

One Faith No Longer

Life Together Class May 29, 2022

As I was considering what to speak on for my portraits of Paul, my mind drifted naturally to divisions because I am a contrarian by nature. Certainly it seems we live in divisive times, whether social, political or religious. And it turns out that Paul had a lot to say about divisions! That's when I came across this book: *One Faith No Longer*. It's written by George Yancey and Ashlee Quosigk. Yancey is Professor of Sociology at Baylor University and has co-authored several other books. Quosigk is a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Religion in the University of Georgia.

The authors draw on both quantitative data and interviews to support their conclusion that conservative and progressive Christians are in the process of separating into different, irreconcilable religious groups.

This morning, I thought I'd cover what the Apostle Paul said about various divisions in the church and use that for a framework for working through the conclusions of this book, see whether we agree with them, and depending on our answers, discuss what, if anything can be done.

John 17:20–23

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

1 Corinthians 1:10–13

1 Corinthians 3:1–9; 22

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building.

(20–22) And again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

1 Corinthians 12:12–27

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are man, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink . . .

Ephesians 2:11–18

Therefore

Philippians 2:1–4

Therefore if you have any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being united in spirit and purpose.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility consider others more important than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others.

The idea for this book emerged as the lead author, George Yancy, worked on research concerning religious attitudes among academics. George noted that academics from mainline Christian denominations had more sympathy toward non-Christian groups than they did toward their more conservative religious peers.

The research in this book can be fairly seen as an examination of the culture war as situated within the largest religious group in the United States. It is meant to be a guide to help members of one group better understand those with contrasting religious understandings.

Contrasts

Franklin Graham

“As a Christian, I believe the Bible, which defines homosexuality as sin, something to be repentant of, not something to be flaunted, praised or politicized.”

Because of statements like this, Graham is not well liked by much of New York City. He has developed a reputation for homophobia and xenophobia within certain populations of the U.S. During COVID-19 though, he humanitarian organization called Samaritan’s Purse set up a 68-bed emergency field hospital to help victims of the virus. Despite this Mayor Bill de Blasio made it clear the city would keep a close eye on the organization to ensure it didn’t engage in prejudice due to its rigid belief in conservative sexual mores and its negative view of Islam.

Jonathan Merritt was also suspicious of Graham. His father was once the president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He has left Evangelicalism, which he claims to have outgrown, to pursue new avenues of Christianity, and today he calls himself a “liberal Protestant.” Wrote an online article voicing similar concerns as de Blasio.

The two figures illuminate traditionally conservative Christianity, as exemplified by Graham, and liberal, more progressive Christianity, as exemplified by Merritt. When evaluating the depth of Merritt’s comments, condemning Graham, one is right to question whether these two figures are within the same religion in the first place.

There are those who talk about a generalized Christian presence in the United States. Most who talk about the U.S. as a Christian nation seem to be talking about the Christianity of Graham.

The national media tends to present all Evangelicals as one and the same; they are often typecast as backward, conservative Christians. While most stereotypes of Evangelicals present them as conservative theologically and politically, there is actually strong division among Evangelicals with some Evangelicals identifying as either theologically progressive, politically progressive, or both. They envision a Christianity based on notions of intolerance of other religions and conservative sexual attitudes. Images of Christian nationalism may appear in their minds. But doesn't this shortchange the Christianity of Merritt? Have we ignored the Christian faith of those who do not fit the stereotype of the Christian conservative who believes the Bible as the inerrant Word of God? This type of stereotype brings with it an assumption of unity among Christians that simply does not now exist. There is a social, political, and theological diversity among Christians that often goes unrecognized.

Religious progressives are an understudied group. But recent quantitative research suggests that political conformity matters more than theological agreement in the assessment of theologically progressive Christians toward theologically conservative Christians.

This research found that theologically progressive Protestants exhibit more social distance from conservative Christians than from politically progressive non-Christians. Building on this body of research, we examine how progressive and conservative Christians develop contrasting social identities.

Progressive and conservative Christians use entirely different factors in determining their social identity and moral values. Indeed, we argue that the ways in which these two groups deal with questions of meaning are so different that it is time to regard them as distinct religious groups rather than as subgroups under a single religious umbrella.

Methodology

Three data sources

1. Data from the American National Election Studies (a national probability survey)
2. Series of blogs written by progressive and conservative Protestants
3. Interviews with over seventy American Protestants

How It Began

The early 20th century in the U.S. saw the emergence of a modernist-fundamentalist schism among Christians. Protestant fundamentalism developed largely in reaction to innovations in science, such as Darwinism, and new social changes emerging from modernity. The Scopes trial best illustrated this attitude.

In 1925 a high school teacher, John T. Scopes, attempted to teach human evolution to his students. In doing so, he purposefully violated Tennessee's Butler Act, which outlawed the teaching of evolution. Such laws had been pushed by fundamentalists who prioritized biblical fidelity over the latest scientific theories. However, not all Protestants embraced fundamentalism, as many progressive Christians affirmed the modern social changes and the new scientific theories while attempting to retain their Christian beliefs. Many modernists argue that evolution is not inconsistent with religion and that Christians should embrace, rather than push away new science. The schism that developed in the 1920s persists to this day.

