

Neither-Nor: Beyond the Binaries of Progressive and Conservative
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Text: Galatians 3:26-29

Focus: Much like the Galatian church of the first century, the US church today is divided. In the first century, Paul's emphasis on the faith of Jesus countered the effort to maintain the division between Hebrew and Gentile. Today, the church must confront a new binary—liberalism's progressive and conservative structure—and reclaim the centrality of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit for our life and faith.

Function: To note the divisive nature of defining the church as either progressive and conservative, and look to the manifestation of the Spirit as confirmation of the Church's witness.

Food is one of those things that can easily bring people together. Yet, at the same time you know you are in a different place by the kinds of foods, or even the names of foods, to realize you aren't at home any more.

Here in Elgin, my kids have been enrolled in a dual language program with Latino/a kids learning English while my kids learn Spanish. The fun thing for me is that they get invited to birthday parties and Quinceaneras. Most of the time our parties involve some kind of Pizza. When my kids go to parties, they have tamales. Now, I pretty sure I was out of college before I had my first, hand and home made tamale. My kids were probably 5 years old.

Over the past year I have missed traveling for my denominational work. And what I miss most is the chance to sit down with local food in all our Brethren congregations. I learn so much about people by the food they share. In East Los Angeles, Gilbert Romero gave me my first Chicarrónes—pork rinds that didn't come in a plastic bag. When I was finishing my Mdiv at Emory, my ministry formation and Hebrew Bible professor made sure to start the first class of the semester with Moon Pies and RC Cola, and then in the middle of the term he brought in bags of fresh shelled Pecans from his farm. Mennonites in the Southeast host their relief sale and serve the southern staple of Brunswick stew—a kind of BBQ based soup. And you can tell if someone is from PA or Ohio by how they make Chicken Pot Pie—with a traditional pie crust or with dumplings. And you can probably tell what county someone is from by what they call the cream puff deserts—Whoopie Pies or Gobbs.

While food reveals cultural differences, it also establishes cultural difference. In the opening of Galatians, Paul recounts how eating with Gentiles was causing quite the stir among the early Jesus movement. It is important to remember that in first 40 or 50 years of the Church, Christianity was a group within the wider Hebrew community. Much like we talk about Pharisees and Sadducees, Christians were a sect of Jews. In the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection and ascension the question quickly emerged—what should be done with the Gentiles who were showing up as part of the Jesus movement. We know from the book of Acts that Peter himself baptized the house of Cornelius when he witnessed the same signs of the Holy Spirit he had witnessed on the day of Pentecost. The church quickly had to discern what to do...

should Gentiles and Jews eat together if they were baptized? What should happen to Gentile men— should they too become circumcised? What of holiness laws for food or for mensuration?

Luke says in Acts 15 that the testimony to the presence of the Spirit among the Gentiles given by both Peter and Paul convinced the Jerusalem elders that Gentiles were part of the movement and need not become Hebrew by adopting all the laws. Luke's version of the council meeting read more like an idealized, matter of fact account. What we see in Paul's letter to the Galatian church, written more in the midst of the heated debate, gives us a different picture.

Paul is a bit more heated in his tone, even calling his readers foolish as he chastises them. It is apparent from the letter that there are some folks stirring the pot in Galatia, telling the Gentile Christians that they do indeed need to practice all the holiness laws of the Hebrews as part of following Jesus. Now, some NT scholars try to figure out the differences between Paul's story telling at the opening of the letter and Luke's account in Acts 15. The problem is, the two writers are composing their accounts at least a decade apart, and Paul is doing so in the midst of what he considers a clear threat to the emerging church and Luke is doing so after some of the immediate controversy has passed and a practical, if not policy, consensus has emerged.

For Paul, the agitators in Galatia are contradicting two things— the clear manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Gentiles when they first received their baptism, and the church's unity in Christ through the imposition of cultural uniformity. Nancy Bedford summarizes Paul's more positively—"Paul adamantly holds the tit is not necessary for Gentiles to become full-fledged Jew in order to follow Jesus, in part because the apostle doesn't advocate sameness or homogeneity but rather the way of Jesus from within particularity." (Bedford, *Galatians: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 7).

