

When Narrative Identities Clash: Liberals versus Evangelicals

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Culture Wars, Seminary Styles, Congregational Politics

If there is one thing North American Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century *think* they understand, it is the divide between liberal and evangelical in the church. Polarized ecclesiastical publications tell their stories from the left or from the right, constructing competing denominational identities that clash in the consciousness of members. If a denomination has only one important publication, it avoids the issue with quaint desperation, trying to keep everyone happy. Mainstream media relentlessly draw our attention to “religious culture wars” and lavish attention on high profile court cases on controversial moral issues.

Spare a thought for seminarians. They face this conflict head on in theology and Bible classes where they have to find their way in what sometimes feels like hostile territory. Some students can’t grasp why the seminary class does not take literary and historical criticism of the Bible for granted and get into the wonderful details. Others feel increasingly desperate as the Bible’s authority is challenged over and over again. Church history classes present the massive pluralism of Christian belief and practice, which delights some students while making others skeptical of their treasured assumptions about Christian identity and spiritual unity. Entire seminaries have theological “cultures,” at least by reputation. Well intentioned mentors fearfully advise future seminarians to “steer clear of school X because it is too liberal and will destroy your faith,” or “to stay away from school Y because it is too evangelical and hostile to freedom of inquiry.” In practice, seminary life is always more textured but the cultural realities are undeniable.

Churches, like seminaries, have cultures. Church reputations are often skin deep, and a pastor quickly gets a sense for the real pluralism within a congregation upon arriving to begin ministry there. But the pastor’s education about existing pluralism often comes in the form of multiple pressures to meet stated needs in particular ways. “We like biblical preaching.” “We like issue-oriented preaching.” “We like to hear about our pastor’s personal faith journey from the pulpit.” “We want a healing service.” “We want more opportunities for social action.” Do the squeaky wheels get the grease? What about all the people who don’t come right out and say what they expect from their minister? What do they really think? What do they truly need? How does the congregation’s local history produce these frustrations and longings? And what are the minister’s obligations beyond just meeting needs and satisfying congregational desires?

Alongside the pressure to “be this or that for us,” ministers have to endure the families that leave, disgusted with one or another aspect of the new ministry. “You’re too conservative for us.” “You don’t take the Bible literally enough for me.” Ministers have to negotiate semi-organized blocks of gossipy parishioners who spend more time sniping at the pastor’s ministry in the shadows than in building up the church community in Christian worship and practice. All this is frustrating, enormously stressful for spiritual identity, and a serious challenge to the minister’s sense of call.

Conflicting Caricatures

Around the all-too-familiar conflict supposedly looms a liberal-evangelical divide. In theology, in biblical interpretation, in seminary styles and church cultures, liberals and evangelicals know they are different from one another and feel the differences sharply. Inevitably, caricatured readings of the “other” come to life.

Caricature #1: Liberal Christianity is a tangle of habits that, like a parasitic vine, chokes the very life out of the church upon which it grows. Its good news is an intellectually tortured and ultimately incoherent story about, well, something to do with love. It is high-culture religion, socially and economically privileged, and full of bleeding-heart activism seeking economic and social justice for the less fortunate. It has little emotional power to draw people together in life-transforming ways because high-culture people are afraid of their own psychological shadows and don't know how to get emotional. It is old-fashioned, sensible, and bores young people to tears. It sends many folk right out the church door, never to return, once they see what they are asked (or not asked!) to believe and do in the name of liberal Christianity. It is treasured by many faithful Christians the way lovely suburban neighborhoods are treasured but is shrinking in its relatively small corner of global Christianity.

Caricature #2: Evangelical Christianity is all about passionate proclamation. Its gospel story is clear in the way that bedtime stories for children are clear. It requires buying into an alien worldview that has little to do with the modern world we inhabit and love to complain about. It is confident in an afterlife where everything bad about this world gets put right, but that just brings comfort to the confident while undermining serious social activism. It promotes life-transforming experiences that change people's personalities and make for large and bustling churches, but is perpetually naïve about the way that strongly bonded groups always produce spectacular life changes, regardless of the gospel preached. Best of all, evangelical enthusiasm lets you take your feelings out for spin while giving your brain a good long rest. It boasts a counter-cultural moral posture but on economic issues is a premier instance of culture-Christianity. It is famous for sheep stealing and overblown numbers but there is no question that evangelical forms of Christianity are expanding all over the world.

The caricatures are potent. Just like cartoon drawings, they distort prominent features to make a point. Non-religious people seem to get a big kick out of them so there must be an opportunity for laughter here somewhere. Of course, non-religious people can afford to chuckle because they are not on the cartoonist's sketch pad themselves.

