

John Webster and George P. Schner, eds., **Theology After Liberalism**, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

The shift from modernism to postmodernism that has been underway in western culture is not only having an impact upon evangelicals and fundamentalists but upon liberals as well. It has been disheartening to Bible-believing Christians to see the move to an open view of God and a denial of the realities of hell that is taking place within evangelical circles. Such unexpected doctrinal declension in conservative circles is part of a larger mindset that has been labeled, for lack of a better word, *post-conservative*. What true conservatives might find surprising is that there is a mirror movement on the liberal side of the ledger that can be called *post-liberal*.

Blackwell Publishers, in the book *Theology After Liberalism*, has done a service to those who are trying to exegete the present cultural landscape and make sense of the diverse discussions going on in the name of Christian theology. Contributors to the book come from several traditions, both Protestant and Catholic. The book is divided into five sections: an introduction, a discussion of specific doctrines, an exploration of methodology, some example criticisms of post-liberal theology, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides two articles by the two general editors of the work. George Schner discusses possible metaphors for theology that have been used mostly in liberal circles. A more helpful chapter and one of the best in the book is written by John Webster (“Theology After Liberalism?”) who reviews the problem of identifying and defining the loosely knit movement which is being called *post-liberal*. This chapter is especially helpful for pastors who seek an overview of issues and who do not want to get bogged down in detailed theological discussions of this kind. Webster acknowledges that the word *post-modern* is the next best word to describe the movement, but that all terms are somewhat inadequate. In the end, he decides that *post-liberal* is probably the best label.

Webster concludes that postliberalism can be described as a movement that emphasizes doctrine over critical methodologies. As such it does not seek to divorce itself from past heritage (including modernism and classical liberalism). However, it does not want to use present culture as the necessary starting point for present versions of theology. One particular example of how this is seen is the growing emphasis on ecclesiology as opposed to anthropology. While this may cause unrest among the higher critics and more modernistic liberals as Webster shows, this is not a strong move toward any biblically based theology. It is just that doctrinal themes from the past, especially those involving the Church and its mission, can serve as focal points for developing theological systems.

Webster’s well-written article actually discusses the outline that the body of the book follows: doctrines, methods, and criticisms of postliberalism. In the section on doctrine, several articles are provided which do not really show the focus on ecclesiology which had been mentioned by Webster. Hans Frei focuses on Christology while William Placher highlights the Trinity. Colin Gunton seems to bring those two ideas together

somewhat in his article “The Atonement and the Triune God.” Oliver Donovan speaks on freedom and reality from what appears to be an anthropological point of view. J. Augustine DiNoia’s article “Theology in Dialogue” reminds the conservative that the focus on doctrine in post-liberal theology has no intention of doing away with ecumenical dialogue between the world religions. In this way, postliberalism maintains continuity with its liberal tradition.

Out of the four articles on method, by far the best discussion in the entire book can be seen in James Buckley’s article “Beyond the Hermeneutical Deadlock.” Buckley, following the lead of others, divides the various hermeneutical approaches to theology into three general categories:

1. revelationalist (emphasizing some element[s] in the subject matter of scripture),
2. functionalist (emphasizing the use of texts in the Christian community),
3. textualist (emphasizing

According to Buckley, conservative Bible-believing interpreters would be one small segment of the revelationist breed due to our focus on the Bible as inerrant propositional revelation. For the most part Buckley discusses these categories with respect to the various emphases found within the liberal tradition. The result is a clear overview of some of the overall methodological approaches being used by liberalism and postliberalism.

The final section of the body of the book reveals irenic criticisms of postliberalism from the vantage points of feminist theology (Fulkerson), the possible lack of interaction with the world (Williams), and the Roman Catholic experience (Tracy). A final afterword is added to the book (entitled “Toward a Postliberal Theology”) by taking a section from George Lindbeck’s seminal work *The Nature of Doctrine*. This book is considered the classic statement of postliberalism.

The book *Theology After Liberalism* can adequately serve as a required or recommended text for a course at the Ph.D. level in theological method or the history of hermeneutics. However, it has doubtful use as a text in usual conservative seminary or Bible college classrooms. What it does provide for the conservative seminary or Bible college professor or for the thoughtful pastor is a map of the current field of liberal argumentation so that he has a better grasp of the culture in which he ministers.