

Dr. Roger Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15, Liberalism

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15, Liberalism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Roger Green's lecture in his "Reformation to the Present" church history course examines **the emergence of liberal theology**, tracing its roots back to 19th-century Germany and the influential figure of **Friedrich Schleiermacher**, considered the father of this movement. Green explains that **liberal theology arose** in reaction to religious conservatism and sought to restate Christian faith in modern terms, emphasizing religious experience and individual reason over traditional dogma. The lecture further explores **the characteristics of classical Protestant liberalism**, including its openness to scientific and historical criticism, and its surprising influence on both conservative evangelicalism through the focus on personal experience, and the left-leaning social gospel movement exemplified by **Walter Rauschenbusch**. Ultimately, the lecture sets the stage for a future evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of liberal theology.

**2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15 – Double
click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Church History → Reformation to the Present).**



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3. Briefing Document: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15, Liberalism

Briefing Document: The Rise of Liberalism in Church History

Overview:

This lecture by Dr. Roger Green serves as an introduction to the rise of liberal theology in church history, building upon previous discussions about the Reformation, evangelical resurgence, and the intellectual climate of the 17th and 18th centuries. The lecture sets the stage for a deeper examination of liberal theology by first concluding a discussion on John Wesley's theology of "perfect love" and then outlining the background and initial characteristics of liberal thought, particularly its emergence in 19th-century Germany.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. Conclusion of John Wesley and Evangelical Resurgence:

- **Doctrine of Perfect Love:** Dr. Green summarizes John Wesley's doctrine of perfect love, emphasizing that Wesley believed the Bible taught believers could achieve a form of Christian perfection in this life – a perfection in Christ, not human perfection. This doctrine was a response to the spiritual stagnation Wesley observed in the church.
- *"Wesley preached a doctrine of perfect love. And so that's where we are now."*
- *"He believed that the Bible taught the doctrine of perfect love, which was a kind of Christian perfection. It was a perfection in Christ, but it wasn't a human perfection."*
- **Two Results of Perfect Love: Creation of a Holy Community:** Wesley aimed to create a community of Methodists who would live pure lives and serve as examples of Christian living. *"So, he wanted to create kind of a holy people. He wanted to create a people who were different from the world, who were distinct from the world, and who could be recognized as a holy people."*
- **Service to the Poor and Neighbor:** Wesley emphasized caring for the poor, outcasts, and sick, defining the neighbor as "the poorest among you." His anti-slavery stance is given as an example. *"When they asked John Wesley, who's my neighbor? Wesley said, the poorest among you, that's your neighbor."*

- **Wesley's Awareness of Dangers in His Theology:** Dr. Green highlights Wesley's theological maturity by noting his consciousness of potential misinterpretations of his doctrines, especially the Doctrine of Sanctification. He cautioned against pride, salvation by works, and neglecting other doctrines.
- *"You know that you are looking at a great theologian when that theologian is aware of the dangers of his own theology. And that was true of John Wesley."*

2. Transition to Liberal Theology:

- **The Pendulum Swing:** Dr. Green frames the emergence of liberal theology as another swing of the pendulum in church history, reacting to both the severe skepticism of the Enlightenment and the evangelical resurgence. *"Today's lecture is on what we call liberal theology and how liberal theology was a bit of an answer to both of those things."*
- **Germany as the Origin:** Liberal theology is identified as originating in Germany in the 19th century. *"So Germany becomes really the first place that shows signs of this thing that we call liberal theology. So it starts in Germany."*
- **Three Influential Characteristics in 19th Century Germany:**
 - Lutheran Scholasticism:** Characterized as "doctrine void of life," where people knew church doctrines without genuine spiritual engagement. *"Now, according to Lutheran scholasticism, what we mean is doctrine void of life."*
 - Non-Religious Rationalism:** A movement de-emphasizing the church, Christian doctrine, the Bible, and Jesus, while highly valuing human reason in religious matters. *"So that is a de-emphasis of the church, a de-emphasis of Christian doctrine, a de-emphasis of the Bible, a de-emphasis of Jesus, and so forth, and a high belief in people's ability to reason..."*
 - Pietism:** A movement counteracting scholasticism and irrationalism by emphasizing both the mind and the heart in loving God, aiming to bring doctrine to life. *"Pietism was a movement which engaged the mind and the heart."*

3. Friedrich Schleiermacher: The Father of Liberal Theology:

- **Significance:** Schleiermacher is presented as the "most original theologian since John Calvin" and the central figure in the development of liberal theology. He is considered so crucial that 20th-century theologian Karl Barth deemed his works essential for understanding modern theology, alongside Calvin's.