If we could find our way to a humorous appreciation of these caricatures as affectionate teasing rather than hostile character assassination, we would all be significantly better off. But most of the time, that lightness of heart, that companionable modesty seems impossibly distant. It demands the kind of spiritual maturity that places love ahead of power, and caring for others ahead of defending our rights. In practice, congregations are impatient around these issues, and harshness and arrogance from both left and right are the result.

It is difficult to love when we feel attacked, and surely we are not always wise just to sit there and take it. But Jesus' injunction to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44) kicks in at moments like that. The ones we love may or may not remain our enemies, and we may or may not choose to resist their aggression, but we make decisions about how to act from the perspective of love. Everything else is a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (I Cor. 13:2).

Avoidance or Engagement?

If some get angry when they feel caricatured, some others are utterly sick of thinking and talking about conflicting liberal and evangelical religious world pictures. They just want to get past it all. To dwell on the bogey words “liberal” and “evangelical” is to reify the very caricatures we seek to transcend. They want new words and new ideas because the old ideas are dead and the old words poisonous.

I think that avoidance and new terminology won’t help in the long run. Despite the clarity of the rhetoric, few Christian people are neatly liberal or evangelical. Many Christians and congregations instinctively sense that “liberal” and “evangelical” belong together and long to find a way to honor what they love in both. For them, this conflict is like having divided loyalties in a civil war: victory by either side can’t possibly be a good thing and you just want the fighting to stop. But they are also rightly suspicious of new words and phrases that just repackage without truly engaging the problem. To them, avoidance just lets something fester, and jingoistic relabeling seems scatter-brained.

They are right. We need to mount a direct attack on the religious rhetoric of our cultures and churches and on the conflicting narrative worlds that inspire it.

Here’s the crux of the issue. I began by saying that most North American Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century *think* they understand the divide between liberal and evangelical in the church. In fact, most Christians, even most ministers, do *not* understand these ideas well. They don’t know their history and how the words first became precious before they were co-opted for ideological in-fighting. They don’t appreciate the sociological principles that explain the conflict. They don’t grasp the theological insights that guide a meaningful resolution. And they don’t understand the demanding nature of the solution.

There is a classic Christian solution to the problem of cultural and ecclesiastical pluralism. It requires walking through the fires of painful words and bitter resentment. We must spiritually confront our own demonic hostility to the other in all its forms. We must acknowledge that following Jesus Christ makes homeless beggars of us all, gratefully serving the kingdom of God, committed to the reign of God and not to a fruitless ideological triumph.

I contend that “liberal” and “evangelical” really do belong together. The “and” that joins them is not sappy “can’t we all just get along” hopefulness but a considered theological judgment about the historic meanings and inherent possibilities of the two ideas. Liberal and conservative are opposites, in many ways, but liberal and evangelical are not.

Beneath the Surface

The deepest problem in trying to put liberal and evangelical instincts together is that their gospel narratives and their guiding world pictures do not seem to match. Let’s ponder this fundamental difference.

Since the Reformation, “evangelical” Christians have typically defined themselves over against some other group of Christians. They have also derived a strong moral framework from pietism’s instinct that our lives are lived transparently before God, with whom we have

a personal relationship; sin is an in-your-divine-face insult to God. The word “evangelical” has enjoyed its greatest staying power among groups that combine the group-defining oppositional elements and the morality-defining piety elements with the stress on spiritual rebirth (being “born again”) and a particular understanding of the gospel, the story of good news in Jesus Christ.

Specifically, this evangelical story stresses: (1) the severity of the problem of sin for human beings, (2) our inability to do anything through thought or deed to save ourselves from this problem, (3) a substitutionary theory of the atonement whereby Jesus dies for us and our sins in order to reconcile us with God, (4) a conversion experience of repentance and being born again, (5) a personal relationship with the living Jesus Christ, (6) a personal idea of God as a being to whom we can relate now as well as for all eternity in the heavenly life to succeed this one, and (7) the Bible as the authoritative source for this story and for all other matters of faith and morals.

In the nineteenth-century North Atlantic world, evangelical Christians discovered a liberal-conservative split in their midst. A plain reading of the evangelical story just outlined naturally presupposes a supernatural worldview but now that worldview was under fire, wrecking the story and its narrative power. And it was not just secular outsiders who were attacking it but also well-meaning Christians. By the beginning of the twentieth century, many battles had already been fought over authentic evangelical Christian identity. Many more were to come once the First World War shattered the bogus assumption of unlimited cultural progress under the guidance of secular democratic nation states with free-market economies. A chastened feeling was abroad: something had gone badly wrong in western civilization. The threats to the narrative integrity of the evangelical story were symptoms of a deeper sickness.

