

“A House on the Sand”:
American Theological Liberalism
From the 18th - 21st Century

Lib-er-al-ism

n.

1. The desire for the Christian faith to be free from the Word of God in mood, methods, morals or message.

Introduction: Definitions & Theological Triage

Part I - Seeds: 1740s - 1860s

Charles Chauncy (1705-1787)
William Ellery Channing (1780-1842)
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
Harvard College (1636-1805)
Theodore Parker (1810-1860)

Part II - Roots: 1820s-1890s

Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)
Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)
The Rise of the Liberal Academy (1841-1895)
Charles Briggs (1841-1913)

Part III - Flower: 1900-1960s

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918)
Shailer Matthews (1863-1941)
Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)
Dietrich Bonhoeffer at Union Theological Seminary, New York City (1930)
Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)
Paul Tillich (1886-1965)

Part IV - Forrest: 1960s to the Present

American Theological Liberalism and the Roman Catholic Church (1943-)
Women in American Liberal Theology (1830-)
Langdon Gilkey (1919-2004)
Marcus Borg (1942-2015) and John Shelby Spong (1931-2021)
Phillip Clayton (1955-)

****A Word About The Emerging Church, Deconstruction, & Today’s “Progressive Christianity”***

“Five Steps for Relating to Theological Liberals”

Pastor Dave Abernethy
Article for the Desiring God Website
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For many of us happily immersed in the world of conservative evangelicalism, liberalism is a highly suspect word. Strictly speaking, though, liberalism (the desire for freedom or liberation) is amoral. That is, the morality of freedom is entirely contingent upon the subject from whom we desire to be liberated.

To be free from sin, from injustice, the tyranny of the devil or to seek to assist others in their liberation from such is a noble quest. We want to be liberal there. But the desire to be free from the Word of God (whether written or incarnate), lays bare the essence of our sinful depravity.

And the kicker is that the desire to be free from the Word of God manifests itself in more than one way. Jesus says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine *and does not do them* will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7:26–27).

The temptation to build a house on the sand is a subtle one, even for theological conservatives. The simple (and devastating) truth is that conservative evangelicals struggle with liberalism: the desire to be free from the Word of God in mood, methods, morals, or message. How, then, do we engage theological liberals around us? Here are five steps, among others, that may be of help.

1. Seek to Understand Them. (John 2:25; 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:20; 8:1)

The goal with any person is to love them. Love your brother, your neighbor, your enemy. What makes God’s love for the world so stunning is that he knows the world so thoroughly and loves it so exquisitely. Love is not biblical love if it is devoid of the knowledge of the beloved. If our brains are empty, our love will be cheap and bargain-basement. But if our knowledge is full, then our love stands the chance to be deep, comprehensive, wise and mature.

How well do you know the story of American theological liberalism? How well do you know the participants in the story? Gary Dorrien’s three-volume work, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, is invaluable in this regard. How well do you know your liberal family members? Co-workers? Friends? Neighbors? Or classmates? Do you know their spouse’s name? Their kids’ names? Do you know what they do on their day off? Do you know what they eat at a restaurant? Seek to understand them.

2. Labor to Appreciate Them. (Philippians 4:8)

Philippians 4:8 carries within it a command that is life-changing if we’d apply it to the theologically liberal folks around us. This verse is a call to admire and laud that which is admirable and laudable. The 60-year pastoral ministry of Charles Chauncy at Boston’s First Church, the thoroughgoing integrity of the Unitarian Theodore Parker (with all the Unitarian ministers wimping out around him), the pioneering radio ministry of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the unabashed zeal of our contemporary Phillip Clayton.

And that's just on an *individual* level. Consider this movement at an *institutional* level. Doctrinal liberals have been the gatekeepers of much of our nation's theological higher education for nearly 300 years. They have simply not known "the scandal of the evangelical mind" — deep thinking, academic labor, and rigorous, thoughtful argument have not been the Achilles heel of this movement. That is commendable. Philippians 4:8 commands us to commend whatever is commendable. Seek to appreciate what is truly appreciable in them.

