

Biblical Worldview and America Liberalism

INTRODUCTION

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. ~ Micah 6:8; James 1:27

The Core Problem

'Liberalism.' When you hear that word, what's the first thing that comes to mind? For many, it brings to mind modern politics. Typically, people associate Liberal with democrats and Conservative with Republicans.

The word 'Liberalism' is used to describe 18th-century founders like Adam Smith *and* 21st-century progressives. This confusion is a major problem. Here we have to ask: what *is* liberalism, and is it compatible with a biblical worldview?

Today, we are going to be objective. We will define two types of political liberalism, then define the biblical worldview, and *then* compare them.

DEFINING THE TERMS

Classical Liberalism, which flourished from the 1600s to the 1800s, has the key idea of the liberty of the individual against the state. This is often called 'negative liberty,' or freedom *from* government interference. Its key figures were men like John Locke and Adam Smith. The core tenets of Classical Liberalism include inalienable individual rights, specifically life, liberty, and property, limited government, the rule of law, consent of the governed, and free-market economics, or capitalism.

John Locke – First Treatise – argued that all people are God's property (created in His image), and therefore no other person (like a king) can claim absolute, arbitrary ownership over another. It must be clear that John Locke was a philosopher and that his theology was not good. For example, he argues that reason is the tool that judges and validates revelation. And that reason is the candle of the Lord.

Adam Smith – The Wealth of Nations – What makes a nation wealthy? At the time, the dominant theory was Mercantilism, which said wealth was a fixed pie—a nation got rich by hoarding gold and silver, maximizing exports, and minimizing imports.

Smith argued this was completely wrong. He said wealth is not a fixed pie; it is *created*. There are four main points:

1. The "Invisible Hand" – This is his most famous concept. Smith argued that when individuals act in their own rational self-interest, they are led by an "invisible hand" to *unintentionally* promote the good of the entire society.

- His famous example: The butcher, the brewer, and the baker don't give you dinner out of benevolence. They do it out of regard for their own self-interest. By pursuing their

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own profit, they must produce a high-quality, affordable product. This *unintentionally* benefits you and the whole of society.

- It is a theory of a self-regulating market.

2. The Division of Labor – Smith argued that the key to creating wealth is the **division of labor**.

- His famous example: A single, untrained worker trying to make a pin from start to finish might only make one pin per day.
- But in a factory, that labor is *divided* into 10 specialized tasks (one man draws the wire, another straightens it, another sharpens the point). By specializing, those 10 men can produce over 48,000 pins in a day.
- This specialization creates massive efficiency, which lowers prices and makes goods available to more people, thus creating national wealth.

3. Laissez-Faire (Free Markets) Because of the "invisible hand," Smith argued for *minimal* government intervention in the economy. The term is *laissez-faire* (French for "let do"). He believed the market would be far more efficient at allocating resources (labor, money, goods) than the government could ever be.

4. The Limited Role of Government Smith was not an anarchist. He believed the government had three essential (and limited) roles:

- i. Protect the nation from invasion (a standing army).
- ii. Protect citizens from injustice (an impartial legal system and police).
- iii. Provide "public works" that are necessary for commerce but are too large or unprofitable for a private individual to build (e.g., roads, bridges, ports).

Classical Liberalism is the basis for our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. In fact, many of Locke's statements are nearly quoted in the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution provides the mechanisms for how those "Liberal" principles were to be instituted, and the Bill of Rights points to the specific limitations of the government on the liberties of individuals.

Modern Liberalism, which is normally referred to as an evolution from Classical Liberalism, was developed from the early 1900s to the present. I do not count this as an evolution, but rather a hijacking, but we will come back to this.

This philosophy argues that true liberty isn't just being left alone; it requires being *empowered* to act. This is 'positive liberty,' or freedom *to* achieve one's potential, and is assisted by the government. Its key figures include men like John Rawls and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The core tenets of Modern Liberalism are that government *must* intervene to correct social inequities. It

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focuses on a social safety net, economic regulation, and 'social justice,' which increasingly prioritizes group and identity rights.