The controversy forced Christians to choose:

1. Fundamentalism
 - a. Emphasis on message of eternal salvation through trust in Christ's atoning work
2. Modernism
 - a. Emphasis on a social gospel that concentrated on political action and sought to realize the kingdom of God on earth by aiding the progress of civilization.

Previously, Christians had been primarily divided along denominational lines, but this new split happened within denomination rather than simply between them. This division set the foundation for a conservative-progressive split that continues to divide denominations today.

The difference between today's progressive and conservative Christians have increased over time. For instance, whereas both modernists and fundamentalists used to see LGBTQ sexual orientations as sinful, progressive Christians of today now generally affirm these sexualities, whereas conservative Christians typically continue to take a hard-line stance condemning them.

Same Schism Exists in Catholicism

While in the past the division centered on birth control and women's ordination, current conflict among Catholics often fits with cultural war issues in general society. Conservative Catholics are uncomfortable with the questioning of the Church's authority while progressive Catholics believe that such questions are important in modern society, creating a key distinction in how Catholics can find separate sources of meaning.

In many ways the conflict in Catholicism mirrors that in Protestantism because rebels in both groups question whether to rely on tradition authority or to accept modern interpretations of their religious traditions. The general progressive-conservative division among U.S. Christians transcends denominational barriers.

There is more research on conservative Christians than on their progressive counterparts. Theologically conservative Christians are relatively likely to exhibit particularism. Conservative Christians are relatively unwilling to accept religious out- groups and have a preference for other Christians.

Politics

Theological conservatives tend to be political conservatives and theological progressives tend to be political progressives.

There is much debate as to why this theological orientation-political viewpoint relationship exists. Froese and Bader argue that the way Americans conceptualize God may help explain this propensity in the United States, that that US Christians are more likely than Christians in other countries to envision God as active and authoritarian.

Other scholars suggest that the link between theological orientation and political viewpoint is more common among Christians in the US than elsewhere and may be a distinctive feature of American culture. Some have argued that the political orientation of Christians has sometimes shaped their religious faith rather than vice versa.

Theological & Political Priorities

The goals of progressive Christians are not fully grounded in partisan politics. Rather, progressive Christians seek to support certain goals tied to an ideal of social justice, and those ideals appear to be the basis of their religious beliefs.

Conservatives build their identity around an adherence to certain traditional theological beliefs. Other social values become subservient to the final goal of what they conceptualize as biblical obedience.

Baptists in America: A Case Study of Progressive-Conservative Battles within an Evangelical Denomination

American Evangelicalism has come to be dominated by Baptists. The division among Baptists that is most relevant to the theme of this book is the division over the issue of missions, which was directly related to the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. An internal conflict developed as some Baptists were willing to agree with modern ideals more than other Baptists. Some Baptists aligned their mission more along the lines of the social gospel, prioritizing social services and general education, while more fundamentalist Baptists continued to embrace a more traditional mission style, relying on direct proselytization, evangelism, and conversion.

Led to a split in the Northern Baptist Convention and the forming of the Conservative Baptist Association.

By the mid-1900s there were a plethora of Baptist groups in America and by the end of the 20th century, Baptists were experiencing new divides over issues like the ordination of women, abortion, the Bible, and eschatology. Beginning in 1979, the SBC experienced a major conflict begun by conservative Christians who believed liberalism had taken root in Baptist institutions and who sought a renewed emphasis on an inerrantist view of the Bible.

Issues of biblical inerrancy and women in leadership shaped much of the debate they had with moderate or progressive Baptists. They organized in 1979 to wind the presidency of the SBC. Eventually they were able to place conservative Christians in leadership positions for seminaries, publishing houses, mission boards, Sunday School boards, and state conventions.

The movement came to be known as the “conservative resurgence” by its supporters and as the “fundamentalist takeover” by its opponents. It mirrored the shift toward conservatism in broader US culture, exemplified by the 1984 reelection of Ronald Reagan.

Eventually this led to the Alliance of Baptists to split away in 1987 and join the National Council of the Churches of Christ. The Alliance of Baptists adopted a theology that called people not only to salvation but also to social justice. The denomination also practices ordination of women and it affirms LGBTQ sexualities as orthodox. It is highly politically involved and frequently criticized President Trump and conservative policies during sermons.

The timing of the SBC split coincides with the rise of the religious right. The modernizing and secularizing trends of the 1970s led some conservative Christians to become more politically mobilized to protect conservative values that had been called into question in areas like family, sexuality, and religion in public life. These conservative Christians founded organizations like the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family, both of which mixed faith and politics. One of the dividing lines among Christians that determine whether one is progressive or conservative is one’s views on whether transgenderism, homosexuality,

and other nonheterosexualities, such as bisexuality and pansexuality, are condoned by God and are consistent with the Bible.

David Gushee, professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, a Baptist college and divinity school argued for LGBTQ affirmation on biblical, historical, and philosophical grounds in his book *Changing Our Mind*. In his revised understanding of Christian sexual morality, he appealed to his distrust of traditional Christian teachings partially due to what he viewed as sins of the past Christian Church.

However, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminar, disagreed with Gushee's reassessment, appealing to biblical authority.

This disagreement is a perfect example of the progressive-conservative division as both men come from Baptist backgrounds and remain active in the Baptist community today.

