress. These people also deified the historical process; they believed in the progress of humanity.

As they looked at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, they felt that humanity was progressing, getting better and better and better. They were looking forward to the 20th century being a Christian century. So, they saw progress.

They saw the 20th century was going to be this great Christian century. And therefore, deifying the historical process is the right way to go. Okay.

The funny thing, however, is that the 20th century began in 1914 with World War I. So, if you think that the 20th century is going to be a great Christian century, it's going to be kind of the great unfolding of God's history, you're going to be in trouble with that theology. You're not going to be able to sustain that theology after World War I, because World War I was so brutal and so forth. We've already talked about that.

So, this becomes problematic for people who want to deify the historical process. What happens when the historical process not only gets sidetracked, what happens when the historical process gets really, really, really messed up with World War I and World War II in Korea and Vietnam and the Holocaust, and what happens then to your kind of deifying the historical process. So, there are some problems there. But there were a number of theologians and a number of pastors who deified the historical process, and that's the way to go.

If we can just instill that in people kind of doctrinally if we can get them reading the Bible, that way if we can get the preachers preaching that message, we're going to save Christianity in America. We're going to make it something viable again because they saw it as something that had pretty much caved in. So, that's first, the first kind of tactic or the first kind of strategy here.

Okay, questions about that one, deifying the historical process? Yeah, there are, and we're going to be getting to some names here. I'll do the three first, and then we're going to be getting to some names of people who, in one way or another, forwarded these strategies. So, we will see some folks.

Yeah, right, right. That's a good question. This is more of a Protestant project because Roman Catholicism is still getting its act together after the Civil War.

It's still an immigrant church. It's still kind of consolidating itself, and then we get into World War I and so forth. This is, yeah, really a Protestant project that we're talking about here.

Right, yeah. Yes, and where we would use them in a place like Gordon, for example, will be in reaction to this, to this, with the found, and we'll talk a lot about that because we talk about fundamentalism and evangelicalism. So, the founding of the Bible colleges and places like that is a reaction to liberalism that was perceived not to save American Christianity but to further remove it from its roots.

So, we'll get, we'll see a lot of that. Yeah. Right, right.

In other words, they don't believe in the incarnation in one person. God didn't come in the flesh in one person, but God, God comes to this world in a real, in a real

tangible way. So, I don't mean incarnation like I would mean it if we talk about the incarnation of Jesus, God coming in the flesh, but tangible would be a good thing.

How do you? What's the tangible way in which God manifests himself? And the tangible way is through history. You can see how God has worked in the Old Testament, the New Testament, the history of the church, and the history of America. I mean, you can, you can see that, trace that, and so that's how God, that's a tangible way you can understand God through that kind of incarnation.

So, he's not coming in the flesh in the person of every human being, but he's coming in a tangible way through history that we human beings should be able to see if we're reading the Bible correctly and if we're preaching correctly and so forth. Something else? Yeah, Emory. Yes.

What will happen is when we see evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and evangelicalism coming along. Part of it is a reaction to these three that we're going to be, these three that we'll talk about. And now we've got a couple of other lectures before we get to fundamentalism and evangelicalism. So, because we do, we do want to talk about New Orthodoxy.

We do want to talk about Rauschenbusch, and so, so we get, we're fleshing this out a bit, but then we'll see how fundamentalism and evangelicalism respond to this, but that's right. It will largely respond to the ideas that we're mentioning in these three movements. Something else about deifying the historical process.

Okay, so what is a strategy for it? It's a strategy for saving Christianity in America, making it strong again. So, as Carter mentioned, it's a Protestant strategy. Basically, Roman Catholicism was not involved in this at this time.

So, okay, that's number one. Number two is stressing the ethical, stressing the ethical. Okay, so for these people, and yeah, that, you know, here's another thing.

With the three that we're going to be talking about, I don't want to, I don't want you to get the idea that there were certain, you know, there was kind of one group of people here, and then there's another group of people here, and then there's another group. These things all kind of intersect with each other. This is a classical liberal Protestant strategy for saving.

But I'm just explaining them in these three ways, so I hope it'll make sense to you. So that's the only reason I'm doing it. Okay, does that make sense? Okay.

Okay, for stressing the ethical. The key test for Christianity, and this became almost a byword for people. Life, not doctrine.