Here Paul's vision for the Jesus movement and the mission to the Gentiles is best summarized by one of his most notably poetic verses. "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The beauty of the image Paul painted should not conceal an equally important reality. In response to the agitators, Paul started with the presenting question— the Gentile inclusion in a Hebrew faith. Yet, he went much further. He challenged the social hierarchies of gender and social-economic class as well. If we were to stop at Jew and Greek, it might seem that Paul's concern is primarily cultural— what should we do with the range of food and religious practices. However, what Paul sets up here is what we can describe as the either/or of hierarchies. In more philosophical language, Paul names a number of oppositional binaries- two possible poles that are mutually exclusive. In terms of identity, you are either one or the other, and in terms of power, you are one and NOT the other.

Some today read this section and see an erasure of cultural, class, and gender difference. "We are all one people in Christ," some say. Yet, I am not convinced that Paul is arguing for a kind of equality that ignores real constructs within the dominant culture. While I significantly disagree with Augustine's assumption that social differences such as gender, class, and culture remain "embedded in our mortal interactions," he does name that these binaries are part of the world outside the church (Augustine, "Homily On Galatians" in *Ancient Christian Commentary on*

Scripture: New Testament Vol VIII). Paul names, rather, that in terms of the community within the church, the “over-others” nature of these binaries is contrary to the unity of the Church in Christ— especially in the baptisms of water and the Holy Spirit. This is what he argued to the Jesus movement in Corinth when they imported social-class into the practice of the Lord’s Supper (See I Corinthians 1:10 and 11:17-22) and to the Jesus people of Rome as they argued over the salvation inherent in the Hebrew and Roman law (See Romans 1:18-2:9). In those letters, Paul made clear that differences remain in the church, but those differences become part of the larger unity— a unity much like the human body (See I Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-8). There is, as I argued in my work on Spiritual Gifts, an essential role for diversity within the larger unity of the Body of Christ (See Joshua Brockway, “One Body, Many Parts: Reclaiming the Ecclesial Context of the Spiritual Gifts” in *Brethren Life and Thought* Vol 59 no 1 Spring 2014). Put another way, differences matter in the church but they are not about power over others, but a complex whole that shares in the common mission of God’s redemptive work in the whole world.

When I read Galatians today, I wonder what binaries we might include in Paul’s list. In the US church, we clearly still struggle with culture, gender, and class. Yet, I would add geography— neither urban nor rural, or maybe what the song says— neither east nor west, south nor north. Yet, I think one that has to come right to the top of the list is neither Progressive nor Conservative.

To be honest, there are at least three drafts of what I mean by neither Progressive nor Conservative. One is more historical— telling the story of American experiment from colonial days; and another is more philosophical—outlining the Enlightenment ideas of political liberalism, reason, and individual authority. Those drafts all started with the simple question of how we got to where we are today. Instead, I think, we can just say plainly that American culture and the church especially are dividing starkly according to those two symbolic poles of Progressivism and Conservatism.

We label so much today according to the Progressive/Conservative binary— news stations and papers, think tanks and universities, even social service agencies can be lumped together into one camp or the other. We know that the political parties make their money on these differences, but we are seeing the binary take a life of its own beyond democrats and republicans. In some case, even within the parties, groups form that are trying to out progressive progressives and out conservative conservatives.

I call this the Binary of Liberalism— two options like 1’s and 0’s in binary code, on a spectrum of ideas based in Modern Liberalism. Progressives/Conservatives would like us to think that the two are completely different and distinct. In fact, I have heard over and over that they are different systems and ideologies, even different religions. However, Nancy Murphey noted in her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, Progressives/Conservatives are two ends of a single spectrum. They have common questions about the nature of the individual, how we know what we know, and even about the nature of governments. It is simply that these two poles answer those questions differently. However, they only make sense given the wider political, economic, and philosophical matrix of Enlightenment Liberalism.

Though we like to think of the Church as being in and not of the world, the reality is that it is just as defined by the Binary structure of liberalism. It has been that way for over a century. As far back as the Reformation itself, theologians and clerics have argued about how the enlightenment ideas of the scientific method and individual authority impact long held theological beliefs. Yet, it was in the late 19th and early 20th century that the culture wars between progressives and conservatives really took hold of American Christianity. At that point, the labels were a bit different and the fight was between Modernists and Fundamentalists. The now infamous Scopes Monkey Trial and preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon 'Shall the Fundamentalists Win' mark the cultural and theological moment when ministers took sides with science or faith.

