

**“What Is a Liberal?” A Sermon by Rev. John H. Dietrich**  
**Presented and Amended**  
**by**  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
**January 8, 2023**

*[Rev. John H. Dietrich, who lived from 1878 until 1957, was the minister of our Spokane church from 1911 to 1916. He came to us from Pennsylvania immediately after being condemned as a heretic by the Dutch Reform Church, the first and only of its ministers to have this distinction. It was here that Dietrich first began calling himself a Humanist, and afterward went on to become an original signer of the Humanist Manifesto, to establish the Humanist Pulpit at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minnesota (where he was minister from 1918 until his retirement in 1936), and to be forever recognized as the Father of Religious Humanism. Although our gratitude should rightfully go to our brothers and sisters at First Unitarian Society for heralding Dietrich’s liberal message and preserving the bulk of his writings, it is also fair to say it was in Spokane that he found the freedom to find himself and where Religious Humanism was born.]*

*Today our religion and our world needs John Dietrich’s liberal message more than ever, along with his deep and unapologetic commitment to establishing a more liberal and, therefore, better, freer, and more dignified society and world. This is why I am endeavoring to bring his voice back into the pulpit from time to time, beginning with today’s sermon, “What Is a Liberal?” Preparing it has been a delightful but not simple task. Dietrich’s sermons were nearly hour-long lectures, with ten-page transcripts. Mine are about 25 minutes with 5.5-page transcripts. So, I’ve had to omit much of what he originally said, most of which consists of the examples he used to make his points, but never the points themselves. Although I’ve dramatically reduced their length, the wording remains more than ninety percent his own, although I’ve made subtle changes to say something important in fewer words, to make better sense for us today, and to make his traditional use of pronouns more inclusive.*

*I’m extremely excited about presenting this century old sermon today because I agree with its content, could have written it myself, and deeply believe it is a message we need even more now than when it was first given by Dietrich himself. — Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof]*

**T**he question which I have chosen for my subject this morning— “What Is a Liberal?” —will indicate to you at once that I have in mind the problem of what constitutes the essential character of a liberal. I imagine most here this morning would consider themselves liberal. We speak of this as a liberal religion, but what are the common qualities we share that make us liberals, and how completely do we measure up to these qualities? In short, what does the term *liberal* mean and when is a person rightly to be regarded as a liberal?

I.

In speaking of the term, I find it difficult to define just what we do mean by *liberalism*. It is one of those sweeping generalizations of our common speech, just as *conservatism* is, which serve as molds in which our thought becomes hardened. And this is very unfortunate because such terms seize hastily only the salient and striking features of things. We should, therefore, be careful not to fall under the tyranny of catchwords and popular classifications. For instance, in simplistic terms people are either good or bad; things are either black or white; whereas to the discerning world, they are seldom either good or bad but are rather

subtle mixtures of the two qualities in varied proportions of light and shade. And among these popular classifications which so obscure important distinctions is that of *conservative* and *liberal*. These names conceal almost as much as they reveal. By the conservative is generally understood as one who is wedded to things as they are, and is skeptical of change; by the liberal, one who is eager for any change that seems to make for progress. This is perhaps as good a distinction as we can make and yet these interpretations are vague and indiscriminating. There are many types of both conservatism and liberalism, good and bad types of each.

Among the former, we may note first the *conservatism of selfishness*, which fears change because it may endanger vested interests or personal convenience. Here we find those who desire to keep things as they are for their own personal benefit and oppose change of any kind because change would deprive them of certain things which they enjoy. Then there is the *conservatism of inertia or indifference*, which, moving contentedly along in the large tracks and ruts of custom, resents what it terms the agitating of the reformer and is uncomfortably disturbed by any ruffling of the surface of settled life by the stir of new ideas. We have again the *conservatism of disenchantment*, which has resigned itself to the second best as the only thing attainable by mankind, which feels that the ideals of the progressive are unattainable and utopian, and, therefore, is satisfied with what it calls the “practical.” Finally, we have a more *normal and wholesome conservatism* which is sentimental and has its basis in a loving attachment and deep veneration for familiar things and places, persons, institutions, and customs. One sees its strength in the reverence for the greatness that is deep rooted in the past and has stood the shocks of time.

