

Same labels, different Protestants

By [David Heim](#)

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The reevaluation of liberal Protestantism and its real but perhaps overstated decline—a topic that the *Century* has covered [with this review](#), and related commentary [by Martin Marty](#) and by [John Buchanan](#)—was [picked up by the New York Times this week](#).

The *Times* story does a decent job summarizing the debate, in which the overarching question is posed by historian David Hollinger ([interviewed by the Century last year](#)): Did liberal Protestants of midcentury win the culture war but lose the church? Did their ideas triumph, but at the cost of eroding their own institutions?

What often gets lost in discussions of liberal and conservative winners and losers is just how much both liberal and conservative Protestants have changed internally over the past 60 years in response to each other and in response to larger cultural and intellectual shifts. The same labels get used, but the products inside the wrapping are different.

Liberal Protestant leaders of the current era tend to be self-consciously postmodern, localist and communitarian in sympathy. They are happy to talk about the Bible as a fundamental narrative, and they are energized by liturgy and enamored with ancient spiritual practices of the church. These liberals are vastly different from the liberals of midcentury, who were self-consciously progressive and globally minded, confident that the social sciences were the handmaidens of theology and a new world order.

Meanwhile, conservative evangelical leaders of today tend to be globally minded, socially reformist, and committed to a sophisticated integration of faith and higher learning—vastly different from insular and defensive evangelicals of midcentury.

One gets a good glimpse of changes on the conservative side in this [critique of the evangelical magazine Christianity Today](#) from the movement's right wing. As *CT* approached its 50th anniversary in 2006, Philip Johnson lamented that the magazine had turned its back on the “old evangelicalism” it once represented and had

succumbed to theological liberalism. I don't share his lament, but I think he accurately detects some real changes.