According to Mohler, we "were seminary students together and we were for some time colleagues on the same theology faculty." But while they had these things in common, Mohler also notes that "it was also clear that we inhabited different theological worlds and had very different visions of evangelical identity and conviction."

Gushee articulates the division on issues like this: "Culture warriors who criticize me believe they are defending the True Faith from compromising liberals like me. I believe I am defending the Religion of Jesus from intolerant ideologues like them. We will never, ever agree. Only God can judge."

Denominational labels no longer provide a clear indication of one's social or political alignment. It's not the name of the denomination, but whether the group, congregation, or individual identifies as theologically conservative, moderate, or liberal within those groups.

(Sociologist James Hunter) The divisions between progressive and conservative Christians ultimately center on questions of moral authority: progressives are committed to the superiority of looking to "personal experience," or "spirit of the modern age," or "self-grounded rational discourse" Conservatives are committed to transcendence, which is a type of "reality that is independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience," such as scripture.

Recent work suggests Evangelicals were drawn either to a progressive impulse that reasons based on personal experience and subjective intuition, or a traditionalist impulse that reasons with a commitment to divine revelation. This contrast of moral authorities is evident in the differences in reasoning often found between progressives and conservatives, with progressives often appealing to personal experience and using a humanistic ethic of social justice to view scripture and conservatives often appealing to a historical theology emphasizing biblical doctrines in defense of their views.

Other Splits

Most recently, the United Methodist Church signed an agreement aimed at separation. This action was taken due to the intense disagreements in the church over sexuality. Previously, Episcopal conservatives split with Episcopal liberals over the issue of gay ordination. We're observing a general splitting of progressive and conservative Christians regardless of denominational identity.

In or Out

To be an Evangelical is usually thought of as to be one with missionary zeal and desire to share the gospel with others. These two terms get at the heart of the divide between progressive and conservative Christians and how a given Evangelical relates to these two concepts helps one to understand the identity crisis within Evangelicalism.

Insider movement consists of persons from non-Christian backgrounds who have come to believe in Jesus but who nevertheless remain (and are often encouraged by their Christian mentors to remain) part of their original religious communities.

Those who embrace the legitimacy of Insider Movements consider it possible to maintain some religious beliefs and practices associated with another religion and still follow Christ.

Chrislam refers to a syncretistic blending of Christianity and Islam, and it was proliferated by a number of Evangelicals who were growing increasingly concerned about missiological teachings coming out of certain places where missionaries are trained, particularly Fuller Theological Seminar in California.

Concerned conservative Christians, however, believed these missiological methods were producing a heretical amalgamation of Christianity and Islam, and they began employing the term “Chrislam” to describe this amalgamation. Progressive Evangelicals adamantly disagree, arguing that the accusation of Chrislam is misguided and that missionaries to Muslims have been wrongly centering their mission efforts around a Western understanding of the Bible and culture.

Ultimately, we find that theologically conservative Evangelical Christians see themselves as more closely aligned with theologically progressive Christians than with Muslims; however, progressive Evangelical Christians see themselves as more closely aligned with Muslims than with conservative Christians.

Theologically conservative Evangelical Christians in our study are more likely to surround themselves with heterogeneous peers (that is, peers who hold a variety of theological perspectives), and they hold overwhelmingly moderate views of progressive Christians. By contrast, theologically progressive Evangelical Christians are more likely to surround themselves with homogeneously thinking peers (that is, peers who hold similar theological perspectives), and they hold overwhelming negative views of conservative Christians.

Lastly, conservative Evangelical Christians rely primarily on a more rigid, traditionalist form of theology to determine who is in their in-group. Progressive Evangelical Christians, by contrast, determine their in-group by relying primarily on a more flexible, progressivist form of theology to determine who is in their in-group. Conservative Christians tend to emphasize the importance of correct theology, and they hold several distinct theological beliefs that mark them as separate from progressive Christians and all other religious groups. But when defining their in-group, conservative Evangelicals break from the stereotype of being theologically rigid, and they are ironically willing to overlook theological differences with progressive Christians and consider those progressives as part of their in-group, on the grounds that they perceive progressives are within the Christian fold and share similar goals.

Conservative Christians as Theologically Rigid and Socially Diverse

In Christ Alone is a well-known hymn sung in Christian churches of various denominations. Song was written by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, but conservative Christians. Written in 2001. Getty and his wife are self-described modern hymn writers who strive to recharge the art of congregational singing

within churches. They incorporate centuries-older Christian hymns and have created a catalog of songs specifically focused on articulating Christian doctrine.

The lyrics to “In Christ Alone” were written to proclaim what they believe is the true Christian doctrine.

However, the clear doctrine articulation has left the song vulnerable to questioning by progressive Christians, who appreciate much of the song but hold differing doctrinal views on some points. The progressivist impulse toward revisionism and the conservative impulse to hold fast to traditional doctrines came to a head in 2013 when the Presbyterian Church, a denomination that has shifted toward progressivism, requested permission from Townend and Getty to print a revised version of the hymn “In Christ Alone” in its new hymnal. The Presbyterian Church desired to change the second verse.

Original

In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied;
For ev’ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live.

Due to the evolving progressivist belief that emphasizes the divine love of God as being devoid of anger and judgment, and a rejection of the traditional conservative Christian belief that God’s wrath actually is his love in action against sin, the church hoped to change “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” to “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the love of God was magnified.”