Chastened conservative evangelicals sensed the failure of plausibility structures and moral habits that formerly nurtured Christian life and they responded. They hardened the evangelical gospel, reaffirmed its supernatural worldview, and organized themselves to resist anything that they felt threatened Christian identity. They steered away from critical historical research and stressed the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. Their denominations reasserted uniformity of doctrine and practice. Some of them became Fundamentalists.

Chastened liberal evangelicals turned toward rather than away from the problem, as they saw it. They struggled to come to terms with a simultaneously devastating and liberating discovery about the Bible and the early church: its “core-message pluralism.”

What is core-message pluralism? It does not take a seasoned biblical scholar to notice that the New Testament has many colorfully different formulations of Christianity’s core message, and that none of them is much like the official creedal Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries. The most obvious and famous contrast is between Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God and Paul’s preaching of Christ crucified; the evangelical gospel sounds a lot more like Paul than Jesus. And neither of those is much like Peter’s preaching to Jews as recorded in Acts 2, in which the crucifixion and resurrection are not about salvation but about injustice and God’s reversal of it, confirming Jesus’ authority, his message, and his identity as the Christ. Hebrews presents a technology of sacrifice that bears no resemblance to James’ vision of Christian salvation. And then we have the much later doctrinal

developments of the Trinity and Hypostatic Union, which articulate the good news in a metaphysical way that is quite alien to the conceptuality of the Bible, despite elements of continuity. The changes in Christian practice during the same period are as important as those in theology.

Liberal evangelical Christians throughout the twentieth century wanted to take core-message pluralism seriously. But how could they do this without losing their evangelical identity, with its dependence on a plain gospel story that could win the hearts and minds of ordinary people? The writings and sermons of liberal evangelicals such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr show exactly how they did it.

On the one hand, they loosened (“liberalized”) some parts of the evangelical gospel to reflect core-message pluralism. In particular, they recognized that there was a vast array of atonement theories within the Bible and subsequent Christian thought, and similar variation in ideas of divinity and in metaphysical worldviews, so they allowed diversity on these points. They went the opposite direction from conservative evangelicals on the authority of the Bible, seeing it as a sacred but culturally conditioned source of revelation and so inspired but not inerrant.

On the other hand, liberal evangelicals stressed three principles to secure social unity in their pluralized form of evangelical Christianity. (1) The Principle of Humility states that we human beings simply don’t and can’t know enough about divine matters to settle all questions, not even in the light of divine revelation. We must live with uncertainty and accept doubt as a natural part of faith. (2) The Principle of Love states that Christians should cleave to one another unconditionally, accepting and loving one another. It is a difficult but deeply rewarding calling. (3) The Principle of Christ-Centeredness states that Christianity is about Jesus Christ, not picky debates over details of belief and practice. Jesus’ own ministry becomes our model for the “cost of discipleship” (to recall Bonhoeffer’s famous phrase).

On this view of core-message pluralism, there is room in Christ’s Church for plural understandings of the gospel. There is room for the fabulous diversity of spiritual practices evident within the history of Christianity. Liberal evangelical Christians believed that open-hearted humility, unconditional love, and Christ-centeredness would keep the church together in spite of the chaotic threat of core-message pluralism.

Mutual Attraction

The likes of liberal evangelicals such as Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr seem to be long gone. But their high-profile public influence is sorely missed. The religious air waves are now dominated by conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists. Conservatives have claimed the word “evangelical” and liberals have done little to stop them. But the word “evangel” just means “good message” or “gospel” so it should be the property of every Christian.

It is this sense of a deeper shared Christian heritage that inspires a profound mutual attraction across the evangelical-liberal divide among many ordinary Christians and congregations. I would not want to speak for all liberal Christians or all evangelical Christians here but I am willing to speak for the worried, the frustrated, the disaffected, or the bored folk who look longingly toward the other camp and want some of what it has. There are plenty of such people on both sides.

What do liberals want that evangelicals have? To put my answer first in crass terms, they envy the numbers, the money, and the sheer institutional buoyancy of most evangelical churches. More profoundly, they envy biblical preaching that is comprehensible, educational, and inspiring. They envy the spiritual energy of dynamic music and passionate worship. They long for those small-group meetings where people reach out in compassion to one another. They thirst for explicit expectations that translate the cost of being a Christian into moral, financial, and spiritual terms.