Life, not doctrine. Christianity is about life. It's not about doctrine.

It's about the life you live and the kind of life you live. And so, therefore, these people felt we could save Christianity and really make it viable if we really stressed this. So, it's not a doctrine we're concerned with.

It is life, living a good, ethical, kind of moral life. So, okay, who becomes the example here? Of course, once again, Jesus becomes the example. Jesus was the person who lived the kind of life in a relationship with God.

The true life as it should be lived, look at Jesus, and then you'll have your example. Okay, and so Jesus, and so for these people, notice Jesus did not emphasize judgment. Jesus emphasized love.

So, living a loving life is really what life should be all about if you're a Christian, and judgment should be out of the picture. They were nervous about judgment. Yeah, Haley? Right.

They did not believe Jesus was God, but that would be true basically for all three that we'll talk about in general, that they did believe that Jesus was sent from God. They have a high view of Jesus and that he had a special relationship with God, but he wasn't God in the flesh. So, Jesus becomes your example.

Jesus becomes your moral example, your ethical example. So, now, one thing that is very important for people stressing ethics is Christian education. Christian education becomes really, really critical.

The Sunday school movement, in a sense, was taken over somewhat by some of these people because they wanted to stress the ethical, and if you're going to stress the ethical, you've got to educate people. You've got to train people in terms of what the ethical is all about. Okay, the illustration here is from my own personal life, which I will not tell you the name of the church.

I will not tell you where the church is located. I will not tell you what denomination it is, but many, many years ago, I was asked to go and do a Sunday school class on the Gospel of John for an adult in this church for an adult Sunday school group, and I think I was there for four weeks, four Sundays. Now, I found it a little strange, and this would, well, I'll let you decide.

I found it a little strange. We went on the first Sunday, so I obviously had my Bible because we were doing the Gospel of John, so I found it strange. Nobody had Bibles.

Nobody thought to bring a Bible. Why would you bring a Bible to church? I mean, they weren't kind of making this connection. I'm not sure why they asked, but

anyway, not quite making this connection, so they scurried around. They did find a couple of Bibles in the church somewhere, hidden away in the cupboard or something, so they found a couple of Bibles, and they were able to kind of look.

People were able to look. Now, finding the Gospel of John was a pretty major chore, so I had to, okay, let's see what Bible you're using. Okay, let's turn to page 1009. The first Sunday was really hard, but now, after a while, I think we maybe got the gist of it, but I'm not sure why I was invited.

I'm not sure whose idea it was in that church to actually have a Bible study. I mean, why would you do that in a church? And then I had a little bit of a disconcerting, I guess a disconcerting little adventure here. On my fourth Sunday, when I was finished, I just walked down the hallway, and there were Sunday school classes for kids, you know, different ages and everything, and I noticed in two or three of the rooms that they were still going on.

Their class was still going on. I noticed in two or three of the rooms that they were showing cartoons, like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and Davy Crockett and all that, showing cartoons, and I was watching these cartoons for quite a while and everything, so I just happened to ask someone in the church, well, tell me about the Sunday school class. Well, we don't use the Bible with our kids in Sunday school.

That would be out, forbidden, but we do show them cartoons, and we think that from these cartoons, they can get some moral values in terms of how they should live their Christian life, and so they think that the cartoons give them a better moral understanding of the Christian life than the Bible and so forth, so you wouldn't, why would you use the Bible in Sunday school? I mean, who would think? So, so cartoon, I said cartoon, so I, so I was, they never invited me back. I've never been back, but it was strange, I mean, it was a very strange kind of event in my own life because that's just not the world I live in, and so, but it was a very liberal church, and basically, why use the Bible when you can use cartoons? I should tell you about one church. Should I? I got to watch my time, but I should tell you about one church I went to.

This is a very interesting church. I shouldn't, I shouldn't do this, but I will, but I used to take students to New York City. We at Barrington College used to have a winter in January, so we'd have three weeks.

In January, so we'd have three weeks in my winter. I used to take students to New York City for those three weeks. I wanted them to see what an experimental church in Greenwich Village is.

So, on one Sunday, we went to that church. It was called the Judson Memorial Church. And after, I am Judson, by the way, Judson Memorial Church.