Getty and Townend rejected the request of the Presbyterian Church to drop the mention of the “wrath of God” and would not allow the modification of the lyrics. This uncompromising emphasis on adhering to historically defined correct doctrines fits well within the stereotypical conservative Christian character.

The Presbyterian Church saw the rejection of its request as unfortunate, believing the proposed alteration to be a very minor one in comparison to all the two groups could affirm. In contrast, the conservative Christian songwriter felt it unthinkable to erase “the wrath of God,” which they argued is an integral part of true Christianity, explicitly and repeatedly found in the Bible. His response also hints at a widely held conservative Christian belief that sinful and deceiving ideas will threaten to infiltrate correct doctrine, but one must hold fast to the truth, and the belief that some will walk away from the truth even if by simply ignoring certain attributes of God.

The conflict regarding “In Christ Alone” illustrates some of the most fundamental differences between progressive and conservative Christians.

Conservative Christians and Islam

Conservative Christians are overwhelmingly theologically exclusive. They see Islam as a false belief system that prevents Muslims from accepting the truth as conservative Christians define it. They are more apt to see Muslims as members of a completely separate religion from their own and tend to

perceive that Islam is opposed to Christianity's core tenets concerning the person of Jesus, the cross, salvation, and the Trinity. In contrast, conservative Christians tend to see progressive Christians as part of their in-group because they perceive that progressive Christians agree with them on major doctrinal issues. Theologically conservative Christians are also more likely than progressive Christians to have a heterogeneous (diversified) Christian social circle in regard to views of Islam and also overwhelmingly have moderate views of progressive Christians (usually seeing progressives as wrong but with pure motivations). Known for their distrust of government, conservative Christians are also more apt than progressive Christians to see the world mainly through a religious lens, rather than a political lens.

Comfort with the Terms "Evangelical" and "Christian"

For the most part, conservative Christians were more than happy to be called an Evangelical. Usually felt comfortable with the Christian label even proud of it in some cases. For many, Evangelical and Christian go hand in hand.

Generally have more positive outlook on the Christians of today than progressive Christians do. While conservatives do not believe themselves to be more intelligent or better in terms of merit, than non-Christians, they do believe they have been entrusted with the truth of God and that their action of knowing and accepting the truth is what makes them a Christian. This tends for conservative Christians to express a high level of certainty regarding their beliefs about God and to describe their doctrines as coming directly from God.

Conservative Christians do not share progressive Christians' postmodern distrust of language or progressives' comfort in altering definitions.

Almost all conservative Christians stated the Bible or the Word of God to be the source from which they draw their highest moral authority. The centrality of the Bible in conservative Christians' mindset serves as the foundation to other conservative Christian beliefs. Obedience to an unchanging God means not altering one's beliefs according to shifting cultural attitudes or new social problems. Majority of conservative Christians are supremely interested in the reconciliation of God and humankind, both in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Conservative Christians are also more likely to speak of hell to outsiders for a number of reasons. Due to their view of hell, conservative Christians are more likely to support traditional Evangelical proselytization. See sharing their faith with others as an act of love toward others and obedience to God. While they have biblical support for and interest in meeting the physical and emotional needs of people, they would prefer that such efforts be accompanied by attention to spiritual states as well.

Political Views

Conservative Christian theology tends to align them more closely with the US Republican Party. Research also suggests conservative Christians are becoming increasingly unhappy with the Republican Party, citing corruption and abandonment of conservative and founding principles of small government within a Judeo-Christian framework. Conservative-leaning Evangelicals are not as optimistic about political solutions to society's problems. Often they see others as being more motivated by theology, seeing the world through a religious lens. (Islamic terrorism—root of the problem in the religion of Islam rather political or other social causes) Identifying the problem within the realm of religion implies a

religious solution, and conservative Christians tend to view Christian proselytization (and polemics) to be the best potential solution.

Most conservative Christians were not optimistic regarding government as a force for positive change. Conservative Christians are generally weary of “big government” and “socialism” and are unhappy with newer governmental acts they believe to go against the Bible (same-sex marriage). Though the Democratic Party is more often cited as supporting these unbiblical stances, conservative Christians frequently describe both parties as having abandoned true Christian conservatism.

Conservative Christians are more interested in debating religious truths than are progressive Christians. The historical traditional conservative Christian stance of having something valuable to share with other non-Christians is often seen as oppressive by progressivists. This is because progressive Christians view Christianity as the dominant form of religion in the US and thus seek to promote other non-Christian ideologies in an effort to shift power to the perceived marginalized.

Conservative Christian interviewees were consistent in emphasizing the importance of their freedom to point out what they see as the fallacies of Islam and the truths of Christianity.

Conservative Christians see themselves and others as being more motivated by religion, and they see the world through a religious lens, whereas progressive Christians see others as being more motivated by political and socioeconomic factors.

Conservative Christians often express complicated views toward Muslims, stating both positive and negative thoughts. Despite their negative opinion of Islam and its dire eternal prognosis, conservative Christians usually expressed warmth toward Muslims. High level of interest in and accommodation of Muslims stem from their conservative Christian emphasis on biblical doctrines of salvation.

