

Postliberal Theology

Postliberal theology designates a type of theology whose leading proponents were active in the final decades of the 20th century. It is called *postliberal* because of its proponents' dissatisfaction with classical liberal theology and because it is a response to liberal theological claims.

Representatives include Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, David Kelsey, and Stanley Hauerwas. William Placher and Kathryn Tanner are also sometimes considered to be postliberal theologians.

Postliberal theology arose in tandem with postmodern philosophy. Both rested on the recognition that the ideal of universal and absolute truth is illusory. For postliberal theologians, this recognition meant rejecting the assumption that Christian theology can be evaluated by and interpreted in terms of some other philosophical or scientific discourse. They believe that classical liberal theology had portrayed Christian beliefs and practices as particular instances of general religious truths and phenomena. The God revealed in scripture, for instance, was thought to be identical with the God discovered by philosophical investigation. By seeking to correlate Christian claims with philosophical or scientific claims, postliberals argue, liberal theologians abandoned the autonomy and truth of Christian theology. They had submitted theology to an authority outside of the Christian faith.

It is questionable whether this indictment applies to all liberal theologians. Nonetheless, the postliberals' concern show us why they embrace Karl Barth's theology. Like them Barth insisted that the truth and norm of the Christian faith can be found only within revelation; all attempts to understand Christian theology outside of revelation distort theology. They also appreciate Barth's view that God's revelation is always particular and not general. This viewed accords with their postmodern skepticism about the possibility of general truths and universal forms of experience. There is, they argue, no such thing as religion in general or universal religious experience. On the contrary, Christian theology rests on the historical particularity of revelation and on the particular character of the Christian community. The emphasis on particularity and the rejection of universal, absolute truth shows the postfoundationalist character of postliberal theology—with postmodern thinkers generally, they reject the possibility of an absolute, unshakeable foundation of human knowledge.

The postfoundationalist stance explains why narrative is a central category of this theology. Narrative, it is argued, is both the Bible's preferred genre and also the mode of discourse most appropriate for God's revelation, since narrative is better adapted to the particularity of revelation than is philosophy. The Bible's narrative, however, despite its realistic character, is not a depiction of historical events. Instead, the truth of narrative lies in its power to draw the reader into the world of the narrative and to reshape the reader's life according to the narrative's story and characters. Postliberal theologians, accordingly, affirm Jesus' resurrection as an essential element of the gospel narrative; however, they have little interest in discussing the historicity of the resurrection. Similarly, they hold that the truth of Christian doctrines has nothing to do with their accuracy in describing objective states of affairs. Their truth lies instead in their capacity to sustain the beliefs, practices and character of the church. Doctrines, in other words, are not descriptions of objective facts; they are instead principles that maintain the integrity of the Christian life.