US Christianity sorted itself into those two categories for much of the 20th century. The terms used have shifted some in 100 years, but the theological left has been described as Modernist, Mainline, and Progressive. The left has generally accommodated scientific theories from both the natural sciences and the social sciences as part of the theological reflection. They tend to approach historic data as key to scriptural understanding, and at times seem to assume that human reason and revelation are one and the same. The left is much more comfortable with social matters—being rooted in the Social Gospel movement and the positive assessments of human ability rooted in Protestant Liberalism. The left emphasizes *justice* as key to discipleship.

The right has also taken many names, most notably Fundamentalist, Evangelical, and Conservative. The origins of the right took a traditionalist posture to questions posed by the scientific method and theories. Revelation has a much stronger position, to the point where extreme versions of the right are considered anti-intellectual. Individual matters of faith, piety, and salvation are often center stage on the right, while they have argued for social order and continuity rather than social progress. The right emphasizes *righteousness* as central to discipleship.

Few of these are wrong, but simply matters of emphases on historically rooted elements within Christian faith... Reason/Revelation, Social/Individual, Inner/Outer, Justice/Righteousness. In fact, the last pair to our modern ears sounds like two opposing ideas when in fact they are English translations of the same words in the New Testament. Throughout Galatians, for example, where we read "Made Righteous" or "Justified" we can accurately switch the terms.

The religious landscape studies done by the Pew Forum and groups like the Barna Foundation often divide White Protestant Christianity into two categories— Mainline and Evangelical. Several years ago I was reading a summary of one of those studies and I wondered what denominations they included in those two categories. As I read through the methodology section, I was struck by the fact that Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed, and even Anabaptist groups were listed in BOTH categories. Looking more closely, the divide is precisely between what would have been called the Modernist/Fundamentalist line of the 1920's. Those denominations such as the ELCA, PCUSA, and American Baptists were those much more open to the Modern changes and what we might call Progressive theology today. Evangelical denominations were the Southern Baptist, Missouri Synod Lutheran, and PCA... all groups that were more in line with early 20th century fundamentalists and take more conservative positions today on gender, sexuality, and politics. In other words, Mainline and Evangelical as sociological

and theological categories are nearly synonymous with Progressive and Conservative Christianity.

The problem for us today is that Progressive/Conservative has come to be aligned with the partisan political process. As Drew Hart notes in his latest book *Who Will Be a Witness*, “it is hard to distinguish Christianity’s commitments from the political parties of our day.” Walk into a congregation and in a few minutes you can tell if it is aligned with democrats or republicans, or tries to take some sort of neutral middle group. (28). Or without finger pointing— too many people experience church as nothing more than what they already see in the wider, dominant culture.

That is, in part, because the Progressive and Conservatives Christian groups made significant strides in the post World War II years to align with particular political positions, and thus quickly became the religious feeder programs for the Democratic and Republican parties. Kevin Kruse, in his book *One Nation Under God*, as well as Kristen Du Mez in her book *Jesus and John Wayne* have shown how the Moral Majority movement had roots through the National Association of Evangelicals, and the parachurch publications that fueled the Fundamentalist movement.

What these authors note, often in passing, is that Mainline traditions through ecumenical organizations also took policy positions that reflected socially progressive movements. The Federal and National Council of Churches were key parts of the public policy debates about prayer and bible studies in public schools and the addition of the phrase ‘Under God’ to the pledge of allegiance. Kruse does note that these policy positions made by the NCC were divisive issues for the denominations that comprised the ecumenical organization as many of the upper-middle class, highly educated denominational leaders supported these initiatives while they made little sense to members in local congregation. Many pew sitters heard news stories about the NCC’s position and read that their denominations had signed these policy briefs, all the while wondering who got to make those decisions.

Phrases like Social Gospel, Protestant Liberalism, Ecumenism have all been lumped together under the category of Progressive Christianity. While Neo-Reformed, Evangelical theology, Nondenominational all tend to fall in the conservative category. However, when we strip away the historic and cultural signifiers of Progressive and Conservative, we can see that there are theological contributions to the questions of our day and age. This isn’t to say that all are correct, or even that some are better than others. Rather, these movements are just as contextual and culturally driven as Black and Native American theologies, Latin American or Brown church theologies. While the Progressive and Conservative binary defines American culture today, it is not as though the theologies that have emerged from the last 100 years of White Protestantism somehow rises above the contingencies of culture and every day life. In fact, I am saying that White Progressive/Conservative, Mainline/Evangelical theologies are defined by dominant White American culture.

