

DIGGING DEEPER: THE COMING EVANGELICAL SPLIT +

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I wrote a short article a few weeks back on the split of Evangelical Christianity. It started out as simply a Facebook note and went viral at online hubs such as Red Letter Christians with Tony Campolo and Churchleaders.com—which lead to about 100,000 people having a chance to engage these thoughts. Those hub conversations sparked several other great conversations on cool blogs such as Scot McKnight and Rachel Held Evans. My note was never written as a full thought—but more a simple observation or declaration of what I believe is happening and will continue to happen.

I would prefer a nice short article! This type of thought requires more thoroughness with carefully chosen words and phrases. I'm a practitioner, not a theologian—so please have a bit of grace with me. My hope is that we can all have a conversation about the current landscape and not simply throw rocks at others views—while seeking to prop up or defend our views. Let me be clear—this is what I see already underlying in Evangelicalism right now. I'm not calling for a split or division. I'm simply describing what I experience as a leader within Evangelicalism—and sharing in more detail where these trends will possibly lead in the next few years.

I don't cause the rain—but I recognize it when it starts.

With all that in mind I thought I would lay out further details on why I think Evangelicalism will split and look at two defining characteristics I see growing within each 'side'. I don't mean to imply just two flat sides— but I do believe there will be two over-arching and distinctive methods of operation, and I've experienced a growing disconnect of vocabulary over the last few years, which I believe will ultimately lead to enough individuals in the US seeking to distinguish themselves. Even right now—I sense people across evangelicalism looking for vocabulary to distinguish themselves from others in Evangelicalism that don't accurately portray the way they frame their Christianity.

I believe we'll eventually find two basic coalitions: Traditional Evangelicals and Progressive Evangelicals

Of course the vocabulary has yet to be found—and perhaps only one group will use an adjective at the front of the word 'evangelical' to identify it. I would guess that traditionally minded evangelicals would prefer to remain simply "Evangelical" while Progressives will gladly adopt some type of clarifying adjective. For the sake of the article—I'll use adjectives for both groups.

As a side note, I don't think we're talking about the Emerging church either, so I don't want that to sidetrack the conversation. I think the Emerging, Emergent movement is a precursor to this shift. I think the Emerging conversation began to expose some of the basic differences and progressive values that have been forming in the faith of evangelicals.

Jonathan Fitzgerald argues that we won't see a split, but erosion. I mostly agree with this—and am glad he shared this word picture. I believe things have indeed already eroded under the surface to the point that one singular event will shake things up and expose the gulf that exists right now. Existing erosion makes some areas more suspect for an earthquakes effects to produce an 'instant' change of landscape—such as a landslide. The underlying eroding forces happened over the course of years—but the trigger causes a perceived massive and momentary shift.

I think this what we have here in the United States right now.

I think there are two current underlying core issues that will be exposed in the next few years:

A difference in methodology: Practice vs Scripture:

Methods don't simply expose how people do things. Methods expose underlying value systems. Evangelicalism currently has such a wide disparity of what it means to 'be a Christian' that at some point people are going to look to clarify these values—and distinguish themselves from the polar opposite who still operates under the Evangelical 'brand' of Christianity. The following is my understanding of the current landscape.

The Traditional View: Christianity is a set of beliefs that are rooted in the inerrant Word of God, the Bible. The scriptures are the primary filter thru which traditional evangelicals engage others, and metaphorically 'hold it tightly and heavily' in their right hand. 'Good' theology unifies and creates common ground for traditionalists to worship and work together. Practice, while important is held more loosely in their left hand. Practice is meant to shed light on the Bible. While they value both—the emphasis is more on growth thru the revelation and understanding of scripture. The synopsis is this: good theology will lead to good practice.

The Progressive View: Christianity is a lifestyle modeled by Jesus—to be imitated and practiced. Growth happens in community first and foremost thru practice. Social justice and practice are metaphorically 'held tightly and heavily' in their right hand. Practice unifies and creates common ground for progressives to worship and work together. Scripture, while important is held more loosely in their left hand. Scripture is meant to shed light on practice. While they to value both—the emphasis is more on growth thru the process of work and serving others. The synopsis is this: good practice will lead to good theology.