They would not want to surrender their freedom to interpret the Bible according to their conscience, as guided by critical scholarship. They would not be eager to embrace an authoritarian form of religion, nor shake-and-bake spirituality, nor flat-footed theological responses to life's terrible moments of suffering. They would never surrender their passion for social justice and practical commitment to the transformation of social conditions affecting the poor, nor their love of learning and the literate ideal of humanity passed down through the liberal tradition of politics and religion. They might not change the way they vote. But they would prize an energetic Christian community with a comprehensible message and the power to help them forge close relationships, transform recalcitrant habits of thought and behavior, and inspire them to an intimate relationship with God.

What do evangelicals want from liberals? Freedom to be themselves. They want freedom from arbitrary authorities that impose convention in place of reasons and stamp out creativity and originality; and freedom to think and feel across the range of life's complexities, within and beyond the core narrative of their own faith. They want freedom from social coercion in which their group's way is the only way; and freedom to see the group from the outside, through the eyes of the marginalized or ignored Other. As much as they love their core message, they want freedom from its sameness and simplicity; and freedom to make it more realistic, more flexible, more persuasive. As much as they love the energy of close-knit church life, they want freedom from its intrusiveness and transparency; and freedom to have the privacy of their thoughts and feelings honored in a less invasively bonded community.

They would not want to give up their personal relationship with Jesus, their confidence in God's revelation in the Bible, their belief that divine wisdom is more important than cultural wisdom, or their passionate commitment to salvation as the ultimate goal of human life. They might not change the way they vote, either. But they are tired of moral intolerance, doctrinal rigidity, and monochromatic spirituality. They want to decide for themselves in worship and at prayer what to believe and how to act.

The Big Problem

How does evangelical Christianity come by all its good stuff? In a phrase, social cohesion. Evangelical Christianity has better glue for social life. This glue may not make the kind of flexible bond that liberals are used to but it holds diverse people close together and fosters the heat that starts the fire that changes lives. The recipe for the glue is simple enough and I think there is good evidence that the principles involved are common to human beings whatever their social and religious setting.

There must be a compelling story! The core message must make a convincing narrative, one that captures imaginations with its grandeur and richness, its historic boldness and prophetic edge. It must make sense to children and yet unfold onto endlessly fascinating details. It

must be practical and immediately relevant to the existential struggles of our lives. It must conjure a new world—what Swiss theologian Karl Barth called the “strange, new world of the Bible”—that changes the way we look at the world we think we know. It must be told often in creatively diverse but consistently reinforcing ways. Core beliefs and practices must be keyed directly into the narrative elements of the message. Corporate life must involve energetic worship bound closely to the message, and must focus attention on personal growth in faith, bonding experiences of sharing faith with other believers, adrenaline-rush experiences of sharing faith with those outside the group, and explicit demands of the group on the individual.

It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? It works, too. But there is a Big Problem: core-message pluralism complicates the message and weakens the social glue that is the secret to evangelical Christianity's attractiveness. Intuitively sensing this social disaster right on the heels of every challenge to the unity of Christianity's core message, evangelical groups typically let challengers know—quickly and in no uncertain terms—what “the group” believes. They often tolerate curiosity and diversity, but when group identity is in danger, it is common to see strategies of control such as definitive restatements of the group's guiding narrative, appeals to authority, subtle accusations of disloyalty, and the implicit or explicit threat of social marginalization. If liberals typically migrate to evangelical settings full of stiff awkwardness but eager for some real excitement and amazed at the energy they find, evangelicals often arrive in liberal land feeling seriously beat up and stunned that there is a place where they are loved for who they are and their personal views are welcomed.

Pluralism at the heart of the Christian movement is an immovable problem. Do we celebrate the pluralism but lose social cohesion in the process? Or deny the pluralism in order to preserve the tie that binds? This kind of catch-22 is not that uncommon in life. Life and institutions alike are about dynamic balance and adjustment, not static perfection. This is the deepest theological reason why liberalism and evangelicalism need each other, like yin and yang need each other, like the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees need each other: they are complementary.

How does a liberal evangelical church brew the glue and hold the center even while admitting that there is more than one way of reading the Bible, more than one core message of Christianity, more than one Christian worldview, and more than one way to live as a faithful servant of Christ?

I have heard answers to this question that amount to “Let's celebrate our diversity!” We have to do that, certainly, but this is blessedly naïve as an answer to the question of social cohesion. There has to be another way that comes to grips with the hard fact that core-message pluralism weakens social cohesion and spoils the narrative simplicity that forges powerful group identity. It has to be a compelling way that avoids the intellectual sins of liberal fudging and evangelical oversimplification. It must be a socially realistic way that creates excitement and changes lives without committing the social sins of suppressing diversity and boring people witless. It needs to be a spiritually vital way that rejects the dual sins of avoiding spiritual depth through compassionate social outreach and neglecting the world in the name of individualistic salvation.