While conservative Christians prefer black-and-white boundaries in so many areas, they demonstrate more flexibility regarding multiple perspectives on Islam. In general, conservative Christians interviewees seemed reluctant to speak against other Christians but rather tried to find commonalities in the mission to share their religion with non-Christians.

Impact of Pluralism

Being exposed to examples of widely diverging beliefs can make minor distinctions seem less important, even if those distinctions were previously seen as significant. Conservative Christians may be loosening their theological boundaries with progressive Christians, believing that the inner core of their beliefs are shared, in spite of numerous non-essential differences.

Authors content they are curious as to how well conservative Christians truly understand progressive Christian theology and whether their accepting attitude stems, at least in part, from unawareness of how vastly progressive Christians’ core theology and social priorities differ from their own.

In addition to pluralism, the reason conservative Christians are more apt to consider progressive-leaning Christians as part of their in-group is that their theology has been gradually becoming more progressive without their full realization. Possibility strengthened by a recent study of US Evangelicals that suggested most interviewees’ moral authorities were in fact more progressive than they themselves realized or felt comfortable expressing outright.

Progressive Christians

Progressive Christians have a flexible, Jesus-centric theology, which stresses what we have conceptualized and termed a humanistic ethic of social justice.

Progressive-leaning Christians were more optimistic about politics and political solutions than conservative Christians and were more apt to see the world through a political, rather than religious, lens. Politics itself doesn't drive their political optimism, but rather their political optimism is a consequence of their flexible theology that stresses a humanistic ethic of social justice.

This ethic seeks not only to serve those perceived to have unequal access to power in Western culture, such as religious minorities, but also to learn from them and give equal space to their beliefs. The humanistic element means they aspired to live a life based on personal self-fulfillment and individual values. In line with humanism, they believe the understanding of truth and best practices is on an upward trajectory, and more flexible, and that humans are emerging with better interpretations of scripture than the humans before them.

Christian Labels (Progressive Christians)

Almost all interviewees answered in the affirmative when asked if they were comfortable being tagged with the label "Evangelical." However, progressive Christians were much more likely than conservative Christians to supply modifications to and critiques of the label. Similar reservations and caveats extended to the term "Christian." For progressive Christians, "Christianity" can be a dirty word associated with moral deficiency.

Progressives tended to tie Christianity to the Western world and often specifically to American nationalism and Republican political ideology. Progressive Christians put high value on the concept of culture, believing culture to be, at times, more powerful than religious conviction in influencing behavior.

The progressive Christians we spoke to also strove to distance themselves from the historical "us versus them" mentality, which they felt to be characteristic of historical Christianity. They rejected the mentality that would pit, for example, Islamic beliefs against Christian beliefs. Rather they were open to the possibility of someone from a different religion having greater insights than they did regarding truth.

Progressive Christians hold a flexible theology. They see value in acknowledging the perceived complexity of situations and exploring the various contexts and lenses that people use to reach a decision. The majority of progressive Christians have had to be flexible as they experienced significant theological changes in their own lives and have become unconvinced by black-and-white answers.

Many were less likely to reach firm conclusions because of their understanding of biblical interpretation as a dynamic process, rather than a static set of truths. This interpretive approach allows for doctrines found in the Bible to progress and to mean something different today than they did, for example, one hundred years ago.

They see the Christian religion as “developing” and are more apt to change their stances on modern societal issues, such as same-sex marriage and divorce, because of this more flexible theology. There is also a belief that the majority of Christians have failed to understand the Bible correctly and generally distrusted people’s ability to discern the Bible for themselves. Some believe that Christians have allowed the Bible itself, or trusted interpreters of the Bible, to lead them toward evil and to act against humanistically defined principles of peace and love.

Humanism is a philosophy that stresses human value and agency, emphasizing the commonality of human needs, and seeks to use reason to solve human problems. Evangelical concepts of the “fallenness of man” and divine judgment for that sinfulness were mostly absent among the progressive Christians we interviewed.

Their Christian humanism included a view of Jesus as the way to achieve, perhaps in some ways paradoxically, both self-fulfillment or self-realization and altruistic unselfishness to serve others. This form of humanism advocates for the self-fulfillment of humanity, but this goal is housed within a framework of certain distinctively Christian doctrines and ethics.

Since judgment was not a major theme for progressive Christians, they tended not to mention the view of Jesus that focuses on his ability to redeem one from hell. Instead, they tended to focus on the here and now and to conceive of Jesus as the way to true peace in this life and the ultimate example of how to live a life of love.

Most progressive Christians also had a desire to communicate their view of Jesus with others. However, their views of Jesus and motives for sharing was not an exercise in trying to compel belief or conversion. Progressive Christians usually desired to share their views of Jesus with other individuals only after building a relationship with those individuals and after listening to and learning from them. Progressive Christians clearly hold Jesus in high esteem, seeing him as important to talk about, but not necessarily for the purpose of eternal salvation.

Uncertainty, a trait of postmodernism, is not something shied away from but is rather embraced by progressive Christians. Uncertainty about hell could provide another reason why some progressive Christians are less motivated to engage in traditional evangelization and are more interested in social justice. Many Progressive Christians were more interested in overcoming the perceived “hells” individuals are experiencing in the present and in addressing the pain of injustice.

