When Narrative Identities Clash
Liberals versus Evangelicals

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If there is one thing North American Christians at the beginning of the 21st 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 case 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.

Space a thought for seminarians. They face this conflict head-on in theology and biblical classes, where they have to find their way in their way in sometimes feel 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 theological assumptions about Christian identity and spiritual unity. Entire seminaries have theological “cultures,” at least by reputation. Well-intentioned mentors fearful of 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 of 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 have 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 gossip and litigants who spend more time spying 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-versus-evangelical divide. In theology, in biblical interpretation, in seminary styles and church cultures, liberals and evangelicals know they are different from one another in the differences sharply. Inevitably, caricatured readings of the “other” come to life.

**Caricature #1: Liberal Christianity**

Is a puzzle of habits that, like a parasitic vine, choke 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 psycho- logical 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 lonely suburban neighborhoods are treasured, but is shrinking in its relatively small corner of global Christianity.

**Caricature #2: Evangelical Christianity**

Evangelical Christianity is all about passionate proclamation. Its gospel story is clear in the way bedtime stories for children are clear. It requires being 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 arena 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 bundling churches, but it is perpetually naive about the way 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 a spin while giving your brain a good long rest. It boasts a countercultural social posture, just an economic issues is a premier instance of culture-Christianity. It is famous for sheep stealing and overflow 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 into 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 compassionate sociability, seems impos- sibly distant. It demands the kind of spiritual maturity that pleases 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 cases we love may or may not remain our enemies, and we may or may not choose to resist their aggression, but it is important to find a way to act from the perspective of love. Everything else is a changing cyclical (1 Cor. 13:13).

Avoidance or Engagement?

If some get angry when they feel caricu- tured, 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. These people want new words and new ideas because the old ideas are dead and the old words poisonous.

It’s hard to believe avoidance or new terminology will help in the long run. Despite the clarity of the rhetoric, few Christian people are really liberal or really 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
n seminary I knew I was different, but I didn’t have a name for what I was. I was the product of an unusual union of Christian traditions, and this left me feeling out of place. My early faith formation took place in small evangelical house churches where being born-again, faith healing, speaking in tongues, and the daily battle with the devil over my soul were paramount to the Christian life. At the same time, I was an active member of the First Congregational Church in Fairport, New York. This was a very proper church in the sense of the term that was concerned about the poor, placed itself on its youth and church school programs, and was always wary that the slate roof might spring a leak and cost a small fortune to repair.

It was in the house church that I learned to pray. It was in the brick church that I learned to play. It was with my born-again friends that I developed a personal relationship with Jesus. It was with my congregational friends that I learned to talk about God, instead. In battling the devil I learned about the power of faith and the fear of damnation; at church bake sales and harvest festivals that supported our local and wider missions I learned about God’s love and care for all people. In living rooms I learned to take the word of God literally, in the open sanctuary of our church I learned that there was room for interpretation in scripture.

I grew up in two worlds, one evangelical and Christian and the other liberal and Christian. The two never met face to face until they collided within me during seminary. I loved the passion, spirit, conviction, and holy mystery of evangelistic faith, but I was repulsed by the exclusive nature of it. I loved my institutional church, with its broad welcome and its embrace of the diversity of God’s creation, but I loathed its banality and limp faith. There was more to be a passionate, apologetic Christian while still embracing the complexity of the world? Was there a way to be liberal and still love Jesus? Could the Christian message be energetically shared with the world while respecting the traditions of others? Could be both liberal and evangelical? Was there anyone else like me?

I have found that being both liberal and evangelical is kind of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” proposition. Staunch liberals find evangelicals offensive, and passionate evangelicals believe

liberals are intent on emasculating the Christian faith. I found I could move in both liberal and evangelical circles with relative comfort as long as I kept my mouth shut and my opinions to myself. My liberal friends didn’t want to hear about my Jesus, and my evangelical friends didn’t want to hear about my gay friends. I was overjoyed when, in my search for my first senior pastorate, I came across a congregation that described itself as both liberal and evangelical. They were an open and affirming church that believed fervently in an inclusive gospel. I was thrilled to be able to be both faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Feeling as though we were made for each other, it wasn’t long before the church and I got “hit!” I have now served the United Church of Christ in Norwalk, Massachusetts, for almost five years, and it has been an extraordinary journey of faith and discovery.

It is fair to say that the church wasn’t entirely liberal and evangelical, or at least they weren’t as liberal and evangelical as they thought they were—or in the way they thought they were. It wasn’t long into my pastorate and preaching ministry in Norwalk that people began to approach me with questions.

The church had just completed its “open and affirming” process a few months before my arrival, so many of the more evangelical or conservative Christians had left in a huff. The first questions came from the more liberal members of the congregation. They were glad I was committed to the inclusion of all people in the life of the church. In fact, they were thrilled to have a young, white, heterosexual male chaplain. The place of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in the life of the church. But they also had concerns. Why did I talk about Jesus? Did I really believe in an actual resurrection? And what was all this “Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior” business about?