My thoughts on the differences in methodology: These differences are foundational, real, and radically different ways of framing Christianity. I don't think lines will be drawn in a simply denomination fashion as those too have eroded, with both views found in all denominations. The question could be put like this: What does Jesus mean when he says 'make disciples'? For traditional Evangelicalism making 'disciples' happens first thru the teaching of the Bible—and leads to serving. For Progressive Evangelicals this process tends to be reversed—inviting people to serve and renew the world as a vehicle to share truths about Jesus and from the Bible.

Two different methods to making disciples.

Two subtly different value systems

Two different frames to Christianity.

A Difference in Theology: Exclusive vs. Inclusive

Here is where I think the final straws begin to break. Ultimately this growing tension has been navigated between the two views, but the theology being stretched here reveals the deep gap between the underlying value systems about people and God. As these differences become more public people are going to look to clarify these values—and distinguish themselves from polar opposites who still operate under the Evangelical 'brand' of Christianity. The following is the next big underlying theological issue that I think Love Wins brings front and center.

The Traditional Exclusive Theological view: "We have a fairly firm idea of who is in Heaven and out to Hell." Most every Evangelical Christian of influence over the past 500 years have held an exclusive view of who gets into Heaven and who ends up in Hell. Jesus death and resurrection form the basis for a gospel that needs to be

consciously believed and affirmed. Others are excluded (some believe by choice and others by predestination) from the grace and renewal of the work of Jesus on the cross and the tomb. This whole paragraph is simply my effort to succinctly explain the theological system that Evangelical Protestant Christianity has embraced and passed on since the Reformation. (traditionalists would probably use the word orthodox).

Exclusivism interprets that Jesus is The Way and Truth and Life— and that people need to consciously believe this to experience grace at the end of their life.

The Progressive Inclusive Theological view: “We have a fairly loose idea of who is in Heaven and out to Hell.” Inclusivism is an established theological position that states there is enough evidence in the Bible that the work of Jesus is more inclusive of others than the traditional exclusive system would allow for. CS Lewis was an inclusivist along with Wesley. I think Rob Bell seems to me, to fall into a very similar vein in his book. Let’s be very clear— this NOT Universalism or Pluralism. Unlike Pluralism, Inclusivism states that only Jesus saves humanity—and that other religions and nature contain varying amounts of truth come from Jesus. People of other religions who faithfully and unknowingly live out the Pattern of Jesus—could possibly get into Heaven based solely on the work of Jesus death and resurrection. Unlike Universalism, Inclusivism believes that Jesus seeks to include as much of the world as possible, but does not simply sweep everyone into Heaven— allowing those who choose to be excluded to be separated from God.

Inclusivism also believes that Jesus is The Way and Truth and Life—but interprets that He alone has earned the right to decide. Since the divine nature of Jesus is to include others—this leaves possibilities that exclusive systems of Christianity leave out.

Therefore, Inclusivism does not believe that everyone must consciously make a profession of faith. Here are some examples: Those who have never heard about Jesus could be included. People with imperfect knowledge of Jesus will be judged based on their living out of what truths they were aware of. People such as infants, and those mentally incapable of such a decision would also be included.

This is a more vague and even agnostic view of salvation.

My thoughts on the differences in Theology: On this point theological point I think Rob Bell’s book exposes this growing gap. I take a man at his word—Bell says he is not a universalist. I think he is probably simply an Inclusivist. Bell’s book is comfortable with the vagueness of who is getting into Heaven and who does not. This goes against the very grain of exclusivism and its need to have the questions answered—and more closely understand who is in and who is out.

The book exposes a tension in approaches. Traditionalists who seek answers—getting things clear and nailed down—and the Progressives who find answers in practice and are reticent to ‘nail the furniture to the floor’.

This tension creates an environment ripe with suspicion when people won’t answer theological questions. To be clear I absolutely believe Inclusivism has a place in the traditions of the ancient church. It takes verses into consideration and chooses to remain agnostic toward the afterlife—but wholly affirms Jesus divinity and authority. However, I don’t think it will find a comfortable place within the current climate of traditional evangelicalism.