3. Come to Sympathize with Them. (Romans 12:15; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4; Matthew 9:36; Colossians 3:12)

We, of all people, are to "put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and compassionate hearts" (Colossians 3:12). To weep with those who weep. If we can honestly hear the stories of William Ellery Channing, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's experiences with their fathers, and not bust wide open in genuine compassion, we have to wonder whether we are indeed followers of Jesus at all. Our soul's native language ought to be grace. "Who made you to differ?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Sympathize with them.

4. Confess Your Sins to Them. (Matthew 7:3–5; 1 Timothy 1:5)

Here, we are wise to remember the speck and the plank. We conservative evangelicals may be doctrinally tidy and theologically tucked in, but we all too often live lives that unsay our own creed. The planks of conservative Christians are legion. Jerry Bridges speaks of "respectable sins," such as ungodliness, sinful anxiety and frustration, discontentment, unthankfulness, selfishness, lack of self-control, impatience, irritability, self-righteous and short-fused anger, judgmentalism, jealousy, gossip, pragmatism — and the list goes on and on.

Wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, gluttony — the seven deadly sins — are all too often for many evangelicals, the seven daily sins. Using Jesus's yardstick in Matthew 7:26–27, we far too frequently hear his words and don't do them. He calls it building your house on the sand. Using our definition above: it's liberalism. Moral liberalism. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Liberals need to see us doing business with the gospel like this if we hope to see them do business with that same gospel.

5. Offer Correction to Them. (2 Timothy 2:22–24)

Finally, 2 Timothy 2:22–24 provides one of the most succinct approaches as it relates to correcting those in doctrinal error. By God's grace, in the strength that he supplies, freshly forgiven of your own sins, don't quarrel, but be kind to everyone, teach, patiently endure evil, and correct your opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance!

And how do we begin the correction? C.J. Mahaney offers us seven magic words: "Would you be open to an observation?" If they indicate that they are not, don't press. If they aren't open, you may ask yourself whether or not you've given them reason to open up.

Have you sought to understand, appreciate, sympathize with, and confess your sins to them? These tend to grease the skids for the seven magic words. Ask them if they're open to an observation, and then attempt to remove the speck. Stay close to the gospel, which is always our issue "of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

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An Annotated Reading List for

“A House on the Sand”:

American Theological Liberalism

From the 18th - 21st Century

- **Peter Barnes, *A Handful of Pebbles: Theological Liberalism and the Church*.** The Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, PA. (2003) 2008.

This book is good. It provides a quick and dirty overview of theological liberalism. Its problem areas are two: it's too quick and it's too dirty. On the 'quick', it's only 81 pages so greater expansion on almost every topic would have been helpful. On the 'dirty', it's not that the author's punches are below the belt or anything, it's just that the brush he paints with is so broad it ceases to be as helpful as it could be from time to time.

- **Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*.** Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2001.
Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity - 1900-1950*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2003.
Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, & Postmodernity - 1950-2005*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2006.

Dorrien's trilogy stands alone atop the entire field of historical research on this topic. This work is a stunning achievement in every sense of the term. He's so balanced that here and there you might forget that he actually endorses the movement he's describing. Scholarship *par excellence*. If I were the conservative Protestant Pope, I'd make it required reading for every evangelical and fundamentalist pastor in America.

- **Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston (1705-1787)*.** Minnesota Monographs in the Humanities Volume 11. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN. 1980.

Griffin is another careful and wise historian. A professor at the University of Minnesota for the better part of half a century, Griffin is now retired. The story is important because it traces the headwaters of American theological liberalism, and because Chauncy is typically given such short shrift by historians (evangelicals in particular). Chauncy was an absolutely fascinating man. This biography is not one to pass up, especially if you're interested in the First Great Awakening.

- **J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*.** New Edition. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. (1923) 2009.

This book originally appeared in 1923 (making its centennial birthday next year!) and hasn't dated much during that time. In many ways, this volume sealed Machen's fate at Old Princeton as his convictions eventually led to his dismissal from the school. Within ten years of writing it, Machen went on to found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Though he may have technically been on the losing side of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, I don't even want to begin to contemplate the size of this man's crown when we all get to heaven. He was not ashamed to acknowledge Christ before men and he paid dearly for it in this life with his career. May his tribe increase.