Very interested in social justice, meaning they were deeply interested in addressing the unequal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within societies and restoring these things to marginalized groups. Issues of concern included support for immigrants, financial care for the poor, policies promoting racial equality, interfaith initiatives, and peacemaking foreign policy efforts.

Progressives tended to focus on the teachings of Jesus that promoted what they viewed as loving and kind and did not focus on what they would deem his more harsh or divisive words. Otherwise, they cited teachings promoting positive treatment of others in support of their humanistic ethic of social justice.

Politics (Progressive Christians)

Progressive-leaning Christians were more optimistic about politics and political solutions than conservative Christians. They were also more willing to acknowledge how factors outside of religion

impact others' conclusions regarding politics. For the most part, progressive Christians see others as being more motivated by political and socioeconomic factors, seeing the world with a political lens.

Those who aligned themselves with the Democratic Party did so only grudgingly and often after expressing both a dislike of being categorized and unhappiness with the two-party system.

Many progressive Christians imply that if the political circumstances were different, Muslims would not be motivated toward violence. They believe there is nothing uniquely violent about Islam as a religion. We can conclude that politics carries more motivational power for progressive Christians than religion.

Progressive Christians are more willing to consider political policies as the best viable solutions to both issues of domestic terrorism and issues of social inequality. In other words, they were optimistic regarding government as a force for positive change.

Progressive Christians expressed a focus on accepting Muslims, learning from them, and journeying toward the kingdom of God alongside them. They viewed Muslims with admiration, believing they could learn about God from them.

A substantial part of how progressive Christians identify themselves is by exposing clearly what they are not—namely, conservative Evangelicals. While progressive Christians' flexible theology allows for an openness to be felt toward traditional out-groups, this attitude is not equally applied to conservative Christians. In progressive Christians' eyes, conservative Christians' errors, in the realm of theology and practice, are sufficiently severe to necessitate an unwelcoming and negative response that is otherwise uncharacteristic of progressive Christians.

Part of this desire to learn from Muslims is due to some progressive Christians' perceptions that Muslims' faith impacts all areas of their lives, whereas Christians compartmentalize.

Out-Group Culture

Part of the reason progressive Christians felt so positively about Islam, the Qur'an, and its prophet is that they view Islam as something bigger than a religion. Most progressive Christians contemplate and acknowledge cultural elements of faith. Instead of viewing faith as the driver of culture, culture rather drove faith.

For progressive Christians, many of the differences between Islam and Christianity are seen as differences of culture. Since progressive Christians tended to value culture, this is an important distinction, and it arguably contributes to having less of a desire to convert Muslims out of Islam.

Progressive Christians were more apt to see beauty and truth in other religions outside of Christianity than conservative Christians. Progressive Christians were also far more likely to seek out commonalities between themselves and Muslims and reject the idea of converting them.

Some insight into the mentality focused on finding common ground with outsider religions can be gained from the scholarship of David Cheetham, who contributed to theories regarding interfaith relations and argued for the possibility of creating spaces for religions to meet. Not meeting as a discussion forum of differences or similarities between the faiths but a place to emphasize "understanding above agreement" and "collegiality above consensus." Pentecostal/Catholic Dialogue.

Conservative Christians largely rejected this type of ecumenical activity and see less beauty in other religions.

Language (Progressive Christians)

Progressive Christians expressed distrust of language to relay concepts correctly, including authentic belief in God. They exercised more flexibility in how they defined words. This flexibility has tremendous theological implications. For example, some progressive Christians use this linguistic flexibility to support their claim that one can remain a Muslim and still be a follower of Jesus. To varying degrees, most progressive Christians were willing to affirm that Allah of Islam is the same God as their own.

Progressive Christians are more likely to surround themselves with a Christian peer group that thinks like they do on the topic of Islam. Many explicitly stated that they cultivated their peer group in this way on purpose.

While progressive Christians resist black-and-white boundaries in so many areas, this unambiguous response shows that progressives draw a hard line between themselves and traditional-leaning Christians and the traditionalist beliefs on Islam.

Most progressive Christians' critiques identified a number of perceived moral deficiencies in conservatives' beliefs and behaviors. Some of the most common negative descriptions depicted them as inflexible, insufficiently concerned with social justice, prone to immoral political compromises, and swayed by irrational fear.

Progressive Christians tended to see certainty and decisiveness as negative traits and signs of ignorance.

When it comes to participating in community service with Muslim refugees, Evangelicals still felt they needed to share the gospel. To varying degrees, this is seen by progressive Christians negatively, as having ulterior motives when building relationships and helping the community. If a conservative Christian is spending time with a Muslim with the hopes of telling them about their faith, they are failing to care for them authentically and are not fully listening to the marginalized. Instead, they have alternative goals and an immoral desire to dominate with their more culturally pervasive form of religious beliefs.

Progressive Christians see conservative Evangelical political influence and support for conservative policies as real threats to the well-being of humanity and the reputation of Christians globally. Part of this is due to the belief that conservative Christians restrict the freedom of others (same-sex marriage). And some felt the conservative stance on immigration, foreign policy, and government-run social programs to be lacking sufficient care for the marginalized.

This dislike for the mixing of political power and Christianity continues to be an area of concern for progressive Christians, especially now, as they consider the conservative Evangelical support for Donald Trump to be an immoral compromise.

Do Red and Blue Christians Belong Together?