I can’t tell you how many times I have heard about Progressive congregations who have tried to do a pulpit swap with an historically Black congregation. It usually goes well the first couple of times. Yet, when the novelty wears off, the theological differences start emerge. Often, the Black

church feels socially progressive enough... at least around questions of race or the criminal justice system. But they are also too conservative theologically about the inner life, the need for piety/holiness, or the role and nature of Scripture. If the congregations work together long enough, ideological differences about sexuality or gender become too much for the Progressive congregation to handle. I have heard Black ministers say that they have been ghosted by their white colleagues, and I have heard white leaders say that the Black congregation is too conservative or not open enough for them. Even in an attempt to do something counter-cultural— White progressives quickly fall into the partisan binary of Prog vs Conservative. And White conservatives find the social emphasis, particularly around racism, too Progressive.

This binary... as with most either/or structures... are as much about understanding and identity as they are about power. Though we know there is a complexity, even a spectrum, between the two options, we collapse too much into the either/or and make it hierarchical. The either/or implies that one of the two is ideal, and the other despised, that one is better than the other, and that one is in cultural position of power over the other.

Frankly, sisters and brothers, I am more and more convinced that the questions of Progressive and Conservative Christianity are part of the dominant culture of Whiteness. They are constructs based in European philosophical developments in the 17th and 18th century, and have morphed into partisan religious platforms for the electoral process. In other words, the Progressive/Conservative binary is a demonstration of how Colonialism has created a diseased imagination within the White church.

Much like the church in Galatia, there are efforts to impose one cultural and political form onto the US church. And like the Galatian Jesus movement, we need to be reminded by Paul that the real test of Christian discipleship is not the ideological framework laid over our commitment to Jesus, but the bearing out of Fruit of the Spirit.

When the first Hebrew followers of Jesus witnessed the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that presence of the Spirit became the testimony for all who would be welcomed into the Jesus community. When Peter went to the house of Cornelius he recounted how the Spirit was present and active. When the elders convened in Jerusalem, James spoke that it is good with the Spirit and with us, and when Paul wrote to the Galatians he made clear that the faith of Jesus resulted in the activity of the Spirit, the baptism in water, and the Love of neighbor.

Therein, sisters and brothers is our problem. We as White American Christians are not looking for the Fruit of the Spirit but look for signs and keywords that fit our cultural framework of Progressive/Conservative. We then lump people together according to those binary options, and treat them according to where we place ourselves in those same categories. We other the people not thinking like us, and rarely ask two essential questions:

- Are they producing the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control? Or are they sowing arrogance, anger, and jealousy?
- Do they exemplify the summary of the law, that of loving their neighbor as themselves, and work for the good of all?

In short, when people encounter us, do they see Jesus or do they see more of the power games, see culture warriors for Progressivism or Conservatism?

In my first pastorate I dropped the average age by about 20 or 30 years. So of course they had a lot of long standing traditions that I as a young adult had to take some time to learn. One I challenged and one I had to learn to love. And both centered on Love Feast.

At the end of love feast, the men often took their dishes to the kitchen and began putting away the tables and chairs. The women went into the kitchen to wash the dishes. After my first Love Feast the tables and chairs were done rather quickly, so I just went into the kitchen and picked up a towel and started drying the plates and forks.... To some gentle ribbing for sure. It was my way of showing I was part of the community while gently pushing back against some of the gendered and aged assumptions.

The other tradition was one that I quickly learned to love. On easter morning for breakfast the church didn't have the pancake breakfast I had grown up with. They brought out the left over sop— the beef, broth, and bread. When I first heard that I thought it sounded... well, not that appetizing. But they weren't finished. Along with the leftovers from love feast families brought each brought in pies— fruit pies, chocolate pies, cream pies, pecan pies. The table that had a serving bowl of beef and broth was soon overwhelmed with the beautiful and colorful circle of pies, many of them home made.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, there is a time to push back against old traditions and there is a time to embrace the people we know only a bit about, but know we share the faith of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that looks like picking up a towel side by side, and sometimes that means sitting down to enjoy a beautiful feast together.

Mennonite historian Alan Kreider put it this way in his book *The Patient Ferment*. The either/ors of Roman culture were just as hierarchical as they are today. He invited his reader to imagine a house church where a rich man, and a single poor woman prayed the Lords Prayer together—saying Give us this day our daily bread. Once the worship ended, the rich man took this sister in Christ to the market with him and purchased her bread for the week.

Imagine with me, then, what the world would see if they saw the people they assume to be conservative and progressive Christians caring for one another in ways that make no sense within a dominant culture that can only see things in frame of left and right.