In like manner, we may distinguish many types of liberalism. It, too, has its ignoble type in the *selfish liberalism*, which hopes to glean its harvest from improvements. Here are found the people who desire change because change would be an advantage to them just as it would be a disadvantage to others. Then there is the *liberalism of unrest* which springs from a dramatic love of change, joined often with the dramatic thirst for applause. It is a sort of “wanderlust” in politics and religion. It is a certain nervous discontent with things as they are, and desires change, regardless of whether the change be for the better or worse. We have too the *liberalism of optimism*. This is liberalism that makes exaggerated claims on behalf of humanity and stakes the whole cause on some one particular reform. According to this view, humanity has been through the centuries the victim of unjust laws and institutions; and might realize utopia tomorrow, were only the clutches of a vampire minority—the privileged class—relaxed. And this type of liberalism usually has its one patent nostrum, its one universal cure-all, by which humanity may thus be freed.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, we have that *saner liberalism*, which, while leaning decisively to the side of hope, tempers that hope with a recognition of the fact, that humankind, instead of having fallen away from some high estate, has been moving upward, working out the brute, and is slowly but surely coming by its deserts. It differs from conservatism because, while it recognizes the steady march of human progress, it declines to set a limit to the rate at which progress may hereafter be achieved. It believes in the transforming power of great ideas, and in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the type of liberalism that dominates the current moment, an illiberalism that is useless in the world and set only upon the deliberate destruction of its own institutions and liberalism itself.

possibility of lifting humanity, as upon some great wave of enthusiasm, to unexpected levels.

But these are abstract types rather than flesh and blood realities. In most of us, conservative and liberal tendencies are subtly intermingled, although the one or the other of them usually predominates. Sometimes a person is liberal in politics and conservative in religion. I have known political radicals who were ardent Roman Catholics or devoted Presbyterians; on the other hand, I have known Unitarians and Rationalists of the most radical type who in economics or politics refused to accept change.

And yet we know that it was the great movement of liberalism which constituted the main glory of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the marvelous period of intellectual and social and religious awakening in England, and a similar period in America when that great group of New England Unitarians dominated and enlightened the intellectual and spiritual life of this country. In France it brought the Second Republic, the literary revolt of Romanticist Victor Hugo, and the socialistic dreams of philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudon. In Italy and Hungary, it led to the democratic revolutionary movements identified with the names of Mazzini and Kossuth. In Germany it precipitated the revolution of 1848. In Russia it expressed itself in such literary geniuses as Tolstoy and Turgeneff, and in such political revolutionists as Tchaikovsky and Kropotkin. Everywhere this new spirit was at work, sometimes peacefully and sometimes violently, but always it was directed at the destruction of old tyranny and the establishment of new freedom.

Now it is this great movement which we have in mind when we speak of liberalism, and the mental qualities behind this movement when we speak of what we call the liberal spirit. It was the awakening of the best minds everywhere to the need of a better world, and a consecration of their minds to the achievement at any cost of this high end. And it was this movement of liberalism which marks the nineteenth century as the most remarkable period of human history. In fact, the nineteenth century did more to add to the sum total of human life than all the other centuries of the Christian era put together. As German philosopher Heinrich Treitschke once said, “everything new that the nineteenth century created is the work of liberalism.” It is no doubt; because the world has come to recognize this fact that we honor the term and like to be called liberals. There is an occasional person who glories in his conservatism; but the majority of people are proudest when they are recognized as liberals.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

All this now brings me to the inquiry as to how many of us who lay claim to the name of liberal, live in accordance with the ideals which are involved in this great name? You would be surprised at the number and kinds of people who call themselves liberal. I was asked some years ago to give a course of lectures out in the state of Washington in a small town about 100 miles from Spokane, the city in which I was then located. I was told there were

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<sup>2</sup> Sadly, today even liberals turn away from using this term and from embracing this label.

many liberals in this town interested in hearing more about liberal religion. Well, all the liberals came, and when I stepped upon the platform, I faced the most assorted collection of people I had ever seen. Among them were believers in every school of religious opinion, as well as unbelievers in any religion whatever—old and new style Unitarians, mildly or liberal orthodox, Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, Quakers, Theosophists, Swedenborgians, and many forms of individual eccentricity.