It's a very interesting church. And I didn't know how my students were going to react to this. So we had interesting discussions after.

For example, on one Sunday that we went to one year, the pastor preached from the piano because he's a jazz pianist. So, he preaches on the piano. And all of the hymns that morning were on Mickey Mouse, like Disney songs, like Mickey Mouse and Davy Crockett.

Those were the hymns for the morning of the church because he was preaching from his piano about the Mickey Mouse religion. So, in order to get us in sync with the Mickey Mouse religion that he was preaching, we sang Disney songs. So, they were the hymns of the church.

So, they said that's where the hymns are for the morning. So, it's a very interesting experimental church. And it's Judson Memorial Church.

When you think of the background at and around Judson, it's a Judson Memorial Church, but very experimental. So, another time, we were there for another year, but it was communion in the church. It's communion time in the church.

So, I thought this is going to be interesting. I wonder what they were going to do. They're more liberally oriented, you might say.

For communion, it was Coca-Cola and potato chips. So, they passed around some potato chips and then some Coca-Cola and so forth. So very interesting Judson Memorial Church.

So you can get, this has nothing to do with anything. So I'm going to lecture, actually lecture again, but it just reminded me of going to that other church. And then I've been to Judson Memorial Church.

And so you can see some interesting, strange, and wonderful phenomena out there. But in any case, it goes back to stressing the ethical. Okay, so that's what these people do, stressing the ethical.

Okay, now there were some of these folks, now we're going to get into a couple of names. There were some folks who stressed really personal ethics and sometimes almost a health and wealth gospel, but they were more connected theologically. So they weren't; they were people who theologically were more rooted, but some textbooks still refer to them as being in the liberal tradition.

But I want you to know they're more theologically rooted than the kind of excesses we've been talking about. Let me mention four of them. The first two tended to, at times, stress the individualism of the gospel.

At times, they tended to stress almost a health and wealth gospel. They weren't Joel Osteen, but they tended to stress a health and wealth gospel at times. And the two of them that are most famous were Henry Ward Beecher and those are his dates.

And then Phillips Brooks at Trinity Church. On our second field trip, we went to Trinity Church and saw the Church of Phillips Brooks. Now, we want to reiterate that these people might've been more in the liberal tradition, but they were grounded much more than what we've been talking about.

They were grounded in the scriptures, in God as Christ, in the Trinity, and so forth. But they were people a little more in the liberal tradition. Sometimes, in their preaching, they would stress the ethical, but they believed that Jesus was God.

They did believe in the Trinity and so forth. But those are two names you want to take note of. Two other names that you want to take note of were Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch.

I'll be right with you, Carter. Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. Now you've read that biography of Rauschenbusch.

You've probably read it two or three times over by now because you've had it since the first day to read it. So, if you're reading a chapter a week, you've read it probably three times. These two were the founders of what became known as a social gospel.

Now, the social, but these two people also are well grounded theologically, well grounded in terms of the Trinity, and the incarnation, and so forth, and as a matter of fact, as we'll stress when we lecture on Rauschenbusch and your book stresses, Rauschenbusch even would be considered an evangelical, that's a label that the author of your book notices uses for Rauschenbusch. However, I'm using Gladden and Rauschenbusch as people who have a liberal tendency to stress the social part of the gospel, so that's where this kind of stressing the ethical goes. It can go into an individual stress of the ethical as it did with Beecher and Brooks at times, or it can go into a social stress of the ethical as it did with Gladden and Rauschenbusch at times. So, this stressing of the ethical can go in either of those two directions.

Okay, I saw Carter's hand here, so stressing the ethical, yes. Right, he was, you're talking about Henry Ward Beecher, he was the, right, his dad was Leonard Beecher, but he is, no, he is the individualism that he, they sometimes stressed, he might have come under criticism for, but these are pretty, these four people are certainly within the pale of orthodox Christianity, no doubt about that. Okay, so that, number three, let me go back here, number three, okay, third, and the centrality of religious feeling, the centrality of religious feeling, a third way in which to kind of redeem Christianity in America.