In time, word got out that our church was talking about Jesus and that began to draw in more conservative and evangelical Christians. It only took a Sunday or two before those folks made their way to my office. They were thrilled to be in a New England church that focused so intently on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, but they were confused by the talk about welcoming gay people. As I have often mused, there is
The changes in Christian practice during the same period are as important as those in theology.

Liberal evangelical Christians throughout the 20th 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 tooled ("liberalized") some parts of the evangelical gospel to reflect core-message pluralism. In particular, they recognize that there was a vast array of unique testimonies within the Bible and subsequent Christian thought, and similar variation in ideas of deity and in metaphorical understandings, so they allowed diversity on these points. They went the opposite direction from conservative evangelicals on the authority of the Bible, seeing it in a sacred but culturally conditioned source of revelation and so inspired but not inerrant. On the other hand, liberal evangelicals stressed three premises to preserve the Christian ways of their pluralized form of evangelical Christianity: (1) The Principle of Honesty states that we human beings simply don’t and can’t know everything about divine matters; we all face questions, 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 path for pluralism within the church. (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 became 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 a variety of 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 chasms of core-message pluralism.

Mutual Attraction

The liker of liberal evangelicals such as Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr and more recently Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But the liberal and conservative traditions have been fundamentally transformed. Theological conservatives have claimed the word “evangelical” and liberals have done little to stop them. But the word “evangelical” and the use of that word has changed. It is now clearly understood that the core message of the gospel is the message of Jesus Christ and the plan of salvation. The term “evangelical” is now used to describe a group that is committed to living out the core message of the gospel in their everyday lives. This group includes both Calvinists and Wesleyans who believe in the sovereignty of God, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the necessity of justification by faith alone. The group also includes those who believe in the love and grace of God, the fellowship of believers, and the importance of personal piety. The group is characterized by a commitment to the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, and a belief in the necessity of conversion and regeneration. The group is committed to living out the core message of the gospel in their everyday lives, and to sharing the gospel with others. The group is characterized by a commitment to the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, and a belief in the necessity of conversion and regeneration. The group is committed to living out the core message of the gospel in their everyday lives, and to sharing the gospel with others.
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Questions for Reflection

What kinds of diversity does your congregation embrace? What kinds do it have difficulty embracing?

Is core-message pluralism acknowledged in your congregation's worship, preaching, education, and mission?

In what ways does your congregation use oversimplified labels for itself in order to define its identity? In what ways does the congregation use these labels to define others?

In what ways does your congregation struggle to achieve and maintain an identity?

Does your congregation make a point of developing local stories about its history and mission to cultivate identity?

How is Christ's radical inclusiveness alive in your congregation?
A Manifesto for Liberal and Evangelical Christians

WESLEY J. WILDMAN

his manifesto pairs foundational convictions with strategic responses under seven themes. This reflects my conviction that strategies and techniques are blind without theological depth, and theology is lame without artful action.

LIBERAL REPENANCE

The modern history of the word "liberal" carries forward its medieval associations with class and privilege, whereby only the few could learn what they wanted and form their own opinions openly and honestly. In our time, this has become a cultural form of condescension whereby only high-culture, high-brow, high-minded liberals can face the truth about group-identity destroying core-message pluralism because everyone else needs the group identity more than they love the truth. Like our mothers told us, after we are rude to someone, we have to say we're sorry.

We need to repent of the condescension that links class to religious courage and culture to religious honesty. Learning confers great advantages of understanding and sweetly complicates every part of our lives. But learning does not go with class and culture. It goes with opportunity and discipline.

Liberal evangelical churches must stress education generally and Christian education specifically. They must work to create opportunities for learning and to cultivate the spiritual and emotional disciplines needed to make the most of those opportunities.

EVANGELICAL REPENTANCE

The modern history of the word "evangelicalism" began with an act of semantic theft, turning the evangel, the gospel, into a club with which to beat one's opponents. It's fun when you are winning and it makes for intense toothlessness when under fire, but it is still theft, massively narrowing the sense of the gospel and suppressing legitimate diversity in the name of rationalizing local group identity. Like our fathers told us, after we take things that are not ours, we have to give them back.

We all long to be comfortable, but, as Jesus' ministry shows, the gospel discomforts as much as it comforts. We need the Protestant commitment to perpetual reformation because we get comfortable too easily.

The truly ugly history of Protestant Church splits sends a clear message: basing church identity on doctrine when the Bible is your authoritative source will always lead to splits because the Bible does not say one thing. Neither does church history. We earn moral and spiritual orientation through a discerning conversation among plural voices, including biblical, traditional, and contemporary wisdom.

