

## Today's Divisions [*in American Christianity*]

The divisions in American Christianity today ... are not primarily denominational. Differences between the old mainline Protestant denominations no longer matter very much. Many have entered into cooperative agreements, including mutual recognition and placement of clergy. And among mainline Protestants, the old anathema toward Catholics is largely gone. It's been decades since I have heard parents from a mainline Protestant denomination worry that one of their children might marry somebody from a different Protestant denomination or, for that matter, a Catholic.

Naming today's divisions involves using labels. I recognize that labels risk becoming stereotypes and caricatures; indeed, the difference between "label" and "libel" is a single letter. Yet they can be useful and even necessary shorthand for naming differences.

Aware of this danger, I suggest ***five categories for naming the divisions in American Christianity today: conservative, conventional, uncertain, former, and progressive Christians***. In somewhat different forms, these kinds of Christians are ***found among both Protestants and Catholics***. And there are good people in all of the categories; none of them has a monopoly on goodness.

The categories are not watertight compartments. It is possible to be a conservative conventional Christian, a conventional uncertain Christian, a conventional former Christian, and so forth. But two categories strike me as antithetical and incompatible. ***The great divide is between conservative and progressive Christianity***, which form opposite ends of the spectrum of American Christianity today.

### Conservative Christians

The conservative Christian category includes ***fundamentalist Christians, most conservative-evangelical Christians, and some mainline Protestant and Catholic Christians***. Most of us over a certain age, Protestant or Catholic, grew up with a form of what I am calling "conservative Christianity." Today's conservative Christians insist upon it. Its foundations are:

- ***Belief in the absolute authority of divine revelation***. For conservative Protestants, divine authority comes from the ***Bible***, which they understand to be the ***infallible, literal, and absolute Word of God***. For ***conservative Catholics***, divine authority is grounded in the ***teaching of the church hierarchy***, with its ***apex in papal infallibility***.
- ***Emphasis upon an afterlife***. How we live now—what we believe and how we behave—matters because where we will spend eternity is at stake. For conservative Protestants, the possibilities are heaven and hell. Conservative Catholics continue to add a third possibility: purgatory—a postmortem state of purification for those neither wicked enough to go to hell nor worthy enough to go to heaven.
- ***Sin is the central issue in our life with God, the obstacle to going to heaven. Thus our great need is forgiveness***.

- ***Jesus died to pay for our sins so that we can be forgiven.*** Because he was the Son of God, he was without sin and thus could make the perfect sacrifice for our sins.
- ***The way to eternal life*** (understood to mean “***heaven***”) is ***through believing in Jesus and his saving death.***

Most conservative Christians also believe that Jesus and Christianity are “the only way.” Conservative Catholics commonly affirm a church doctrine known as *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*—namely, outside of the church (the Catholic Church) there is no salvation. Though conservative Protestants reject the notion that the Catholic way is the only way, they do affirm that ***Jesus is the only way***, and many assert that ***their particular way is the only or at least the best way.***

***Some conservative Christians would add to this list of beliefs.*** For example, believing that ***Jesus really was born of a virgin***, that he ***did walk on water***, that his ***physical body was raised from the dead***, that ***he will come again in physical bodily form***, and so forth. But I would be surprised if any would subtract from this list.”

There are subdivisions within conservative Protestant Christianity. These include especially “***the prosperity gospel***” and “***the second coming is soon gospel***,” even as ***some conservative Christians resolutely reject both.*** The former proclaims that being Christian leads to a prosperous life here on earth. A blatant form is inscribed over the door of a mega-church with more than twenty thousand members: “The Word of God is the Way to Wealth.”

The latter emphasizes that Jesus is coming again soon for the final judgment and thus it is important to be ready. Books proclaiming this have been bestsellers for decades; forty years ago, we had Hal Lindsey’s ***The Late Great Planet Earth*** and more recently the bestselling ***Left Behind novels*** by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. How many Christians believe that the second coming and last judgment are at hand? The one relevant poll I have heard of suggests that ***20 percent of American Christians are certain that Jesus will come again in the next fifty years and that another 20 percent think it is likely.***

## **Conventional Christians**

The category of conventional Christian refers to both the reason for being Christian and a particular content of what it means to be Christian. Reason or motive: many in my generation, and in generations before and some since, became involved in a church because of a ***cultural or familial expectation that they would be part of a church.*** Some of these people continue to participate in church life because of that convention. Some continue because they ***value Christian community, worship, commitment, and compassion.*** Conventional Christians also share the understanding of Christianity affirmed in more passionate form by conservative Christians. Most learned it in childhood: namely, the ***Christian life is about believing in Jesus now for the sake of heaven later.***

To a large extent, conventional Christians are “the Christian middle” in American Christianity today. They are not committed to biblical inerrancy and doctrinal insistence about correct beliefs as conservative Christians are. Yet they are not part of what I will soon describe as progressive Christianity. They may not even have heard of it.