Does such a way exist?

The Classic Solution to Conflicting Narratives

Let's face it: if there were a tried and tested formula for forging church unity in the face of core-message pluralism, most people would already be using it. The festering mass of church splits—in the early church and these days especially among Protestant Christians—shows that formulas for unity often have not worked. Splitting the church when narratives diverge is a kind of solution to core-message pluralism in the way that amputation is a kind of medical treatment. It might be necessary for optimizing health but it is still a disaster.

Yet there is an ancient solution to the problem of conflicting Christian narratives. It runs parallel to the mutual excommunications, recriminations, violence, and ecclesiastical splits that have been so common in Church history. It is apt to be overlooked because we notice fights more easily than the many times fights are avoided. In a phrase, it is humble tolerance of differences in love. Jesus commends it in his sermon to his disciples about unity (John 14-17). Paul praises it in his meditation on how to cope with pluralism in congregations (I Cor. 12-13).

Humbly tolerating differences in love is a practical way of life that many Christians walk every day of their lives. The path of inclusive love is difficult because it calls for selfless acceptance of discomfort in the name of radical inclusiveness. As the life of Jesus shows so clearly, true acceptance of different kinds of people always messes with religious authority structures and the comfortable boundaries they maintain on behalf of their own power and their people's needs for security. Jesus' ministry was an utter failure at the time of his execution because his message wasn't sexy, it was true. It wasn't customized to bind masses of people together but to confront the few who really listened with the dynamic reality of the Kingdom of God in their midst. But people love the truth, even when it hurts, because it convicts and frees and opens up new worlds for them.

So let's take stock. We know there is a biblical solution to the problem of theological and spiritual pluralism. We know that this solution—humbly tolerating differences in love—is more like a journey than a rule, and a lot more like a long hard journey than a pleasurable walk in the park. We know that this solution sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails.

But—let's be blunt here—so what? We also understand the social pressures that produce the demand for a simple, strong story to support church identity. We understand the fact of core-message pluralism and its negative effects on social cohesion. These social realities seem massively inevitable. People clump together when they share a compelling story, period. If stories conflict, split the group to help everyone feel more at home. This is a simple solution to narrative conflict within and beyond religious contexts. By comparison, the solution of humbly tolerating differences in love seems like juvenile idealism. Few Christians are so idealistic that they simply deny the social principles that explain the way human beings flock together around shared stories. But most of us want to blend realism about theological and spiritual differences with a blazing streak of idealism that makes the church a genuine example of love at work in groups of people rather than an object lesson in the perils of ignorance and selfishness.

I think that this combination of realism and idealism excites Christian people in our time. It makes them long to put liberal and evangelical sensibilities together in churches. Reuniting Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox churches is not likely. Putting Anglicans and Methodists back together is probably not in the cards. But finding persuasive common

ground between liberal and evangelical ideas and practices seems within reach, while still remaining attractively idealistic. It presents an opportunity to put into practice Paul's vision of unity in face of pluralism, to experience love that makes a difference by uniting differences, and to send a message to the wider culture that love really is the best answer to pluralism, even if it is not the only answer.

Of course, the ideal of humble tolerance of differences in love across the liberal and evangelical divide is just that: ideal. That makes it difficult and easy to ruin. It is a high and a hard calling and so not for those who can cope only with the low and broad highways of self-indulgent comfort.

Concretely, this means that the liberal and evangelical church is always on the edge of one disaster or another. Republicans and Democrats may come down on different sides of a sermon or some controversy might arise over the doctrinal identity of the church. A church with even that much pluralism is inherently unstable. But that is also precisely why the liberal evangelical church is important.

When the going gets tough and worldview conflicts cause fights, that's the time to retell the old, old story. We remind each other about Jesus and Paul and their efforts to transcend barriers. And we retell our local congregation's heritage, its story of unity in the face of difference, its testimony to the power of humble tolerance of differences in love.

I love liberal openness to core-message pluralism and its Christ-like radical inclusiveness. I love evangelical fervor and determination to follow Jesus Christ. The move to combine them may not be completely practical and the sociological odds may not be completely in its favor. But this is just the kind of challenge many congregations need if they are to show what they stand for. By unifying itself in spite of significant theological and spiritual pluralism, the liberal and evangelical church testifies to the fact that love covers differences and unites strangers, it becomes a beacon to a world that rarely finds wider unity in sustained ways, and it lights up Jesus Christ's path of love once more in our own time and place.

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