
HOW DID WE GET TO... THEOLOGICAL LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES?

Discussion Guide

Today, we are accustomed to talking about people as “liberals” or “conservatives.” Although the terms today often conceal as much as they illumine, when applied to theology they do name real differences. In this video, Sarah argues that liberals and conservatives understand and prioritize theological sources of authority differently. She also argues that the two camps emerged as Christians responded to a series of challenges in the late 18th century and the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. When you hear the term “theological liberal,” what do you think it means? What about “theological conservative”?
2. How does your understanding of the terms “theological liberal” and “theological conservative” align with how Sarah uses the terms?
3. In the video, Sarah discusses the “sources of authority”: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. How do you understand these sources? How do you prioritize them?
4. Sarah describes theological liberalism as, in part, a response to Enlightenment skepticism and then, in the U.S. context, to a series of social and intellectual challenges. Does that help you understand theological liberalism? What is helpful or not helpful about that explanation?
5. Where do you see points of common ground between theological liberals and theological conservatives? Do you think it is important to find points of common ground between the two? Why or why not?

Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):

1. Theological liberalism and theological conservatism name differences in how Christians think about and prioritize the sources of authority.

2. The sources of authority are scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Reason and experience, particularly, have more than one definition.
3. Theological liberalism emerges out of the 18th century Enlightenment. Liberal theologians accepted the Enlightenment's elevation of reason and experience over sources such as scripture and tradition, but rejected the idea that Christianity itself was unreasonable.
4. In the U.S. context, theological liberalism and theological conservatism emerge as two distinct tendencies with significant influence after the Civil War. Owing to their differing responses to a series of intellectual and social challenges (evolutionary theory, historical-criticism of the Bible, and mass urbanization and industrialization), Protestants began splitting into liberal and conservative camps.
5. Although the terms liberal and conservative often conceal as much as they reveal today, thinking about what the terms have signified provides an opportunity to be self-reflective about how we understand and prioritize the sources of authority and our responses to new intellectual, political, and social trends.

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Video Outline

I. Introduction

A. In the United States today, we are accustomed to thinking about liberals and conservatives as opposing camps in politics, culture, and religion.

B. In this video, will explore the use and development of the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” specifically as they relate to theology and the intellectual and social developments that gave rise to theological liberalism particularly.

C. Thesis: Theological liberals and conservatives prioritize the sources of authority differently. Theological liberalism was a response to intellectual and social changes coming out of the Enlightenment and, in the U.S. context, post-Civil War changes.

D. Three notes.

1. Theological conservatism and liberalism do not necessarily map onto political conservatism and liberalism.

2. This video focuses on white Christians in the late 18th century and late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. This video focuses on a Protestant story.

II. Sources of Authority

A. Definition: the places or things that Christians go to in order to figure out what is true or what they should do.

B. Wesleyan Quadrilateral (proposed by Albert Outler, who studied John Wesley) is one way of talking about the sources of authority (there are four of them; a quadrilateral is not equilateral).

1. Scripture: the Bible.

a) Note Christians develop different ideas about what the Bible is.

2. Tradition: the teaching of recognized theologians and church leaders.
 3. Reason
 - a) Meaning 1: The capacity we use to make sense of the teachings of the other sources of authority.
 - b) Meaning 2: An independent source of authority, often informed by the sciences and social sciences, that evaluates the other sources of authority.
 4. Experience.
 - a) Meaning 1: The experience of the community over time.
 - b) Meaning 2: Personal experience of God or a sense of what God is telling them.
- C. Sources of authority and theological liberalism and conservatism.
1. Theological liberalism and conservatism prioritize different sources of authority and even define the sources a bit differently.
 2. Conservatives:
 - a) Prioritize scripture.
 - b) Give varying weight to tradition, but, overall, see tradition as helpful in understanding Scripture.
 - c) Do not give reason and experience independent authority by which they could override a teaching that conservatives think is clear from scripture and affirmed by the tradition.
 3. Liberals:
 - a) Give more authority to reason, again understood not just as our reasoning capacity but as knowledge from the sciences, social sciences, and history among others, and to experience, here understood as a sense or intuition of the divine.
 - (1) For liberals, reason and experience can critique what we know from scripture and tradition.

III. Beginning of Theological Liberalism.

- A. The 18th century “Age of Enlightenment.”
 1. An intellectual movement that privileged human reason over traditional authority.
 2. Emphasized empirical knowledge, or what we know from the scientific method, over belief, which might come from the Bible or tradition.