## Uncertain Christians

Uncertain Christians include many conventional Christians and some former conservative Christians. They have ***become unsure of what they make of conservative and conventional Christian teachings***. Is the Bible really the direct revelation of God? Should it be interpreted literally? Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Did he really do all of the miracles narrated in the gospels? Did he really have to die to pay for our sins? Is Christianity really the only way of salvation? But despite such questions, these people continue to be part of a church, whether occasionally for reasons of convention or regularly for ***reasons of community***. For some, ***belonging is more important than believing***.

## Former Christians

It may seem odd to include in a list of Christian categories those people who have left the church, but they are a large group. I have been told more than once that the ***largest “denomination” in the United States today is ex-Catholics***. I do not know whether this is true, but there are many ex-Catholics. So ***also among Protestants***. Mainline Protestant denominations have lost about 40 percent of their membership over the past half century. Why? Most people did not join a more conservative church; they simply left. ***The primary reason is that the form of Christianity they learned growing up ceased to be persuasive and compelling***.

Yet some former Christians continue to live on the periphery of the church. Some attend church occasionally. Many attend educational events on religion and Christianity. They are still curious about Christianity, still seeking, still hoping that there may be a vision of Christianity they can embrace.

## Progressive Christians

Progressive Christians are ***found mostly in mainline Protestant denominations*** and among the ***Catholic “loyal opposition”***—those who continue to be Catholic even as they oppose the emphases and direction of the church’s hierarchy over the past thirty years. Many of these are ***hopeful that Pope Francis will chart a new direction for the Catholic Church***.

Progressive Christianity is about ***both negation and affirmation***. It ***rejects biblical inerrancy, literal interpretation, and the beliefs that Jesus died to pay for our sins and that Christianity is the only way of salvation***. Thus progressive Christians are often better known for what they do not believe than for what they do affirm. This is not surprising: to a large extent, ***progressive Christianity has emerged as a “no” to the conventional Christianity of the recent past and the conservative Christianity of the present***. But there are also ***important affirmations***, even if they are not as well-known as the negations.

- ***The Bible is Christian sacred scripture*** and thus for Christians the most important book there is, even though it is neither inerrant nor to be interpreted literally. Rather, it is to be ***interpreted historically*** (which means putting its ancient texts in their ancient historical contexts) and ***metaphorically*** (which means focusing on its more-than-literal meanings).

- **Salvation is primarily about transformation in this life—of ourselves and of the world—and not primarily about an afterlife.**
- The biblical understanding of the **human predicament and our need is much richer and more comprehensive than conservative and conventional Christianity's emphasis on sin and forgiveness.** We live in Egypt, in bondage to Pharaoh, and need liberation. We live in exile in Babylon and need a way of return and reconnection. **We are blind, diseased, wounded, dead in the midst of life, and our need is seeing again, healing, and rebirth.**
- **Jesus is the center of Christianity.** For Christians, he is **the decisive revelation of God—of what can be seen of God in a human life.** As “the Son of God” and “the Word become flesh,” **he reveals God's character and passion. But his purpose was not to pay for our sins.** That emphasis is, in fact, fewer than a thousand years old.
- **Believing matters, though not in its most common modern Christian meaning,** namely, believing a set of statements about God, the Bible, and Jesus to be true, even when they seem questionable. That is a serious distortion of the biblical and premodern Christian meanings of believing. Its authentic meaning is **better conveyed by the word “believing.” Believing in the modern sense of the word has little transformative power. One can believe all of the right things and still be quite untransformed. But what we believe shapes our lives and has great transformative power.**
- **Christianity is about “the way”—a rich image in both the Old and New Testaments that refers to a path of transformation, the way that leads to life.** Indeed, the earliest post-Easter designation for the Jesus movement was “the Way” (Acts 9.2). Moreover, to affirm that Christianity embodies “the way” need not mean that it is the only and exclusive way. Progressive Christians affirm that “the way” revealed in Jesus is also known in other enduring religious traditions. Christianity does not have a monopoly on God or religion. Rather, **Jesus is the incarnation of a universal way.**

Despite the much greater visibility of conservative Christianity and the common (but mistaken) perception that it is growing while progressive Christianity is declining, the latter has become a strong current in American Christianity. According to a **2013 poll, 28 percent of Americans identify themselves as “religious conservatives” and 19 percent as “religious progressives.”** Thus, while it is true that there are more conservative Christians than progressive Christians, the numerical gap is not that great, and it is narrowing. **The highest percentage identifying themselves as “progressives” are Catholics, and the next highest are mainline Protestants.**

Moreover, **progressive Christianity has growing institutional strength in mainline Protestant denominations.** Several decades ago progressive Christians began to ordain women, and more recently many of them have endorsed same-sex sexual relationships and ordained people in such relationships.

These decisions are impossible to reconcile with conservative Protestant understandings of the Bible as God's inerrant and absolute revelation. **Thus, whether they know it or not, Christians who belong to mainline Protestant denominations are implicitly even if not explicitly part of progressive Christianity.**

*Excerpt From: Marcus J. Borg. “Convictions.” iBooks. <https://itun.es/us/1Pn1Q.l>*