- *"But Friedrich Schleiermacher, he is called, he gets a label attached to him. He's called the father of liberal theology."*
- *"He's the most original theologian since John Calvin."*
- *"He said that if you don't read and study Friedrich Schleiermacher, you are not going to understand modern theology."*
- **Three Influences on Schleiermacher:****Pietism:** He was raised in German pietism and understood its emphasis on both intellectual and experiential faith.
- **German Rationalism:** He was shaped by the intellectual currents of German rationalism.
- **Growing Romanticism:** He was influenced by the emerging Romantic movement, which emphasized emotion and experience over strict rationality.
- **"On Religion, Speeches to its Culture Despisers":** This is identified as Schleiermacher's most important work, where he defends Christianity to the educated elite who were dismissive of religion.
- *"The most important book by Friedrich Schleiermacher is On Religion, Speeches to its Culture Despisers."*
- **Key Ideas from "On Religion":****Emphasis on Religious Experience:** Schleiermacher argued that the essence of religion lies in religious experience, not dogma, doctrine, or correct belief. *"He tries to make the case that what is important about religion is religious experience."*
- **"Gefühl" (Feeling) as the Essence of Religion:** He used the term "gefühl," defined as "the immediate apprehension of the infinite by the finite," to describe the core of religious and Christian experience. This suggests a direct, personal understanding of God, potentially bypassing traditional intermediaries.
- *"Gefühl is the immediate apprehension of the infinite by the finite."*
- *"For Schleiermacher, gefühl is the immediate apprehension of God by an individual person."*
- **Importance of Religious Intuition:** Schleiermacher emphasized intuitive knowledge of God over intellectual understanding. *"Religious intuition is very important for Schleiermacher."*

4. Classical Protestant Liberalism Following Schleiermacher:

- **Reaction to Religious Conservatism:** Liberalism is characterized as a continuous reaction against perceived religious conservatism, particularly adherence to church authority, the Bible, and dogma. *"Classical Protestant liberalism was a reaction to religious conservatism."*
- **Restatement of Christian Faith:** Liberals aimed to rethink and restate Christian faith in ways that would be understandable and intellectually acceptable to modern people (19th and 20th centuries). *"What they tried to do was to restate the Christian faith...in ways that modern men and women will understand."*
- **Rejection of Sole Authority:** Liberal Protestants believed that religious truth should not be accepted solely based on external authority (church, clergy, dogma), but through individual reason and discernment. *"You should never accept religion based on authority alone...You are capable of discerning what is true from what is false by the reason that God has given to you."*
- **Acceptance of All Truth as God's Truth:** Liberalism embraced the idea that all truth originates from God, leading to an openness towards scientific truths (like Darwin's theory of evolution) and historical-critical approaches to the Bible. *"Protestant liberalism, classical Protestant liberalism, took a stand that all truth is God's truth...classical liberal Protestantism was open to scientific truth."*
- **Influence on Both Right and Left Wings of Christianity:**
 - Right Wing (Evangelicalism/Fundamentalism):** Liberalism's emphasis on religious experience influenced these movements, particularly the focus on the individual believer's encounter with God. *"The way it did that was with its emphasis on religious experience, with its emphasis on the experience of the heart, the experience of the believer, without the need for some intermediary."*
 - Left Wing (Social Gospel Movement):** Liberalism contributed to the rise of the Social Gospel movement, which emphasized the church's role in caring for the poor and engaging with social issues. Walter Rauschenbusch is highlighted as the "father of the social gospel movement," who balanced social action with individual faith. *"Liberalism did influence the left wing of Christianity as well...especially the teachings of a man by the name of Walter Rauschenbusch...He was called the father of the social gospel movement..."*

Conclusion and Next Steps:

The lecture concludes by indicating that the following session will delve into the basic theological conclusions of liberalism and offer an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. Dr. Green sets the stage for understanding this significant movement in church history by outlining its origins, key figures like Schleiermacher, and its initial defining characteristics.

4. Study Guide: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15, Liberalism

The Rise of Liberalism: A Study Guide

Key Concepts and Themes

- **The Pendulum Swing of Church History:** Understand the cyclical nature of theological movements, moving from criticism to resurgence and then to new responses like liberalism.
- **Evangelical Resurgence:** Recall the characteristics and figures associated with the revitalized church prior to the rise of liberalism, particularly John Wesley and his theology of perfect love.
- **Lutheran Scholasticism:** Define and explain its contribution to the environment in which liberal theology emerged in Germany.
- **Non-Religious Rationalism:** Describe its key tenets and how it influenced 19th-century German thought.
- **Pietism:** Understand its aims and how it sought to balance intellectual and experiential faith in Germany.
- **Friedrich Schleiermacher:** Identify him as the "father of liberal theology" and understand the significance of his work, particularly "On Religion, Speeches to its Culture Despisers."
- **Gefühl:** Define Schleiermacher's concept of "feeling" as the "immediate apprehension of the infinite by the finite" and its implications for understanding religious experience.
- **Classical Protestant Liberalism:** Recognize its emergence following Schleiermacher and its key characteristics, including its reaction to conservatism, its method of restating faith, its emphasis on reason over authority, its acceptance of scientific and biblical criticism, and its influence on both conservative and liberal wings of Christianity.
- **Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel:** Understand his role as the "father of the social gospel movement" and its emphasis on social justice and the church's role in caring for the poor, while also noting his connection to evangelicalism.