There were also freethinkers of every possible opinion—agnostics, indifferentists, skeptics, atheists, secularists, and many others. A single light, I was reminded, attracts all the bugs in town. There was every possible degree and shade of culture and intelligence. There were those of the highest intelligence, broadest views, and most inclusive sympathies; and others of the densest ignorance, the narrowest prejudices, the crudest opinions, the most bigoted and scornful tempers. Widely as they differed from each other, fiercely as they antagonized each other’s beliefs, they all alike claimed to be liberal and would have been grossly insulted if their liberalism had been questioned.

I have spoken of this incident to illustrate the point that there is nothing more difficult to define than this thing which we call *liberalism*. It has no creed and no organization. Its most notable proponents are members of different churches, political parties, and social classes. Yet there is no other words that can be used in its stead. Some try to use the word “radical,” but it implies someone who holds extreme views and advocates for extreme measures, or as the dictionary says, “one who carries theories to unqualified conclusions.” So, while I take great pride in being a liberal, I would take no pride in being a radical. The important thing is not to be radical, but to be right; and there are times when it is right to be radical and times when it is wrong to be radical. But I cannot conceive of any time when it is not right to be a liberal. For liberalism is a mindset; it is an atmosphere, a point of view, a spirit. As the British statesman, Lord John Morley says, “Liberalism is a marked way of looking at things, feeling them, handling them, judging them.”

William Ellery Channing, that great Unitarian preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said that liberalism was moved by the dignity of human nature. What he meant was that liberalism looks upon human life as the one thing that really counts in the universe; and it judges every institution—the state, the church, the school, the corporation, the labor union—in the light of whether or not it liberates and dignifies human lives. If it does, then the liberal supports and protects it, but if any particular institution weakens or degrades or enslaves or impoverishes life, then the liberal condemns and destroys it. Life is the one thing that counts in the mind of the liberal—not the state, not the church, not the school, but human life itself. This explains why liberal movements in all countries and in every age, have always been identified with religious reformations, political revolutions, and social reforms. To give the slave his freedom, the serf his land, the woman her rights, the laborer his product, the child his childhood, and the individual, one’s right to religious conviction—this has been the work of liberalism from the beginning; and all because each individual, weighed down by social or religious or political tyranny, represented human life and therefore was entitled to the boon of liberty.

### III.

With this conception of liberalism clearly in mind, we are now ready to consider the typical marks or characteristics of the liberal mind. For liberalism is not about what beliefs we hold but about how we hold them. There are many characteristics of the liberal mind; but will be satisfied to discuss six of the most important.

1. Firstly, the liberal must have a free mind, absolutely free—free from prejudice, free! from fear, free from interest of any kind. The liberal above all else must be both the exponent and the champion of the ideal of freedom, demanding freedom of expression for oneself and help guarantee it for others. It is this idea of freedom that others, no matter how much they may differ from us in opinion and ways of life, are nevertheless entitled to every liberty, which has ever constituted the noblest attribute of the liberal spirit.

2. Secondly, a liberal must always have an open mind, absolutely free from bigotry in its every form, and be ready to hear and consider sincerely any idea which may come up. This is especially true of new ideas, even though these ideas may seem to involve the destruction of everything that has hitherto been regarded as true and sacred. The liberal will not run away from such ideas, nor will close one's ears against them. However dangerous or strange they may appear, the liberal will listen to them with sympathy, study them diligently, and reject them only by successfully demonstrating their futility after careful investigation. The liberal will not accept an idea as true just because it is new, nor reject it just because it is new. The liberal will follow the injunction of Paul to *prove all things and hold fast that which is good*— and this is the second mark of the liberal spirit.

Yet a majority of people have some subjects to which they practically close their minds, some questions forbidden to ask. I have in mind a very remarkable man in a Unitarian church which I once served, and he is typical of a great many Unitarians, in the east especially. In all matters pertaining to philosophy and religion, he was liberal in the extreme. He was a splendid example of the open mind when the latest speculation of philosophy, the newest surmise of biblical criticism, the most recent and extravagant idea of God were brought to his mind; but the moment any question of social or economic reform was brought to his attention, his mind closed up like a steel trap. And how many hundreds of people of this kind we find in our Unitarian churches. If there ever was a time when we needed social reform, new economic ideas, and new international relations, it is now; and yet I know many who are real liberals in religion but close their minds to these questions just as they would close their doors against the plague. So, again, the second mark of the liberal is the genuinely open mind.

