

Dr. Roger Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 16, Response to 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 16, Response to Liberalism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This text is an excerpt from a lecture by Dr. Roger Green on the response to liberalism within Christianity, specifically focusing on its historical background, theological conclusions, and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. The lecture identifies key figures like Schleiermacher and Rauschenbusch and their impact on both the right and left of Christian thought. Dr. Green outlines core tenets of classical Protestant liberalism, such as idealism, the imminence of God, emphasis on natural law, denial of original sin, and the centrality of ethics. The lecture concludes by discussing perceived strengths like openness to truth and social concern, alongside significant weaknesses including a non-biblical view of God and Christ, cultural bondage, and an overemphasis on experience and moralism, ultimately portraying the movement as having lost its substance.

**2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 16 – 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).**



**Green_ReftoPres_Se
ssion16.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 16, Response to Liberalism

Briefing Document: Response to Liberalism and the Oxford Movement

Main Themes: This lecture covers two distinct yet related responses to theological trends in the 19th century: the reaction against the perceived dominance of 18th and 19th-century evangelicalism through the rise of liberal theology, and the emergence of the Oxford Movement within Anglicanism as a response to state influence and a desire to return to early church principles.

Part 1: The Response to Liberalism

Main Ideas/Facts:

- **Context:** Following a period of evangelical resurgence, a "pushback" emerged in the form of liberal theology. Dr. Green clarifies that discussing liberal theology is descriptive and not an endorsement by Gordon College.
- **Influence of Liberalism:** Liberalism had a paradoxical influence on both the "right" and the "left" of Christianity.
- **Right:** It contributed to the emphasis on personal religious experience within evangelicalism and revivalism, a connection often overlooked by those traditions. Green states, "Certainly, people in the evangelical tradition or in the more fundamentalist tradition would never think that part of the reason for their emphasis on experience comes from classical Protestant liberalism."
- **Left:** It connected with the Social Gospel movement through figures like Walter Rauschenbusch, who, despite this connection, is now often identified as an evangelical due to historical evangelical concern for the marginalized. Green notes, "The most recent biography of Rauschenbusch identifies Rauschenbusch as an evangelical because, historically, evangelicals have been concerned for the poor."
- **Basic Theological Conclusions of Classical Protestant Liberalism:** **Idealism:** The belief that all reality is shaped by the divine mind.
- **Continuity between Divine and Human:** Seeing a positive connection rather than a break, contrasting with materialism and self-centeredness.

- **Optimism about the Future:** Viewing the world as rational and divinely motivated, expecting progress.
- **Imminence of God:** Emphasizing God's presence in the natural world and through social betterment, rather than transcendence. Green explains, "When society was working for the betterment of humankind, they saw that as a kind of the divine imminent God working through society to make better what he had created originally."
- **Emphasis on Natural Law/Theology:** Believing God works through the natural order and human interaction, seeing this law as progressive.
- **Denial of Original Sin:** Rejecting the idea of an inherent sinful nature separating humanity from God, while acknowledging sinful actions.
- **Centrality of Ethics:** Placing ethical and moral living as the key marker of religion, overshadowing theology and doctrine. Green states, "The true kind of mark of any religion, Christianity included, is whether you are leading an ethical life."
- **Evaluation of Liberalism's Strengths: Openness to Truth:** A willingness to embrace truth from various sources (scientific, philosophical, etc.). Green appreciates "an openness to truth, and wanting to be faithful to truth, a commitment to truth, not being afraid of truth, wherever it comes from."
- **Willingness to Criticize from Within:** A self-critical approach to beliefs and practices.
- **Committed Social Concern:** A focus on the needs of the poor and marginalized, exemplified by the Social Gospel movement and Walter Rauschenbusch.
- **Evaluation of Liberalism's Weaknesses: Lack of a Biblical View of God:** Reducing God to humanity's level, neglecting his sovereignty, transcendence, and the miraculous.
- **Lack of a Biblical View of Christ:** Seeing Christ primarily as a moral example, downplaying or denying his full divinity, the Incarnation, and the significance of the cross for salvation. Green notes they "emphasized his humanity, but they neglected his divinity."
- **Bondage to Culture:** An uncritical acceptance of cultural trends, exemplified by embracing radical biblical criticism and an unquestioning view of science, hindering their ability to speak prophetically to the culture. Green argues they

"often got kind of sucked into the culture...almost an uncritical view of the culture."