Why? Because Traditional methodology relies so heavily The Bible—Traditionalists naturally defend Evangelicalism from any interpretation that lies outside of their prescribed ‘orthodoxy’.They try to ‘conserve’ the faith. Hence the reason I used the term conservatives in my last article.

Many Traditionalists claim that Inclusivism will actually lead people to Hell by removing any impetus for people to follow Jesus. Inclusivists would likely counter that following Jesus to become whole and mature reflections of God is indeed enough motivation for people to follow Jesus—and that the fear of Hell—is neither appropriate or sufficient motivation for real transformation.

This theological difference strikes straight into the heart of the way people frame Christianity.

It strikes straight at the heart of what Jesus is about. It strikes straight at what we think happened on the cross 2000 years ago. Ultimately, was the Cross an excluding event—or an inclusive event? This is what I think Rob Bell is pointing to when he says that our beliefs about Heaven and Hell—say a lot about our belief about God. I would tend to agree with him, it does expose the polar views many hold within Evangelicalism about the God.

Is God more exclusive or inclusive?

This is not a peripheral value...and so you see our issue.

Two radically different lens thru which to see the God

Two radically different lens thru which to engage our neighbors.

What might we end up with in Evangelicalism? Ultimately Traditionalists will, in good conscience, seek to conserve the integrity of the scriptures above all else. Traditionalist communities will mark themselves as true to the scripture, first and foremost—and I think most of these churches and people will remain in many of the current denominational structures. I think their base will be mobilized and grow stronger.

I also see a new set of leaders and churches made mostly of these other Evangelicals who are more progressive combined with a large number of people currently residing in Mainline churches who may feel stifled by the mainline structure. These are practice oriented people who will find that their strengths compliment one another. I don't think it will be super organized. It won't be a new denomination. It will be a label people choose to use to identify how they practice, and what values they hold tightly.

I don't think you'll see a battle for resources or power. I think resources will probably remain in traditional churches—while progressives choose the freedom of striking out and starting newer spiritual ventures such as non-denominational church plants and do-gooding non-profits. Some may also find spaces to operate across a vast spectrum of denominations that will embrace growth and their doing good. They'll be more diverse and harder to define via structure simply because they focus on practice and NOT structure. They'll have a coalition of similar practice and they will distinguish themselves from Traditional Evangelicals.

I think Love Wins is has triggered this coming landslide, shifting the landscape enough to expose the already growing split of methodology and theology. I think this erosion was what Barna recorded in his book Revolution years ago. Many of my international friends have already experienced this shift across the world as this shift is just starting to come light to the United States.

In the end—what role does Rob Bell play?

Rob Bell is a snapshot for the United States of the coming rise of an inclusive, practice oriented and progressive Christianity. Rob Bell is simply a face we recognize—but there are millions of closeted progressive evangelicals in pews, cushy suburban seats, hipster house churches, and barstools across the United States.

I think we're about to find out who they are.

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In the end—I think you'll see traditional evangelicalism march faithfully forward with its leaders, speakers, methods and theology in tact. This will be a victory for them. Alongside them will rise new leaders who strike off and attract millions also—they will be practice focused, progressive and inclusive oriented speakers and leaders operating with a new set of vocabulary and methods. This too will be a victory for them.

I stand by my original article's thought...
This is about the right to control and frame the story of Jesus.

I've got news for you...

Neither side will relinquish their right to that
Because they both love Jesus too much.

FACTS ON THIS ARTICLE +

- *Published with Red Letter Christianity*
- *A successful follow-up to original article*

Generated hundreds Twitter/ Facebook follows:

@knightjeremy "prob the best thing I've read online in a while.."

@BentGreene "RT @TonyCampolo: Deeper Insight into the Coming Evangelical Split from @jimmyspencerjr <http://bit.ly/hE11bP> // Brilliant piece! Insightful."

Timothy Farrell: "Incredible clarity. Thank you for what you do."

Petter Ottness: "I have really enjoyed reading these two articles. I have already seen this happening here in Australia. I've found this to be really helpful!"

David Joseph Goodrich: "Thanks to Jimmy Spencer, for articulating what so many of us are also witnessing and/or experiencing in evangelical circles. This is brilliant analysis."

Heulwen Webb: "The article not only "struck a chord" in my heart but actually "sung a song" in my heart. Thanks from the UK."