3. The third mark of the liberal is the broad mind, the understanding mind, the sympathetic mind. The true liberal does not treat anything with contempt or scorn, but seeks rather to understand others, no matter how alien they are to one's own habits, or how dangerous apparently to one's own interests—to understand their ideas and ideals, their miseries,

desires, and ambitions, their virtues which they always have and their vices which they usually have. Instead of ridiculing others because of certain beliefs or actions, the liberal seeks to understand them, to get their point of view, to feel their woes and to understand their hopes. In seeking to understand others, the liberal does not necessarily accept their ideas, or approve their methods, or feel compelled to help them satisfy their goals. The liberal may feel they are mistaken in their aims and dangerous in their ways but holds that it is one’s primary duty to understand others as the best way to resolve our differences. Before the liberal has any right to judge another, and certainly before there is any right to condemn or punish another, we must truly know them. And this understanding or sympathetic mind is another mark of liberalism.

4. Another mark of liberalism is the inquiring or thorough-going mind—the mind which will not be content with any sham, nor with any half-truth, but which will be satisfied with nothing less than the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The liberal must be in its original sense a radical; that is, a “root man” —one who tries to trace all things to their roots, their origin, their foundation and so be thorough-going and sure as possible in all one’s knowledge and opinions. The liberal will not be content with another individual’s nor an institution’s theory of things, but will find out for oneself whether or not certain things are true. And never will one presume to form an opinion, much less express one, without having carefully collected all the facts and sifted the evidence. The true liberal insists upon seeing things as they really are, and not as one has been told by others to imagine them to be.

5. Another qualification of the liberal mind is sincerity, honesty, and naturalness. The true liberal is always free from pretense and hypocrisy and will never pretend to believe something one does not believe. For instance, I have in mind a man who remains in the orthodox church even though he no longer believes the doctrines of that church. He once said to me, “You know, Mr. Dietrich, I am just as liberal in my religious views as you are; I stand practically upon the same ground, but I remain in this church because of the good I can do through an institution of this kind. It puts me in a difficult intellectual situation, but I think this is justified by the results which I get.” Well, all I have to say of such a man is that while he may hold the same theological views as I do, he is not a liberal. One of the essential characteristics of the liberal mind is absolute sincerity.

6. And the last mark of the liberal mind is courage; enough courage to have the other marks. Cowardice is poor material to make a liberal of. Indifferentists and sneerers and ridiculers may be formed out of cowardice, but not liberals. Only a brave person will dare in the face of all obstacles to insist upon unqualified freedom both for oneself and for others. Only a brave person will dare keep one’s mind open for the consideration of every new problem which comes up. Only a brave person will dare be broad and sympathetic and understanding when all the world is condemning. Only a brave person will dare search down to the very roots of things when others are accepting the dictums of the church and the state and the college. Only a brave person will dare be sincere when it is advantageous to be insincere. And that is why courage must be included in the qualifications which mark the liberal mind.

Some are afraid of being too liberal, but I do not think anyone can be too liberal, not in the right sense of the word. No one can be too open-minded, too free, too broad, too inquiring, too sincere, too brave. People learn to love genuine liberals wherever they go, just as they learn to despise the counterfeit liberals wherever they go. They despise counterfeits because they are counterfeits, and because all they accomplish is to divide and destroy. They love the genuine because they are genuine, and because all they say and do tends to carry the world forward to a better day—a day of clearer light, of larger charity, of growing peace on earth and good will to all.

We, as a group of people gathering here from Sunday to Sunday call ourselves liberals. Liberalism is supposed to be the prevailing temper and purpose of this congregation. The question that concerns us all is, "Are we true to this purpose and temper? Are we liberals of the genuine type or of the make-believe type?" I trust we are genuine. If we are not, we must make ourselves such. And we can make ourselves such by being truly free, truly open-minded, truly broad and sympathetic, truly inquiring, truly sincere, and truly brave; for it is these things that make us truly liberal.