Quiz

1. What was John Wesley's doctrine of "perfect love," and why did he emphasize it in the 18th century church?
2. Describe two key results of John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection within his movement.
3. What were the three main characteristics of 17th and 18th century Germany that provided the background for the emergence of liberal theology in the 19th century?
4. Who is Friedrich Schleiermacher, and why is he considered such an important figure in the history of modern theology?
5. Explain Schleiermacher's concept of "gefühl" and its significance for his understanding of religion and Christianity.
6. According to Schleiermacher, what is the most important aspect of religion: dogma/doctrine or religious experience? Explain his reasoning.
7. What were two key ways in which classical Protestant liberalism sought to restate the Christian faith in the modern era?
8. Describe the attitude of classical Protestant liberalism towards scientific and biblical criticism.
9. In what way did classical Protestant liberalism unexpectedly influence the more conservative wing of the church?
10. Who was Walter Rauschenbusch, and what was the central emphasis of the social gospel movement he is associated with?

Quiz Answer Key

1. John Wesley's doctrine of "perfect love" was the belief that Christians could, through God's grace in this life, reach a state of loving God with their entire being and their neighbor as themselves. He emphasized this because he observed a lack of spiritual growth and understanding among long-time church members.
2. Two key results of Wesley's teaching were the creation of a Methodist society that aimed to be a model of Christian living and a strong emphasis on service to the poor and marginalized as an expression of Christian love.

3. The three main characteristics were Lutheran scholasticism (doctrine devoid of life), non-religious rationalism (emphasis on human reason over religious authority), and pietism (a movement emphasizing both intellectual and heartfelt faith).
4. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is considered the "father of liberal theology" because he offered a highly original theological framework that shifted the focus of religion towards subjective experience and significantly influenced subsequent theological developments.
5. "Gefühl," for Schleiermacher, is the "immediate apprehension of the infinite by the finite," or in simpler terms, a direct and personal feeling or awareness of God. He believed this feeling was the essence of religion and Christianity, preceding doctrine and dogma.
6. Schleiermacher believed that religious experience was the most important aspect of religion. He argued that while doctrines and dogmas could be helpful, the core of faith lay in the individual's direct feeling and encounter with the divine.
7. Classical Protestant liberalism sought to restate the Christian faith in ways that were intellectually acceptable to modern people and by reordering Christian beliefs to align with contemporary understanding and thought.
8. Classical Protestant liberalism generally had an open and accepting attitude towards scientific and biblical criticism, believing that all truth was God's truth and therefore these forms of inquiry should not be seen as inherently contradictory to Christianity.
9. Classical Protestant liberalism, with its emphasis on personal religious experience and the individual believer's connection to God without necessary intermediaries, ironically influenced the conservative wing's focus on personal conversion and revivalism.
10. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) is considered the father of the social gospel movement, which emphasized the church's role in addressing social injustices, caring for the poor, and bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth through social reform alongside individual faith.