- a) Some Enlightenment thinkers questioned both traditional Christian beliefs and the traditional sources of authority. They questioned miracles, the incarnation, church power, and, in a few cases, theism itself.
 - B. Theological liberalism was a response to the Enlightenment elevation of reason and experience.
 - 1. Theological liberals agreed with the elevation of reason and experience.
 - 2. Theological liberals maintained that Christianity was reasonable and aligned with reason and experience.
 - a) Rather than grounding religious dogma in scripture and tradition, religious liberals ground it in reason and experience.
 - C. Frederich Schleiermacher: “father of theological liberalism.”
 - 1. Argued that religion was an intuition of a relationship with God or the infinite. Theology is built out of this sense.
- IV. Conservatives and Liberals in the Post-Civil War United States
- A. In the United States, religious liberals had limited influence before the Civil War.
 - B. Three post-Civil War developments:
 - 1. Evolutionary theory.
 - a) Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species* in 1859.
 - b) In the late nineteenth-century, debates about evolution were not yet debates about teaching evolution in public high schools.
 - c) Evolution’s challenges to Christianity:
 - (1) Evolution offered an account of creation that differed from what was found in Genesis.
 - (a) Not all conservatives believed this was an insurmountable problem.
 - (2) Natural selection and random variation undermined, for some, the idea of a sovereign God.
 - (a) Also suggested that creation happened through a violent process of survival of the fittest, not because of a benevolent creator.
 - (3) Evolutionary theory was seen, by some, as a law that applied to everything, including Christianity. This meant that Christianity was not based on unchanging revelation but was a product of human questioning and development.

- d) Christian responses to evolution's challenges:
 - (1) Some rejected evolutionary theory.
 - (a) Charles Hodge: evolution undermines God's sovereignty so evolution is not true.
 - (2) Some accepted evolution as a possibility, but on theologically conservative grounds.
 - (a) B.B. Warfield: believed that the Bible was inerrant, but believed it possible to reconcile a biblical view of God with the notion that God worked through evolution.
 - (3) Some reinterpreted traditional doctrines on the basis of evolution (this is the liberal move).
 - (a) For example, some theologians claimed that God was immanent or operated within historical processes.

2. Historical-criticism of the Bible

- a) Developed in Germany.
- b) Influence reached the United States in a major way in the late 19th century as more American academics went to German universities to train.
- c) Historical-criticism used the tools of history and social science to uncover the history behind the biblical texts. Historical-critics did not assume that those parts of the story that contradicted reason—such as the miracles—were historically accurate.
- d) Not all historical-critics agreed on what was accurate or inaccurate about the Bible.
 - (1) Charles Briggs: proponent of historical-criticism who faced criticisms for arguing that Moses did not write the Pentateuch; Isaiah had multiple authors; and inerrancy was bunk. Briggs was found guilty of heresy by his denomination for his beliefs.
 - (2) In his later life, Briggs disagreed with other historical-critics who, in Briggs's mind, went too far in what they were willing to doubt, including parts of the Bible such as the stories about Jesus's birth.
- e) Liberals and conservatives had different descriptions of what the Bible was.
 - (1) Conservatives: Bible a historically, scientifically, and theologically accurate account of what happened in ancient Israel and in the early church.

(2) Liberals: Bible divinely-inspired, but also a human product providing theologically-inspired accounts to serve the needs or interests of particular ancient communities.

(a) Some historical-critics believed they could separate the husk of the biblical narratives from what they believed to be the kernel of truth (e.g. love of God and neighbor).

3. Mass urbanization and industrialization.

a) With increased urbanization and industrialization came new problems with poverty, housing, and working conditions.

b) Social Gospel: for some liberal Christians, these new problems demanded a rethinking of the Christian message. Social Gospelers claimed that traditional notions of sin and salvation needed reinterpretation in light of social problems.

(1) For example, they claimed that sin was not primarily about individual wrongdoing, guilt, or brokenness, but was a collective problem, manifested in social structures that made it difficult for some individuals to thrive. Christians, then, were to change the social structures.

(2) Northern Methodist Church Social Creed (1908), for called for a living wage and “the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.”

(3) Note: late 19th and early 20th century liberal focus on changing social structures could be deeply racist. Social Gospelers and other theological liberals were often imperialist, assuming that white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants were on a mission from God to transform the world to be more like them.

c) Conservatives responded to the Social Gospel by claiming that a focus on social structures removes focus from individual sin and salvation.

C. Two-Party Protestantism.

1. As Christians responded to these developments—higher-criticism, evolution, and urbanization and industrialization—they did so in ways that showed different understandings and prioritizations of the sources of authority and they split into two camps (liberal and conservative).

V. Conclusion

- A. True that, today, the terms liberal and conservative conceal as much as they illumine.
- B. Why bother?
 1. Thinking about this history and the “two camps” enables people to consider how they understand and prioritize the sources of authority. That’s a good thing to be self-reflective about.
 2. Might help us understand other perspectives.

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Glossary

Albert Outler: 20th century historian and theologian who coined the term “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”

Charles Briggs: 19th century proponent of historical-criticism who came to disagree with later historical-critics about what was and was not historically accurate in the Bible.

Frederich Schleiermacher: theologian active in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; often called the “father of theological liberalism.” He claimed that religion was an intuition of dependence on God and that theology was a reflection on that intuition. He helped, then, to ground the reasonableness of Christianity in experience.

Historical-criticism: a method that applied the tools of history and the social sciences to the Bible in order to understand the historical context in which biblical writings were produced. The method did not assume that the biblical accounts were historically-accurate and did assume the Bible could be studied like any other ancient text.

Wesleyan Quadrilateral: term coined by Albert Outler to describe the four sources of authority John Wesley used: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

