

## EVANGELICALS AND LIBERALS

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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My college roommate Garry Trudeau once wrote that he grew up in the Episcopalian faith, joking that it's "the best religion money can buy." Yet, the church where his family worshipped in upstate New York was a small, wooden building. A block down the street was what he remembers as a far more imposing structure, the town's Catholic church. "Terra incognita," Trudeau calls it, looking back. As he explains, "Since the church was dark and vaulted and built of stone, and since it was always leaking incense and Latin into the street outside, Catholicism remained shrouded in otherness the whole of my childhood."<sup>i</sup>

According to the gospel writer John, as you heard a moment ago,<sup>ii</sup> Jesus prayed that the Christian community "may all be one." This was important not only for the sake of the community itself, but for missionary purposes -- so that the world may know and believe that God has sent Jesus into the world. Non-Christians will see that the solidarity between all Christians -- their complete unity -- reflects Jesus' unity with God. The point of Jesus' prayer seems to be that the love with which God has loved him, and the love which Jesus has then shared with his disciples and the larger Christian community, and the love which then all Christians share in complete unity with each other, will stand as a beacon for conversion of the whole world to this kind of unified love of all human beings for each other.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet, the Christian Church has decidedly not been one, historically. It has not been tied closely

in the bonds of love. And this has not only damaged the church internally as a community, but also undermined its missionary appeal in the world. Garry Trudeau's sense that the Roman Catholic tradition within the Christian church was "terra incognita" and "remained shrouded in otherness" dates back to the second great schism of the church 500 years ago when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. And the first great schism had come 500 years before that, when the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other. Garry probably knew nothing about the Eastern Orthodox tradition within Christianity as he grew up. Nor would he have known much about the bewildering array of Protestant denominations beyond Episcopalianism. There are more than two thousand different denominations in America alone, with an incredible variety of arguments among them over matters of doctrine, polity, and practice.

The real divide in Christianity today, though, according to sociologists like Princeton's Robert Wuthnow, is not among denominations, but is internal to denominations themselves. The simplest label for this phenomenon is the evangelical-liberal split. Just a few miles from this campus, for example, you can visit two churches which are both members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) but which stand firmly on opposite sides of the divide. The Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, which is evangelical, states on its web page, in part, that it "witnesses the Gospel in the world" by being "focused on Christ" and "proclaiming the truth about God's rule...and by teaching others how to apply these truths."<sup>iv</sup> The liberal First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto explains, in part, that it is "a church committed to inclusive language," is "a peace and justice church," and is "a more light church, welcoming gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and

transgendered persons into full membership."<sup>v</sup>

Most of you probably have a pretty good idea of the watershed differences between evangelicals and religious liberals. But in case not, let me try to explain this by referencing light bulbs. First, "How many evangelicals does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "Evangelicals don't change light bulbs. They simply read out the instructions and try to convince the light bulb to change itself." On the other hand, "How many religious liberals does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "At least ten, as they need to hold a debate on whether or not the light bulb exists. Even if they can agree upon the existence of the light bulb, they still may not change it to keep from alienating those who may use other forms of light."

Jesus prays, "May they become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." How far we seem to be from a Christian community that is completely one! What a pathetic witness, therefore, Christians are to God's love for us and ultimately to a vision of a whole world united in love, rather than divided in bigotry and warfare. What can we do about this? How can we at least begin moving in the direction of Christian unity by seeking to bridge the current evangelical-liberal divide?

I have three concrete suggestions: First, stop stereotyping each other. Second, listen carefully and empathetically each other, seeking first to understand and only then to be understood. Third, work actively together in the areas where common cause can genuinely be made.

I feel very fortunate to have been a university chaplain at two institutions -- Tufts and Stanford -- for 20 years now, serving as an umbrella, facilitator and advocate for all religious communities on campus. At Stanford we have 30 different religious groups that are members of

an organization called Stanford Associated Religions, which operates under the auspices of the Office for Religious Life. Of those 30 groups, some 15 could be characterized as evangelical Christian, while about 5 are liberal Christian. Neither evangelical nor liberal communities are monolithic; there's lots of variation within both traditions and within individual groups.

Yet, both communities are often stereotyped: Evangelicals are seen by many liberals as biblical fundamentalists who aggressively proselytize others to an anti-scientific view of the Kingdom of God and to a politically conservative agenda. Liberals are seen by many evangelicals as secular humanists or political leftists who are nominal Christians, putting a thin religious veneer over their attachment to the culture of the day and over their personal ideological commitments.<sup>vi</sup>

As someone who self-identifies as a liberal Christian, I've been very grateful for the way evangelical clergy and advisors at Stanford have reached out to develop agenda-free personal relationships with me, where we could talk honestly and openly about our faith commitments without judgment. There have been a lot of great conversations over lunch, coffee, and after-work drinks, on campus and at Palo Alto cafes and bars. Along the way, I've come to understand that although evangelicals hold to the final authority of the Scriptures in faith and practice, most of them use modern historical criticism and struggle with questions of interpretation just as I do. They are not fundamentalists, by which I mean biblical literalists. Scientific method is utilized and appreciated; indeed, many evangelicals at Stanford are scientists. Evangelicals by definition support evangelism, but it's usually done by personal example and respectful dialogue, and rarely by buttonholing and browbeating. And there's no litmus test of political conservatism for

evangelicals; indeed, there's excitement that the Office for Religious Life is bringing evangelical minister Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners magazine, to Stanford as the Baccalaureate speaker this year. He's an activist who began working in the civil rights and anti-war movements more than 30 years ago, and he's labored tirelessly to overcome poverty, end war, and eliminate discrimination ever since.

