

Jacob's ladder: Liberal in what way?

From the Editors in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

Mainline or liberal Protestants need a better term to describe themselves. *Mainline* implies cultural and social dominance, which is hard to assert given the numerical realities. Only three mainline churches rank among the ten largest church bodies in the U.S. Only six make it into the top 25. If one counts all the churches that belong to the National Council of Churches, which includes Orthodox and historically black churches, one comes up with 45 million mainliners—about one-fourth of all church members in the U.S.

Liberal has its own problems, beginning with vagueness. Liberal in what way, and compared to what? Some might specify that *liberal* refers to self-conscious modernizers of the faith (like Shailer Mathews in the early 20th century, or Gordon Kaufman in this era) who explicitly seek to exchange classic doctrinal formulations for ones they find more plausible to the modern mind. But such modernizers are at the margins, not the heart, of liberal theology, which has been largely engaged in a constructive argument with, not an abandonment of, tradition.

Liberalism is complicated by the fact that many of its most influential figures have been critics of liberalism. One thinks of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr and, in recent years, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. For all their antiliberal arguments, these figures' intellectual style, ecumenical engagements and approach to scripture and tradition mark them clearly as part of mainline or liberal Protestantism. No one would mistake them for fundamentalists or conservative evangelicals.

Is there an alternative to the vague *liberal* and anachronistic *mainline*? We have a suggestion: Christian humanism. Or, if you will, Protestant humanism.

Humanism captures liberal Protestantism's emphasis on intellectual exploration, on doing theology in conversation with other modes of knowledge. Since the Renaissance, humanism has designated a movement that takes learning seriously and celebrates the ability of scientists, poets and historians to expand knowledge and shape the world. *Christian* specifies that this appreciation of human freedom

and potential is not ungrounded or unlimited, and that human identity is not simply whatever humans want it to be. As creatures of God, humans are most truly themselves when fulfilling divine purposes. And it is “in Christ,” the divine and human one, that we learn what it means to be fully human.

This issue includes a [profile of Hans Urs von Balthasar](#), a Catholic theologian who is a great 20th-century exemplar of Christian humanism. Von Balthasar’s intellectual creativity, and the depth of his Christian spirituality, render terms like *liberal* or *conservative* quite inadequate. *Christian humanist* seems just right.

In recent decades *Christian* and *humanism* have been placed in opposition, which makes this an especially good time to put them together. *Christian humanism* reaches toward the catholic tradition of the church, but it also has the virtue of unpredictability, of genuine openness. So the next time someone asks if you are liberal or conservative, mainline or evangelical, try saying, “I’m a Christian humanist.”