Okay, so jot that down. That's also in your syllabus, the centrality of religious feeling. Oops, all right. Now, in order to, we will never understand the centrality of religious feeling unless we understand Friedrich Schleiermacher, so I need to begin with a little bit of church history and a little bit of theological history, and that is with Friedrich Schleiermacher, and this is the picture of Friedrich Schleiermacher here. Okay, Friedrich Schleiermacher, a lot of you have. Before this course began, you heard of Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin. How many of you have heard of Friedrich Schleiermacher before today? Anybody, one, two, three, four, maybe four people, five.

Okay, Friedrich Schleiermacher, let's give a title to him, just a, just a place him somewhere. Sometimes he's called the father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher okay, Friedrich Schleiermacher was a German theologian, and he was a German theologian who was facing the same crisis in Germany that the people were facing in America who were developing these strategies, but he's, you know, a little bit earlier here, those are the dates of Schleiermacher. Okay, so what crisis is Schleiermacher facing? He's facing the crisis that Christianity and the Bible is outmoded.

Nobody needs it anymore, thank you very much. Maybe we used to need it, but we don't need it now. That's the crisis he was facing in Germany at the time.

So therefore, Schleiermacher feels that God called him to minister to what he called the cultural despisers of religion. So, he ministers to the cultural despisers of religion. In other words, he ministers to the up and out.

He ministers to the wealthy, the influential, and the powerful in German society in order to help them understand that Christianity is relevant to their life. In other words, he's trying to save Christianity in Germany, just like the people we're talking about are trying to redeem it in America, but he comes a little earlier. So that's why he's called the father of Christian liberalism.

Okay, so now, whenever I talk about Schleiermacher, I always have a long sermon, so I'm going to make my long sermon short because I don't have time. Some of you are going to minister to the poor, and that's wonderful... In whatever ministry God gives you, whatever vocation he leads you into, you will be dealing with the poor, the marginalized, the helpless, the homeless, and so forth. I mean, some of you undoubtedly will have that kind of ministry.

That's a wonderful thing. Some of you, however, may be called by God to minister to the wealthy, to the influential, to the powerful in society, like Schleiermacher was. He felt that this was his call.

That's a legitimate call. To minister to the cultural despisers of religion that's a legitimate call. And of you God may place some of you in such a place in life by your vocation; that's what you're going to be doing.

But that is a call, and you need to follow that call. So, I've got lots of illustrations I can use in this, but we don't have time for that. But anyway, Friedrich Schleiermacher ministered to what he called the cultural despisers of religion.

Now, what did he do that other people are starting to do with this third way? What he did was emphasize religious feeling, religious emotion, and religious attachment to God. That's what he emphasized: to bring these cultural despisers back into Christianity. So, Schleiermacher, therefore, and the people who emphasize the centrality of religious feeling, Schleiermacher and people who did so in America downplayed dogma, doctrine, and theology.

They really downplayed that, and they didn't want any kind of literal interpretation of the Bible on anything. They wanted to understand the Bible only as a book that helps us to understand our relationship with God. So, dogma is out.

Doctrine is out. Theology is out. The literal interpretation of the Bible is out.

Religious feeling is in. And so this becomes, for Schleiermacher and then for people in America when you bring it over to America, this becomes kind of a religion of the heart. Now, therefore, what happens in the broader culture, and I'll close with this.

We need to close a little early to get our exams back. But therefore, what happens in the broader culture, as far as Schleiermacher is concerned and people in America are concerned, is that we can allow science to do its thing. We can allow education to do its thing.

We can allow art to do its thing. We can allow mathematics to do its thing. Because that is another realm in which God is working.

But the religious realm in which God works is in the heart and in the individual's religious experience. So, as far as these people are concerned, there's no contest between religion and science. There's no contest between religion and art.

There's no contest between religion and education. We can allow those things to flourish, and we shouldn't feel that we need to be contesting with them at all in the broader culture. So, this becomes a religion of the heart and becomes a way of saving Christianity, convincing people that God wants you to have a religious feeling in association with him.

And now for Schleiermacher, who becomes a great model of this, then for Schleiermacher, the great model of the person who's religiously in touch with God all the time, constantly, continually, the great model becomes Jesus. Of course, Jesus became the great model of a person who is absolutely dependent upon God in his own life. So, there are three strategies.

We might have some questions about these before we get into the battle lines when we meet on Friday. So, I'm going to stop here.

This is Dr. Roger Green in his teaching on American Christianity. This is session 18, Liberal Theology in America.