

heaven. But since people tend to sin at one point or another in their lives, how is it possible for them to ever get to heaven? The answer in conservative Christianity is Christ. What Jesus does is offer conservative Christians a chance to get to heaven. The idea is this: Christ suffered on the cross so much that he built up moral credit sufficient for all people, forever. He then offered a chance to get to heaven—that is, redemption—on the following terms, strict father terms: If you accept Jesus as your savior, that is, as your moral authority, and agree to follow the moral authority of your minister and your church, then you can get to heaven. But that is going to require discipline. You need to be disciplined enough to follow the rules, and if you don't, then you are going to go to hell. So Jesus, with his moral credit that he gained from suffering, can pay off your debts—that is, your sins—and allow you to get into heaven, but only if you toe the line.

Liberal Christianity is very, very different. Liberal Christianity sees God as essentially beneficent, as wanting to help people. The central idea in liberal Christianity is grace, where grace is understood as a kind of metaphorical nurturance. In liberal Christianity, you can't earn grace—you are given grace unconditionally by God. But you have to accept grace, you have to be near God to get his grace, you can be filled with grace, you can be healed by grace, and you are made into a moral person through God's grace.

In other words, grace is metaphorical nurturance. That is, just as nurturance feeds you, heals you, takes care of you, just as a nurturant parent teaches you to be nurturant and allows you to be a moral being, just as you can't get nurturance unless you are close to your parents, just as you must accept nurturance in order to get it, so all of these things about nurturance are true of grace in liberal Christianity. Nurturance comes with unconditional love—in the case of grace, the unconditional love of God. What makes a religion nurturant is that it metaphorically views God as a nurturant parent. In a nurturant form of religion, your spiritual experience has to do with your connection to other people and the world, and your spiritual practice has to do with your service to other people and to your community. This is why nurturant Christians are progressives: because they have a nurturant morality, just as progressives have.