

F. Liberalism in Theology

Biblical Theological Seminary has a policy that "no person favorably inclined toward theological liberalism shall be considered for or retained in the position of board member, administrator, or faculty member, nor shall any person so inclined be considered as a potential chapel speaker or special lecturer in religious programs." This raises the question of the meaning of "liberalism".

The word "liberal" has two basic areas of meaning when used as an adjective. First, a liberal person is one who is marked by generosity and openhandedness. Second, a liberal person is one who is broad-minded, tolerant. When used as a noun, the word "liberal" has as one of its meanings "one who is open-minded in the observance of orthodox or traditional forms." As used in the liberal arts, the word "liberal" has no relevance to theology, nor does its first area of meaning as an adjective.

The term "liberalism" is defined by Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary in one of its meanings as "a movement in modern Protestantism emphasizing intellectual liberty and the spiritual and ethical content of Christianity." The term is also used in the contexts of economics and politics.

Theologically and historically, liberalism is both a mood and a movement. As a mood, it is marked by a basic attitude toward Scripture that can be called liberal. Any theological view that has the attitude that Scripture is anything less than final authority for Christian belief and practice is *per se* liberal. This is the central motif of theological liberalism.

The mood of liberalism should not be confused with the movement known as Liberalism. The mood of liberalism can be found in every age since the Scriptures came into existence. The movement of Liberalism began in 1800.

1. LIBERALISM

The dominant tendency in liberal religious thought that developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is called Liberalism. Liberalism took two major forms: a more conservative(!) form called Modernism, and a more radical form called Humanistic Liberalism.

The dominant motif of Liberalism was that of immanence. Immanence with regard to God's location means that God is present in the universe. Two major types of immanence may be distinguished. The first is a cosmological immanence in which nature or some part of it is God's location. The second is a humanistic immanence in which human powers, plans, causes, ideals, etc. are the dwelling place of God. During the Age of Immanence humanistic immanence followed cosmological immanence; i.e., autonomy followed continuity.

Religious Liberalism grew gradually out of and away from orthodoxy. It was prompted particularly by the challenges of science and philosophy, and was driven by the desire to make religion relevant and respectable.