Basic disparities:

Conservative Christians build their faith on attempts to follow the dictates of the Bible. Their conviction that the Bible is inerrant makes that text sacred to them, and attempts to deviate from its teachings are viewed with strong suspicion.

This does not mean conservative Christians agree on everything. There is some flexibility regarding acceptable interpretations of the Bible. But arguments to persuade conservative Christians generally must be centered on the Bible and legitimated as being scripturally sound. The core of their religion begins and ends with whether they can justify the tenets and morals of their faith with a Bible perceived to be errorless. The idea of the Bible being without error can lead to a particularistic approach to faith. There is a strong tendency to envision their religion as the only valid way to salvation.

Many conservative Christians believe that individuals, and the larger society, would be better off adopting their values and so they seek to replace the faith of others with their particular version of Christianity.

Most Progressive Christians do not base their religion on strict obedience to the Bible, nor do they feel a strong need to encourage others to accept their interpretation of the Bible or even to accept a Christian faith. The core of their religion is built upon a value set of inclusiveness, tolerance, and social justice. Unlike conservative Christians, progressives do not center their spirituality upon a certainty that Christianity has all the answers. Instead, Christianity is just one of many paths to achieving a society of inclusion and justice for the marginalized. It is not necessarily a superior path compared to other religions and nonreligious philosophies that seek similar purposes.

There is a sense of mission among them that they are to promote a social order of justice and kindness. A major focus of outreach for progressive Christians is toward other Christians. In the view of progressives, it is conservative Christians who tend to be the furthest away from adopting a theology that allows for the humanistic ethic of social justice, which values compassion, tolerance, and social justice. They seek to lead those conservative Christians toward a greater goal than the tribalism they attribute to them. Many indicated a greater desire to convert fellow Christians than to convert Muslims.

The particularistic philosophy of conservative Christians conflicts with the ideological interests of progressive Christians much more than the beliefs of non-Christians who value the humanistic ethic of social justice.

New Identities

The fact that progressive Christians reject conservative Christians more than the opposite indicates that progressive Christians feel a greater desire to separate themselves from conservative Christians and their values than vice versa. Progressives have a social identity built upon notions of compassion for the marginalized, tolerance, and inclusion. This is a focus they don't envision themselves having in common with conservative Christians.

While scholars and social observers may talk about Christians in general and lump progressive Christians in with all Christians, the cultural mindset of progressive Christians is not centered on a uniquely Christian task. It is centered on the solving the problem of lack of compassion and social justice in our society.

Conservative Christians' social identity is built upon attempting to be faithful to a more traditional and often more literal interpretation of biblical teaching. Both progressive and conservative identities are in direct opposition to each other. Their disparate social identities result in providing differing, even conflicting, answers to the meaning questions such as those about not only identity but also morality and purpose. These differences are not small deviations but completely different routes to dealing with issues of meaning. So should they remain under the same religious name?

What Unifies a Religious Group?

Even when there is a diversity of beliefs, it is useful to ask whether there are certain unifying beliefs that tend to be accepted by all, or at least most, factions of that group. Such unifying beliefs allow the members of that group to have common perceptions that can act as a binding force.

But even within the beliefs that are assumed to be central to Christianity, the opinions of Christians can dramatically vary. There is no tenet more central to Christianity than the belief in Jesus. But are Christians linked together because of their beliefs in Jesus? Conservatives tend to envision him as having the qualities of a deity. While some progressives openly acknowledge Jesus as God, others see him as an exemplary model for how a human should live rather than focusing on any divine characteristics. There are even Christians who challenge the idea that Jesus even existed. Even this most central belief varies widely, as do beliefs about the inerrancy of the Bible, heaven, and hell and the definition and means to salvation. Beliefs by themselves, then, do not appear to be the factor that unifies Christians as part of the same group.

Unity in and of itself may be what is required for members to belong to a religious group. It is possible that individuals belong to a religious group simply because they believe themselves to be a part of that group. But there are groups that claim a Christian identity—Mormons, some Unitarians—but are generally not accepted by Christian groups. Progressive and conservative Christians both make claim to a Christian identity. Yet progressive Christians often do not accept conservative Christians as members of the same group while conservative Christians are more willing to accept progressive Christians.

Two factors have to be present to move a group from in-group status to out-group status.

1. First there have to be sufficient differences in the core beliefs to warrant a potential separation. The core goals or essences of the groups must differentiate from each other to the extent that it is reasonable to believe that they are working toward divergent objectives.
2. There has to be sufficient out-grouping from each other. Even if there are important distinctions in beliefs, it is unlikely that the groups will truly separate from each other as long as they see each other as members of the same group.

Out-grouping by itself is not sufficient for separating religious groups. Out-grouping may produce horrendous wars and conflict, but if the theological goals remain similar, the conflicting groups should not be categorized as separate religions. With similar goals, it's quite possible for those subgroups to make peace and be recognized as different parts of the same religion.

Hinduism & Buddhism

To see an example of how two religions can emerge from a single religion, we can look at the emergence of Buddhism from Hinduism.