WORSHIP IS THE BOND

When we allow the pluralism of the Christian movement to register in the core message of a church, we weaken the glue that keeps everyone together. Liberal evangelicals have to find a way to brew the glue of social unity even while admitting core-message pluralism.

As humbling as this may be for Protestants, we need to learn this lesson from the great Catholic mother church. Liberal evangelical churches must centralize worship and sacraments, and place doctrine in a subordinate, though still essential, position. And not just any worship will do.

Energetic worship and inspiring sacraments can engage every dimension of human beings. Gifted leaders of worship know how to ease people out of their comfort zones and into new reaches of their own spiritual potential. They know how to steady those whose enthusiasm outruns their discipline. They understand how the sacraments bond Christians together despite their differences of opinion.

MESSAGE MATTERS

When the pastor steps into the pulpit to preach the gospel, the rubber meets the road. Will we hear vague nonsense, shallow thinking, or spiritual paralyzed in the face of a profound intellectual challenge? Will we hear a nuanced message presented as if we are supposed to find it existing, or shallow maximizes that mask all-important details? If so, liberal evangelical Christianity in the 21st century United States is just a naive dream.

This is a truly excellent story. We can meditate on Jesus' life and teaching and notice the life-changing effects he had on his followers as well as on his enemies. We can trace the way his followers struggled to understand how Jesus' power to change lives continued after his death, how God could work through him apart from his physical presence. We can ponder the marvelous theories of atonement that shift with every worldview Christianity passed through. We can wonder at the way Christianity always existed in translation, always adapted to new contexts, always drew forth new ideas as the core message of the gospel passed across cultures and eras. Through it all, with no need to oversimplify and no shortage of excitement, God has been in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world. This message preaches; it opens up into a world of full of realities, and it invites Christians to educate themselves about that world as a way of deepening their own faith.

Having a message that preaches doesn't help unless preachers of the Word know their Bible and theology, work hard in preparation, bring spiritual vibrancy into the pulpit, and love their people. None of that happens by accident.

VIBRANT SPIRITUALITY

What about spirituality for liberal evangelicals? Where is the internal fire that spurs fellowship, heals the ravages of sin, breaks addiction, inspires forgiveness, and makes us strong to love God, others, and ourselves?

Liberal evangelical Christianity is not just a gospel about Jesus Christ; it is a relationship with Jesus Christ. Following Jesus each day of our lives is more important than being able to explain on demand the doctrine of the Trinity or the Chalcedonian Definition. Remembering Jesus in the Eucharist meal is more important than being able to define the Reformed Presence or whatever it is that keeps Christians coming back ever again and ever to the Communion table. Trusting that God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world, making us at one with God, is more important than being able to justify our favorite theory of the at-one-ment. When the Christian keeps his or her eyes fixed on Jesus, the back gets straighter, the spirit gets stronger, the joy gets deeper, and the task of faithful Christian living gets clearer.

All relationships need work as well as inspiration. Liberal evangelical Christians must pray, and so they must learn to pray. They must meditate on the stories of Jesus' life and so they must learn to read the strange new world of the Bible. They must find a spiritual path on which to follow Jesus and so they must learn about the Christian church's vast variety of spiritual disciplines, each tuned to different personality types and contexts.

KINGDOM MISSION

What does spirituality mean when we leave the church service? What do we do at work, at home, in the voting booth, in social action? How do we avoid the infamous evangelical trap of neglecting Jesus' command to serve the poor and marginalized and the liberal trap of understanding our own salvation in terms of the good works we do?

Discerning Christians are invited to participate in it by extending God's love in Christ to others. We can't love others in the name of Jesus Christ unless we struggle with them to achieve justice, health, and healing. Social justice and evangelism are essential components of our mission within God's Kingdom mission.

Social action is a spiritual practice because it is part of God's mission in Christ as this has extended into the work of the Church. The social work of discerning Christians is not merely a way to keep busy; it is an expression of our love and gratitude to God, whose mission has transformed our lives.

RADICAL HUMILITY

God's being for surpasses our cognitive and spiritual ability to comprehend. The work of God's spirit is not tamed by our limited understandings or tied to struggling church mission. Beyond our church there are other churches, beyond Christianity there are other spiritual communities, beyond our understandings there are other deep visions of the truth.

God is not tamed by our insecurities or limited by our imaginations. God's truth is not exhausted by our doctrines, and access to God is not controlled by our sacramental gateways. Our God images are always too small and the reach of God's grace broader and deeper than we can conceive. Ignorance of the other for the sake of comfort and clear identity is nothing other than neglect of another part of God's creation.

Liberal evangelical Churches and churches define themselves by a God that can't be tamed and a divine mission that exceeds our control. This blessed humility inspires the radical inclusiveness of the Christian gospel, breaking boundaries of class and culture and reaching out in transforming love across political and religious differences. The humble power of radically inclusive love heals and transforms more surely than arrogant force.