- **Overemphasis on Experience:** Making personal experience the ultimate measure of truth, influenced by Schleiermacher's concept of "gefühl" (absolute dependence). Green states, "for classical Protestant liberalism, everything had to pass through the bar of experience."
- **Low View of Sin and Overly Optimistic Future:** Believing in human progress to establish the Kingdom of God, failing to recognize the depth of sin and the need for divine intervention. The failure of the "Christian Century" prediction for the 20th century serves as a stark example. Green asks, "How can you sustain a view of a Christian Century when you look at the 20th century realistically?"
- **Overemphasis on Moralism (Salvation by Works):** Leading to a de-emphasis on grace, echoing the issues Luther addressed during the Reformation.
- **Low View of Revelation:** Diminishing the authority of Scripture and the unique revelation of God in Christ, coupled with a high view of human reason.
- **H. Richard Niebuhr's Critique:** Niebuhr famously summarized classical Protestant liberalism as "a God without wrath brought man without sin into the kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." This scathing critique highlighted the perceived dilution of core Christian doctrines.
- **Decline of Liberal Theology:** Dr. Green recounts an anecdote where a liberal scholar deemed classical Protestant liberalism "bankrupt," noting the lack of substance in contemporary remnants of the movement like the *Christian Century*. He concludes, "Maybe I need to retitle this lecture, The Emergence and Development and Death of Liberal Theology, because it is dead. It's gone. It's bankrupt."

Part 2: The Theology of Evangelicalism in the 19th Century (Focus on the Oxford Movement)

Main Ideas/Facts:

- **Approach:** The lecture will examine 19th-century evangelicalism in England through two major movements: the Oxford Movement (high church) and the Salvation Army (low church).
- **Significance of the Oxford Movement:** Described as "highly significant," "deeply devout," and "intensely self-conscious." It originated at Oxford University.

- **Core Aim:** To return to an understanding of the Church (capital C) as a purely divine movement, shaped only by God, based on the New Testament and the early Church (first 400 years). They viewed state control as a corruption that diminished the Church's divine nature. Green explains, "This movement is a movement that wanted to see the Church in the Body of Christ as a divine movement only."
- **Influence of Romanticism:** The movement aligns with the broader cultural trend of Romanticism, which looked to the past for cultural formation.
- **Key Figures and Their Contributions (Beginning of the Movement):**
Richard Froude (1803-1836): Advocated for a revival of early church practices, including fasting, clerical celibacy (though historically inaccurate for the earliest centuries), and reverence for the saints. He viewed the Reformation as a corruption and sought to look "beyond the Reformation to that early church."
- **John Keble (1792-1866):** Poet and preacher, whose July 14th, 1833 sermon on "National Apostasy" is considered a watershed moment, advocating for the Church's separation from state control. He emphasized the Eucharist as the means of salvation through the reception of Christ's body and blood, administered validly only by priests in apostolic succession from Peter. This theological stance leans heavily towards Catholic rather than Protestant understandings. Green asks, "Now, does that sound more Catholic, or does it sound more Protestant?" regarding Keble's views on the Eucharist.
- **John Henry Newman (1801-1890):** Considered the most important figure in the movement, an "intellectual powerhouse" who initially saw himself as an evangelical within the Anglican Church. He began publishing *Tracts for the Times* in 1833. These "treatises" explored theological issues and, over time, revealed Newman's increasing alignment with Catholic theology. Initially, he viewed the Anglican Church as the *via media* (middle way).

Key Quotes:

- **(On the disconnect between evangelicalism and the liberal influence on experience):** "Certainly, people in the evangelical tradition or in the more fundamentalist tradition would never think that part of the reason for their emphasis on experience comes from classical Protestant liberalism."

- **(On Rauschenbusch's historical connection to evangelical concerns):** "The most recent biography of Rauschenbusch identifies Rauschenbusch as an evangelical because, historically, evangelicals have been concerned for the poor."
- **(On the liberal view of God's imminence in society):** "When society was working for the betterment of humankind, they saw that as a kind of the divine imminent God working through society to make better what he had created originally."
- **(On the centrality of ethics in liberalism):** "The true kind of mark of any religion, Christianity included, is whether you are leading an ethical life."
- **(On the liberal openness to truth):** "[I appreciate] an openness to truth, and wanting to be faithful to truth, a commitment to truth, not being afraid of truth, wherever it comes from."
- **(On the liberal neglect of Christ's divinity):** "They emphasized his humanity, but they neglected his divinity."
- **(On the liberal bondage to culture):** "They often got kind of sucked into the culture...almost an uncritical view of the culture."
- **(On the liberal reliance on experience):** "For classical Protestant liberalism, everything had to pass through the bar of experience."
- **(On the failure of the optimistic "Christian Century" prediction):** "How can you sustain a view of a Christian Century when you look at the 20th century realistically?"
- **(H. Richard Niebuhr's summary of liberalism):** "A God without wrath brought man without sin into the kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."
- **(Dr. Green's assessment of liberal theology's current state):** "Maybe I need to retitle this lecture, The Emergence and Development and Death of Liberal Theology, because it is dead. It's gone. It's bankrupt."
- **(On the Oxford Movement's aim regarding the Church):** "This movement is a movement that wanted to see the Church in the Body of Christ as a divine movement only."
- **(On Froude's focus on the early church):** "[He sought to] look beyond the Reformation to that early church."

- **(On Keble's Catholic-leaning theology of the Eucharist):** "Now, does that sound more Catholic, or does it sound more Protestant?"