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the historical context in 19th-century Germany that contributed to the rise and development of liberal theology. Consider the influence of Lutheran scholasticism, non-religious rationalism, and pietism.
2. Explain Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological contributions and assess his impact on the trajectory of modern Christian thought. Consider his concept of "gefühl" and his approach to religious experience.
3. Discuss the key characteristics of classical Protestant liberalism and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses as a theological movement within Christianity.
4. Compare and contrast the emphases of John Wesley's evangelical resurgence with the emergence of liberal theology. In what ways were they responses to similar or different aspects of the church and culture of their time?
5. Explore the influence of classical Protestant liberalism on both the conservative (evangelical/fundamentalist) and liberal wings of Christianity, using specific examples like the emphasis on experience and the rise of the social gospel.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Liberal Theology:** A theological movement that emerged in the 19th century, emphasizing reason, experience, and historical context in interpreting Christian faith, often seeking to reconcile Christianity with modern thought and scientific advancements.
- **Lutheran Scholasticism:** A period in post-Reformation Lutheranism characterized by a focus on systematizing and defending orthodox doctrine, sometimes at the expense of experiential faith and practical application.
- **Non-Religious Rationalism:** A philosophical stance emphasizing human reason as the primary source of knowledge and truth, often leading to skepticism towards traditional religious authority and doctrines.
- **Pietism:** A Protestant movement that emphasized personal piety, heartfelt religious experience, and practical Christian living, often as a reaction against perceived coldness and intellectualism in established churches.
- **Gefühl:** (German for "feeling") In the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, it refers to the immediate, intuitive awareness or feeling of dependence on the "Infinite" or God, considered the essence of religious experience.
- **Classical Protestant Liberalism:** The initial phase of liberal theology, heavily influenced by Schleiermacher, characterized by an attempt to restate Christian faith in modern terms, prioritizing reason and individual experience.
- **Biblical Criticism:** The academic study of the Bible using historical, literary, and cultural analysis to understand its origins, authorship, and meaning.
- **Social Gospel Movement:** A Protestant intellectual and social movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that applied Christian ethics to social problems, advocating for social justice, poverty relief, and the reform of societal structures.
- **Sanctification:** The process by which believers are made holy and conformed to the image of Christ. John Wesley emphasized its potential for completion in this life ("perfect love").
- **Justification by Faith:** A core Protestant doctrine emphasizing that salvation is received as a free gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ, not through human works or merit.

5. FAQs Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 15, Liberalism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: The Rise of Liberalism

1. **What significant event related to religious freedom does Dr. Green mention at the beginning of the lecture, and why is it important?** Dr. Green mentions the enactment of a law on October 14th, 1656, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony against the Quakers to prevent them from entering. This date is significant in church history as it highlights an early instance of religious intolerance in America, a theme that contrasts with the later development of liberal ideals emphasizing individual freedom of belief.
2. **According to Dr. Green, how can the history of the church from the Reformation to the present be characterized in terms of theological movements?** Dr. Green describes the history of the church as a pendulum swinging between different theological approaches. He notes periods of severe criticism and attempts to dismantle historic Christianity, followed by evangelical resurgences, and then the rise of liberal theology as a response to both the skepticism of the Enlightenment and the convictions of evangelicalism.
3. **Who was John Wesley, and what was the central tenet of his theology discussed in this lecture?** John Wesley was a significant figure in the renewal of the church in Britain during the 18th century. The central tenet of his theology discussed is the doctrine of "perfect love" or "full salvation from all sin." He believed the Bible taught that believers could achieve a perfection in Christ in this life, characterized by loving God with their whole being and loving their neighbor as themselves.
4. **What were the two main results or ramifications of John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, according to Dr. Green?** The first result was the creation of a society of Methodists who aimed to live a pure and holy life, serving as a model of Christian living to the world. The second was a strong emphasis on service to the poor, the outcasts, and the sick, embodying the commandment to love one's neighbor, whom Wesley defined as the most needy.

5. **Why is Friedrich Schleiermacher considered such a pivotal figure in the history of theology, and what is he often called?** Friedrich Schleiermacher is considered the most original theologian since John Calvin and is often called the "father of liberal theology." His importance stems from his radical reinterpretation of religion and his profound influence on subsequent theological thought, as evidenced by Karl Barth's insistence that understanding Schleiermacher is crucial for comprehending modern theology.
6. **What were the three main intellectual and cultural influences that shaped Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological development?** The three main influences were German pietism (in which he was raised and which emphasized both mind and heart in faith), German rationalism (which valued reason and human intellect), and the growing romanticism of his time (which emphasized emotion and intuition). These diverse strands converged in his life and thought, shaping his unique theological perspective.
7. **What was Friedrich Schleiermacher's major work, "On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers," and what were its key arguments as presented by Dr. Green?** Schleiermacher's major work aimed to defend Christianity to the educated elite who were dismissive of religion. Key arguments included the idea that the essence of religion lies in religious experience rather than dogma or doctrine, that this experience is rooted in "gefühl" (the immediate apprehension of the infinite by the finite, or an individual's immediate feeling and awareness of God), and that religious intuition is central to knowing God, thus shifting the focus from intellectual assent to personal experience.
8. **What were some of the key characteristics of classical Protestant liberalism that emerged following Schleiermacher, and how did it influence both conservative and liberal wings of Christianity?** Key characteristics included reacting against religious conservatism, restating Christian faith in ways understandable to modern people through intellectual engagement, questioning religious authority based solely on tradition, accepting all truth (including scientific and historical-critical findings) as God's truth, and emphasizing religious experience. Ironically, this emphasis on personal religious experience influenced the more conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist wings of Christianity, while liberalism's focus on social engagement and the application of faith to societal issues significantly influenced the left wing of Christianity, exemplified by the social gospel movement of Walter Rauschenbusch.