The roots of Modern Liberalism began in a philosophical shift as a reaction against individualism and against Classical Liberalism. The first shift came from Utilitarianism, a philosophy developed by men like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

1. Rejection of Natural Rights

Classical Liberalism (Locke): The government's purpose is to protect pre-existing, God-given *Natural Rights* (life, liberty, property).

Utilitarianism (Bentham): This idea of "natural rights" is "nonsense on stilts." The government's purpose is not to protect rights, but to produce "the greatest good for the greatest number."

2. The Redefinition of "Freedom"

Classical Liberalism (Locke): Freedom is "negative liberty," being *left alone* by the state.

T.H. Green's "Positive Liberty": Green argued that a man who is starving, uneducated, and sick is not truly "free," even if the government is leaving him alone. He is a "slave" to his circumstances. Therefore, Green argued, true freedom is "positive liberty"—the *power to act* and fulfill one's potential. And it is the government's moral duty to *intervene* (with welfare, public education, and healthcare) to *create* this positive freedom.

3. The American Progressive Movement

This "Positive Liberty" was the foundation of the American **Progressive Era** (1890s-1920s) with figures like **Woodrow Wilson** and **John Dewey**.

They explicitly rejected the Founders' Classical Liberalism (Divine Rights, Limited Government).

Woodrow Wilson, for example, argued that the Constitution's "Newtonian" model of checks and balances was outdated. He wanted a "Darwinian" model where the government was a "living thing" that could *evolve* and grow, led by experts and "social scientists," to solve society's problems.

Wilson's "Darwinian" model was built on the idea that government must be viewed as a "**living organism**," not a machine.

In his academic work, *Constitutional Government in the United States*, Wilson directly criticized the Founders' model:

"The government of the United States was constructed upon the Whig theory of political dynamics, which was a sort of unconscious copy of the **Newtonian theory** of the universe.... The trouble with the theory is that government is **not a machine, but a**

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living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton." This was not a clever analogy; it was the entire basis of his philosophy:

- i. **It Must Evolve:** A machine (like the Constitution) is fixed. An organism, however, must **adapt** to its environment or die. Wilson argued that government must be free to evolve, to grow, and to acquire new powers to meet new challenges (like monopolies or labor crises) that the Founders could never have imagined.
- ii. **It is Driven by "Life":** He stated that government is "accountable... by the dynamic processes of life." This means its power isn't defined by a static legal document (the Constitution as written) but by the "felt necessities" of the times, as interpreted by its leaders.
- iii. **It Needs a "Head" (A Strong Executive):** A machine can run on its own. An organism needs a head—a central, coordinating will. For Wilson, this was a powerful, active President who could interpret the "national will" and direct the government in its evolutionary progress, unhindered by the "friction" of congressional checks and balances.

In short, Wilson's "Darwinian model" was a call to unleash the government from its 18th-century "machine" constraints and empower it to act as a dynamic, living force, led by experts, to actively manage and improve society.

4. The Economic Catalyst (Keynesianism)

This new "Progressive" philosophy lacked a practical economic plan until the Great Depression. The crash shattered public faith in Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* (hands-off) economics.

John Maynard Keynes, a British economist, provided the solution. He argued that free markets are inherently unstable and that the government *must* intervene through a progressive tax system, spending, and regulation to "manage" the economy.

Franklin D. Roosevelt then combined these ideas:

The Goal: T.H. Green's "positive liberty."

The Method: Woodrow Wilson's "powerful, expert-led state."

The Toolkit: John Maynard Keynes's "government-managed economy."

Liberalism?

Modern Liberalism is not an evolution of Classical Liberalism; it is a rival philosophy that successfully captured the name. What are the roots of this system?

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1. The Seed: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

The "beginning" of the intellectual tradition that *opposes* Locke is Rousseau. He provided the core idea that would animate this new philosophy.

Core Idea (The "General Will"):

Locke argued that individuals have pre-existing rights and the government must *protect* them.

Rousseau argued the opposite. He believed the individuality is "corrupted," but that the *collective* (the people as a whole) is the source of all truth and goodness. This is the "**General Will.**"

This led to his most famous and dangerous concept: If an individual disagrees with the General Will, the state has the right to "**force him to be free.**"

This is the philosophical birth of "positive liberty"—the idea that the state must *force* a "higher" freedom onto you for your own good.

