
Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other

**An article from the Cathedral Times
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler**

Conservatives believe that values and traditions have been established and should be conserved. They believe so in the name of Jesus. And they are right. Jesus said "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them."

Liberals believe that life changes and grows; liberals believe that humanity should be free and liberated from what hinders us. They believe so in the name of Jesus. And they, too, are right. Jesus sets us free. Jesus liberates us.

Can both conservatives and liberals be right? Yes, if we focus on the hope and holiness of Jesus. Jesus is neither an entertainment that we can all use to our own devices and purposes, and nor is Jesus a weapon.

These were my own remarks two months ago, during my sermon for Christmas Eve. But they bear repeating, and expanding, as the Episcopal Church prepares for another politically-charged General Convention.

I am convinced that the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion, is graceful enough to contain liberals and conservatives. I know that many folks have grown tired of those labels. Furthermore, most of us are probably labeled "conservative" on some issues, while being labeled "liberal" on other issues. What do they mean anymore? Still, I am not sure any better set of terms has been suggested yet.

The historic Anglican tradition of Christianity has contained what we would call both liberals and conservatives. At the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD, church leaders were divided between the "conservatives" who favored local, Celtic traditions of Christianity, and the "liberals" who favored Roman traditions of Christianity (or would the terms be reversed?). The synod decided for Roman Christianity, but the church held together.

At the Protestant Reformation, the Anglican Church was divided between "conservatives" who wanted to retain Roman affiliation and the "liberals" who wanted to go fully Protestant; Protestant energy won the day in England. But the early Anglicans in the United States were most certainly conservative; many of them, especially the clergy, were "loyalists" to Great Britain. What emerged in the United States, as before in the Anglican tradition, was an Episcopal Church that was both conservative and liberal. It could contain the liturgy and customs of tradition while going forward with a new country and new politics.

When the Civil War divided the United States, a group of southern Episcopal Churches did try to secede, and they met in a special convention. But the other Episcopal Churches held on to them. Therefore, when the Civil War ended, the Episcopal Church was the first national church to be reconciled, and for a long time we were the only Protestant Church which was re-united (the present division between Northern Baptists and Southern Baptists, which still exists, traces its history back to the Civil War).

I believe that the historic Anglican tradition of Christianity has proven itself by its very ability to contain liberals and conservatives. At our best, we actually rejoice in each other! We need each other!

But we hurt God's Church if we use more intractable, or even vicious, language. I once heard someone say "I don't believe anyone can be a part of the _____ political party and still be a Christian." That is deadly theological language, and it's quite hard for folks even to respond to it.

I adamantly deny a division between "Christian" and "non-Christian" in most of the issues (certainly the sexuality issues) which we argue about in the Episcopal Church. I also refuse to see our arguments as the "orthodox" versus the "revisionists." Those of us who are orthodox are certainly open to revision from time to time. And those of us who revision are certainly trying to do so within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

I am proud to be part of this Anglican Tradition of Christianity. It's not easy, sometimes. But over time, we have learned that we need liberals and conservatives. In fact, I believe God needs both liberals and conservatives. God needs us to hold on to the best of the past, and to open ourselves to the best of the future. The grace of God is in both those places; and wherever grace is, is where I want to be.