Hinduism is more than four thousand years old. Within the Hinduism-dominated society, Buddhism was founded in the sixth century BCE by Siddhartha Guatama, or the Buddha. Buddha used many of the similar concepts found in the dominant Hindu religion around him. He talked about karma, dharma, and reincarnation as Hinduism did, but he rejected much of the caste system and formal rituals of Hinduism. His reforms went beyond merely shaping the existing religion and instead became a new way of answering questions of meaning. Although Buddhism and Hinduism use similar terms, they have different metaphysical goals. For the Hindu, the goal is to lose one's individuality by merging with ultimate reality. For the Buddhist, the goal is an ending of his or her existence. These goals are not identical. They are seeking different outcomes even if some of the concepts used in their religions are similar.

The development of Buddhism did result in strong out-grouping between the two groups. Buddhism virtually became extinct in India in large part to the power of Hinduism to crowd it out of that country. This led to Buddhism becoming prominent in East and Southeast Asia.

While both Hinduism and Buddhism are religions that reject the notion of an exclusive deity and allow for a certain degree of theological inclusion, they are perceived as distinctive religions by most inside and outside their religions. They are rarely categorized as different emphases of the same religion.

Christian Diversity or Two Different Religions?

The quantitative findings in this book suggest that while conservative Christians are willing to accept progressive Christians into their social circles, progressive Christians display strong tendencies to reject the political actions and social values of conservative Christians. Their social identity motivates them to distance themselves from conservative Christians more than from other religious groups. It has also influenced them to develop social networks largely devoid of conservative Christians.

Our research suggests a new dynamic beyond partisan politics. We find evidence that progressive Christians have not merely a different emphasis on politics, but that they also bring a distinct value set to their differences with conservative Christians. Progressive Christians seem to adhere to a flexible theology that stresses a humanistic ethic of social justice as a goal in and of itself. This can produce a different ultimate goal than the one that motivates conservative Christians.

Our data indicates that the two are in the process of becoming, or perhaps already have become, two distinctive religious expressions. Even if each group states that serving Jesus is the objective, serving Jesus means something very different to each group, and these different definitions lead each group to find meaning and identity in different, incompatible places.

Conservative Christians may not experience the effects of secularization to the same degree that progressive Christians do. More than thirty years ago, data emerged indicating that mainline, or more progressive Protestant denominations were declining at a faster rate than conservative Protestant denominations. Furthermore, churches with conservative theology are more likely to grow than churches with progressive theology. Finally, the loss of Christians to the "nones" (those who do not identify with any religious group) tends to come from moderate or progressive Christians more than conservative Christians. These trends can result in progressive Christians feeling more threatened than conservative Christians in our changing religious economy.

Progressive Christians may apprehend that it will become harder to maintain their own version of Christianity in the light of the relative growth of conservative Christians. As such, their fears can play out in their aggressive stance toward conservative Christians.

Implications of Polarized Christianity

Christianity has often been seen as the dominant religion in the US. However, groups with a dominant social status also tend to share a social identity that allows them to express their social power. A numerical majority advantage means little in a culture where the majority is not unified.

We expect that there will be some efforts by progressive and conservative Christians to engage in conversation with each other, but we do not consider it likely that such conversations will lead to reunification. What is more likely to occur is that such efforts at conversation lead to more of an acknowledgement of the gulf between the two groups. One only needs to look at the recent efforts of the United Methodist Church to see this dynamic take place.

For decades, the denomination has argued about the role, and acceptance, of sexual minorities. Finally, it became clear that reconciliation between the two factions was not possible. In 2020, the United Methodist Church drew up terms for a "divorce" that allowed the conservative churches, organized as the Wesleyan Covenant Association, to retain their assets and for them to receive \$25 million with the promise that no future financial claims will be made on the mother organization. The new upstart conservative organization contains 125,000 individuals in about 1,500 churches. This contrasted with the seven million members who remain in the denomination.

Similar steps have been taken with the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian Church USA, and American Baptist Church USA. We suspect similar processes of splitting between progressive and conservative Christians are occurring outside of formal denominations as well.

Perhaps issues such as disaster relief or combating human trafficking can bring these two groups together. Yet we suspect that such cooperation is more difficult between progressive and conservative Christians than between progressive Christians and members of other religions.

Denominational identity has decreased in importance for shaping the social identity of Christians.

Will One Group Retain an Explicit Christian Identity?

It is possible that one of the groups would adopt a new social label that distinguishes itself from the other group. It's also possible that both groups could cling to the Christian label even as they both seek to social distance from each other. In that scenario they continue to fight against each other for the right to be the "authentic" Christian group.

The more likely outcome is that progressive Christians will become less willing to openly identify as Christian, as many of the progressive Christians we interviewed have already distanced themselves from the "Christian" label.

What About Christians in the Middle?

There are many Christians who do not fit neatly into either category. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of scholarship done on moderate Christians, and it is difficult to find research focusing solely on them. If the US is moving toward a post-Christian society, then it is quite possible that Christians not deeply tied

to a theological, political, or social ideology will be unlikely to remain latched to the Christian label. In such a situation it is quite possible that moderate Christians significantly decline in population.

Extensions

There appear to be political contrasts between progressive white Christians and conservative black Christians of color with their religious counterparts. While we did not choose to focus on just white Christians, the influence of the dominant racial group in Christian discourse cannot be denied. Undoubtedly that influence has helped to shape much of the intramural debate among progressive and conservative Christians. Given our racial history it would be surprising if that debate did not differ for racial ethnic Christian communities.