Who He Influenced: Hegel, Kant, and later the French Revolutionaries.

2. The Metaphysical Root: G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831)

Hegel, a German Idealist, took Rousseau's "General Will" and turned it into a metaphysical, historical force.

Core Idea (The State as Freedom):

Hegel rejected individualism as "petty." He argued that true human freedom is not about individual rights; it is about *realizing* your potential by being part of a larger, collective, organic whole.

What is that "organic whole"? **The State.**

Hegel famously called the State the "**march of God on earth.**" It was not a "necessary evil" (as the Founders saw it) but the *divine agent* of human progress and freedom. This completely inverted the Classical Liberal view.

Who He Influenced: T.H. Green, Karl Marx, and American Progressives (like John Dewey).

3. The Justification: Utilitarianism (Bentham & Mill)

While Hegel was in Germany, a different attack on Locke was happening in Britain. This provided the *new purpose* for the government.

Key Figure: Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832).

Core Idea (The Rejection of Rights):

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Bentham openly mocked Locke's natural rights, calling them "**nonsense on stilts.**" He argued there is no such thing as a "natural" right.

He replaced rights with "**Utility.**" The new goal of government is not to *protect rights* but to produce "**the greatest good for the greatest number.**"

This was a revolutionary shift. It gives the state permission to violate an individual's rights (like their property) as long as it can claim it's for the "greater good" of the majority.

4. The Critical Hinge: T.H. Green (1836–1882)

Green is arguably the **true father of Modern Liberalism**. He was a British philosopher who looked at the poverty of industrial England and was influenced by both Hegel's "divine state" and Utilitarianism's "greater good."

Core Idea (The Redefinition of "Liberty"):

Green said Locke's "**Negative Liberty**" (freedom *from* interference) was not enough. He asked, "What good is freedom to sign a contract if you are starving?"

He invented the concept of "**Positive Liberty**": True freedom is not just being left alone; it is the *power to act* and fulfill your potential.

He argued that a man "enslaved" by poverty or ignorance is not free. Therefore, it is the **State's moral duty** to *create* this positive freedom by intervening with public education, healthcare, and welfare. He successfully "stole" the name "Liberalism" for this new, state-centric philosophy.

Who He Influenced: The entire British Liberal Party and American Progressives.

5. The American Application: The Progressive Era (1890s–1920s)

This is when Green's philosophy crosses the Atlantic, finds fertile soil, and merges with American thought.

Key Figures: Woodrow Wilson and John Dewey.

Core Idea (The "Darwinian" State):

These men, many of whom (like Dewey) studied in Germany, imported these ideas.

They argued that the Founders' Constitution (Classical Liberalism) was a "Newtonian" relic.

As noted, they wanted a "**Darwinian model**": a living, evolving government, led by scientific experts, that could grow new powers to solve all social and economic problems. This is Hegel's "divine state" and Green's "positive liberty" put into an American political context.

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6. The Economic Engine: J.M. Keynes & FDR (1930s–1940s)

The Progressive philosophy had the "why" (Hegel/Green) and the "what" (Wilson's expert state), but it needed a "how." The Great Depression provided the crisis, and Keynes provided the manual.

Key Figure: John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946).

Core Idea (State-Managed Economics):

Keynes argued that Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* economics was unstable and would "fail."

He provided the economic justification for massive, continuous government intervention, spending, and regulation to "manage" the economy.

Influence: Franklin D. Roosevelt brilliantly combined all these pieces. The **New Deal** was the political implementation of T.H. Green's "positive liberty," funded by Keynes's economics, and run by Wilson's "expert-led" state. This is the birth of the Modern Liberal state we know today.

7. The Philosophical Capstone: John Rawls (1921–2002)

Long after the New Deal was built, Modern Liberalism needed a 20th-century ethical justification. Rawls provided it.

Core Idea ("Justice as Fairness"):

His 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* became the "new philosophical bible."

He argued that a "just" society is organized to **maximize the well-being of the least well-off**.

This provided the final moral justification for the welfare state and "social justice" (group-focused equity) over Classical Liberalism's "procedural justice" (individual-focused fairness).