In these conversations with Stanford evangelicals, I feel that I've generally been appreciated as a fellow Christian who's committed to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, albeit in a substantially different way: Although I try personally to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, I don't see the Christian path as the only way up the spiritual mountain for all people. I take the Bible seriously, but I accept other sources of revelation as well, including the leading of the Holy Spirit in my own personal experience. I also hear the prophetic call of Jesus to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and free the oppressed. I take that as an ethical imperative on the level of social action and not just one-to-one charitable service.

If evangelicals and liberals can stop stereotyping each other, the next task, I believe, is to listen carefully and empathetically to each other, seeking first to understand, and only then to be understood. This was realized powerfully in a series of dorm conversations that the Office for Religious Life and Stanford Associated Religions ran in March and April about Mel Gibson's film, The Passion of the Christ. It quickly became clear that students were seeing completely different films, based on their own theological starting point. Many liberal Christians couldn't see beyond the violence that they feel they're working hard against in their daily lives, evangelical Christians were deeply moved by the portrayal of Christ's sacrifice on their behalf, Jews were

offended by what they experienced as anti-Semitism in the film, and secularists wondered why anyone would find anything attractive in Christianity in the first place if this is what it's all about.

What worked well in the dorm talks, though, were some basic ground rules that helped people to hear each other deeply, without judging or arguing or closing up. Everyone learned something new about the movie that way and also left with a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of other people's perspectives. We asked the participants to listen before they spoke, trying to put themselves empathetically into the shoes of each person as they contributed to the discussion. Specifically, we asked that each participant briefly summarize the prior speaker's comments before contributing herself or himself, and not begin until the prior speaker affirmed that he or she had been understood. Finally, we asked people to use only "I" statements in their own reactions, making clear that this was not a debate or a time for pointing fingers to criticize others. However, we did want them to express their own feelings, beliefs and values clearly. It seemed to work in creating and maintaining a respectful sense of community, allowing people to express themselves freely, and maximizing learning.

This is the kind of process used in a book jointly written by evangelical Christian Richard Hutcheson and liberal Christian Peggy Shriver. It's called The Divided Church: Moving Liberals and Conservatives from Diatribe to Dialogue. In their conversation, they came to realize how much evangelicals and liberals need each other in the life of the church. Each found aspects of the other wing of the church that he or she personally admired. For example, Peggy Shriver, the liberal, wrote of how she appreciated the clear sense of the essentials of faith, like sin, that

evangelicals have, especially in the face of the failures of modernity and the intractability of many social problems that liberals have optimistically thought could be solved. She liked the fluency many evangelicals have with the Bible as a resource, their courage to testify in a society that is often hostile to their message, and their concern for the personal suffering of individuals. Liberals have more trouble living with scripture on a daily basis; they can too easily be captured by the culture around them, and they can ignore the individual in their primary attention to oppressive structures and systems.

On the other hand, Richard Hutcheson, the evangelical, wrote of his appreciation of the liberal insistence that Scripture is always interpreted by human beings and that God alone has absolute truth; evangelicals can forget this and become close-minded and dogmatic on issues of truth. He was grateful for the liberal emphasis on human rationality and on the necessity for religious scholarship. He also liked liberals' emphasis on social justice, reminding evangelicals of the Hebrew prophets' call as well as Jesus' insistence on bringing good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed. And, finally, he was deeply appreciative of the ecumenical movement which has been central to Protestant liberalism, reminding all Christians to recognize others as authentic parts of the one church universal, as seemingly urged by Jesus in today's gospel reading.<sup>vii</sup>

So we can start bridging the evangelical-liberal divide, first, by refusing to stereotype each other, and, second, by listening empathetically to each other. Finally, I suggest that we look for areas to work actively together. Given the polarization around sexual matters like abortion and homosexuality, that doesn't look like a very fruitful area at the moment, to say the least. However, there's no reason we can't unite around efforts to promote racial equality, to prevent

torture, to feed the hungry, and to challenge the principalities and powers of the world in the name of justice. The mission statements of both the Menlo Park and the Palo Alto Presbyterian churches reference social outreach and social justice. As Menlo Park puts it, "Our God is a God of justice. The Good News we proclaim isn't just that God cares about our soul, but about our plight here on earth. We are called to fight for justice alongside our God."

Therefore, let's get to work together on changing a lot of light bulbs, on removing Garry Trudeau's shrouds of otherness, and on sharing the kind of love which Jesus brought into the world. Let's roll up our sleeves and work on the big issues together: like the extremes of wealth and poverty in our globalizing world and the scourge of war. Let's remember that we need each other within the church. Let's be clear that a divided Christian community is disgrace.

Ultimately, what the world as a whole needs is a vision of unity that's grounded in love. We must begin by getting our own house in order. Then, may we give thanks not only for Jesus' prayer on our behalf that we may all be one in love, but also for the Psalmist's exaltation that "Righteousness and justice are the foundations of God's throne. Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!"<sup>viii</sup> Amen.



## NOTES

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- i. Garry Trudeau, "Introduction" to Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. xiii.
  - ii. John 17: 20-26.
  - iii. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, pp. 794-795.
  - iv. Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, "MPPC Mission Values," [http://www.mppc.org/missions/about\\_us](http://www.mppc.org/missions/about_us)
  - v. First Presbyterian Church Palo Alto, home page, [www.fprespa.org](http://www.fprespa.org)
  - vi. See the discussion in a book which has significantly influenced this sermon: Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr. and Peggy Shriver, The Divided Church: Moving Liberals and Conservatives from Diatribe to Dialogue (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).
  - vii. Ibid., pp. 36-41.
  - viii. Psalm 97: 2,1.