4. Study Guide: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 16, Response to Liberalism

5. FAQs Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 16, Response to Liberalism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about the Response to Liberalism and the Oxford Movement

1. What was the context that gave rise to liberal theology in the 19th century?

Liberal theology emerged, in part, as a reaction to the evangelical strength of the 18th and 19th centuries. It represented a "pushback" against some of the core tenets of traditional evangelicalism. Furthermore, it developed within a broader intellectual climate influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and the rise of historical criticism.

2. What were some of the key theological conclusions of classical Protestant liberalism?

Classical Protestant liberalism held several core theological ideas. Firstly, it embraced a form of idealism, viewing all reality as shaped by the divine mind, leading to an emphasis on the continuity between the divine and the human. They were generally optimistic about the future, believing the world was rationally ordered and moved by divine concerns. They emphasized God's imminence – his presence in the natural world and working through social progress – over his transcendence. Natural law and natural theology were given significant weight, seen as progressive forces. Notably, they generally denied the doctrine of original sin due to their rationalism and optimism about humanity's relationship with God. Finally, ethics became central, considered the true mark of religion, with theology and doctrine taking a peripheral role.

3. What were some perceived strengths of classical Protestant liberalism?

Despite its eventual decline, classical Protestant liberalism did possess some perceived strengths. It fostered an openness to truth, encouraging the embrace of scientific, philosophical, and mathematical discoveries as all originating from God. It also exhibited a willingness to engage in self-criticism, honestly evaluating its own beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the movement demonstrated a strong commitment to social concerns, particularly for the poor and marginalized, exemplified by the Social Gospel movement associated with figures like Walter Rauschenbusch.

4. What were some significant weaknesses identified in classical Protestant liberalism?

Classical Protestant liberalism faced numerous criticisms regarding its theological foundations. It was argued that it lacked a truly biblical view of God, overemphasizing immanence at the expense of transcendence and often downplaying God's sovereignty and miraculous power. Similarly, its view of Christ was seen as deficient, often portraying him primarily as a moral example and neglecting his full divinity, the incarnation, and the significance of the cross for salvation. Ironically, despite its desire to engage with culture, it often fell into uncritical acceptance of prevailing cultural trends, such as radical biblical criticism and an overly optimistic view of scientific progress. The movement's emphasis on experience as the ultimate measure of truth was also seen as problematic, potentially undermining objective theological truths. Its low view of sin led to an unrealistic optimism about the future and the belief that the Kingdom of God could be achieved primarily through human effort. Finally, critics argued that its overemphasis on moralism led to a form of salvation by works, de-emphasizing grace and holding a low view of divine revelation.

5. How did H. Richard Niebuhr summarize the core tenets and ultimate failure of classical Protestant liberalism?

H. Richard Niebuhr famously critiqued classical Protestant liberalism by stating it presented "a God without wrath brought man without sin into the kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." This concise summary encapsulated what he saw as the movement's key weaknesses: a benign God who did not judge sin, a view of humanity that downplayed its fallen nature, a concept of the Kingdom of God as mere social progress without divine judgment, and a Christ whose significance was reduced to moral example rather than redemptive sacrifice.

6. What was the Oxford Movement, and what were its primary aims?

The Oxford Movement was a significant and deeply devout movement that began at Oxford University in 19th-century England. It was also intensely self-conscious about its formation. Its primary aim was to revive what its proponents believed to be the true understanding of the Church (with a capital C) as a divine institution, shaped solely by God, as they perceived it in the New Testament and the early Church (the first 400 years). They were concerned about the perceived control and influence of the state over the Church of England, viewing it as a departure from this early, purely divine model.

7. Who were some key figures in the early stages of the Oxford Movement, and what were their contributions?

Key figures in the early Oxford Movement included Richard Froude, John Keble, and John Henry Newman. Froude emphasized the need to return to the practices of the early church, such as fasting, clerical celibacy (though his understanding of its historical prevalence was inaccurate), and a reverence for the saints. John Keble is considered the key preacher of the movement, and his 1833 sermon on "National Apostasy" called for the Church to separate itself from state control. He also emphasized the importance of the Eucharist as the means of salvation through the reception of Christ's body and blood, validly administered only by priests in apostolic succession from Peter, reflecting a more Catholic understanding. John Henry Newman, initially an evangelical Anglican priest, was an intellectual powerhouse who started the influential "Tracts for the Times" in 1833, which progressively articulated the movement's theological positions.

8. What was the significance of John Henry Newman's "Tracts for the Times" in the development of the Oxford Movement?

John Henry Newman's "Tracts for the Times," begun in 1833, were highly significant in shaping and disseminating the ideas of the Oxford Movement. These were not short pamphlets but serious theological treatises that systematically explored and advocated for the movement's core beliefs, particularly concerning the nature of the Church, the sacraments, and the authority of tradition. As Newman continued to write these tracts, his theological views became increasingly aligned with Catholic doctrines, moving away from traditional Anglican and evangelical perspectives. This progression ultimately led to his own conversion to Catholicism and influenced others within the movement to consider the claims of the Roman Catholic Church.