Summary:

1. **Rousseau** provided the seed: The "**General Will**" is superior to the individual.
2. **Hegel** turned the State into the *divine agent* of that General Will.
3. **Bentham** provided the *justification* for state action: The "greatest good" (utility), not individual rights.
4. **T.H. Green** synthesized these ideas and *re-defined* liberty as "**Positive Liberty**" (freedom *to*), which must be provided by the state.
5. **Wilson/Dewey** brought this to America as the "**Darwinian**" (evolving, expert-led) state.
6. **FDR & Keynes** provided the *crisis* and the *economic engine* (the New Deal) to build it.
7. **Rawls** provided the *final moral argument* (social justice) to defend it.

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THE COMPARISON

Now that we have our definitions, we can hold them up to our standard—the Biblical worldview. Let's take them one by one. This is the core of our analysis.

First, is Classical Liberalism compatible? This is the philosophy that most directly informed the founding of America. We can see several points of alignment. The high value placed on the individual *seems* to align with the *Imago Dei*. The high value on private property aligns with the 8th and 10th Commandments: 'You shall not steal' and 'You shall not covet.' The call for a rule of law over the arbitrary rule of a king aligns with biblical principles of impartial justice, such as in Deuteronomy 17.

However, we find significant points of conflict, especially at the foundation. The primary conflict is Authority. Classical Liberalism places Human Reason as the final arbiter. The Bible places Divine Revelation as the final arbiter. When reason and revelation conflict, one must submit to the other. Second is Human Nature. John Locke's idea of a 'blank slate' is in direct conflict with the biblical doctrine of a fallen nature, as described in Romans 3 and Jeremiah 17. Third is the Source of Rights. Classical Liberalism grounds rights in 'Natural Law.' The Bible grounds rights in a personal Creator. Our rights are not 'natural'; they are *endowed* by God.

Second, is Modern Liberalism compatible? This is the philosophy that dominates much of the current American landscape. It does have some stated goals that align with biblical virtues. It *claims* to value compassion, helping the poor, and 'justice.' Scripture is clear on these, as in Isaiah 1:17: 'Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.'

But the points of conflict are severe and foundational, both in method and definition. Its Authority, like its predecessor, is human-centric. Its reliance on 'evolving community standards' is a direct contradiction to the unchanging, objective truth of Scripture. Its Definition of 'Justice' is also a problem. Modern Liberalism often defines justice as equity of outcome. Biblical justice is rooted in impartial righteousness, applying God's standards fairly to all, regardless of status. Leviticus 19:15 commands this: 'You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.'

Furthermore, the two worldviews disagree on the Core Problem. Modern Liberalism sees societal problems like poverty and crime as rooted in *external systems and oppression*. The Bible sees the root of problems as *internal sin*. Therefore, the Core Solution is different. Modern Liberalism's solution is state-run coercion and re-education. The Biblical worldview's solution is first through personal redemption through belief in Jesus and developing a Biblical Worldview. Finally, modern liberalism actively promotes social positions on life, marriage, and gender that are in direct, objective contradiction to Scripture.

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CONCLUSION

We can summarize it this way: **Classical Liberalism** has some compatible *outcomes*, such as individual value and the rule of law, but it has a conflicting *foundation* of Human Reason versus Revelation. **Modern Liberalism** has some compatible *stated goals*, like compassion, but it has conflicting *foundations, methods, and definitions*. Its authority is human reason, its method is state coercion, and it has redefined justice.

As believers, our worldview cannot be 'Liberalism,' or any ism. We can say that we are more closely aligned with Classical Liberalism. But no one who aligns with Classical Liberalism would call themselves a liberal based upon modern definitions and usage. And we can state definitively that the Biblical Worldview is in conflict with Modern Liberalism.

We may find that the *structure* of Classical Liberalism, with its limited government and individual rights, provides a better framework for religious freedom and the preaching of the Gospel. But we must *never* confuse its *foundation* of human reason with our foundation of Divine Revelation.

Ultimately, our hope is not in a political system built by man. Our hope is in the coming, literal, return and establishment of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. That kingdom will not be a liberal democracy; it will be a perfect, righteous monarchy, and He will rule as King of kings.