



ISSN 1522- 5668

Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 26 (2024)

When Christians Do Not Like Other Christians Outgrouping Between Progressive and Conservative Protestants

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Abstract

Social identity theory indicates that social groups reveal values they accept and reject with their perceptions of outgroups. Previous research suggests that progressive Protestants reject conservative Christians due to political considerations while conservative Protestants' particularism leads them to reject progressive Christians. The general purpose of this study is to investigate the rationale of progressive and conservative Protestants to outgroup other Christians. Using qualitative analysis of open-ended questions from two data sets, a survey of Protestant college teachers (n = 181), and snowball convenience sampling of Protestants (n = 113) this study finds that conservative Protestants envision progressive Christians as another type of Christian while progressive Protestants question the moral character of conservative Christians. Conservative Christians do not apply a "black sheep" label to progressive Protestants, but progressive Protestants may possess identity subversion that substantiates the split between progressive and conservative Protestants. Conservative Protestants generally only rejected progressive Christians when seen as not faithful to Christianity.

Keywords: social identity, Black Sheep Effect, identity subversion, Conservative Protestants, Progressive Protestants

Introduction

Religion is an important source of social identity (Seul 1999; Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman 2010). The highly religious shape their answers to meaning, purpose, and social position through religious identity (McAdams and Albaugh 2008; Verkuyten 2007). Ideological polarization often drives conflict between social groups (Harel, Maoz and Halperin 2020; Krochik and Jost 2011; Woitzel and Koch 2023). Similarly, because answers are often mutually

exclusive between distinct theological frameworks, religious identity can facilitate intergroup religious conflict. A given religious group identifying another religious group as an outgroup can generate conflict due to contrasting interpretations of morality, meaning, and purpose. Outgroups are negative reference groups that illustrate the values individuals reject (Ledgerwood and Chaiken 2007; Van Dijk 2006).

Political and social values can lead to acceptance or rejection of those within similar religious identification. On the one hand, progressive Christians prioritize political values and participation more highly than conservative Christians (Driskell, Embry and Lyon 2008; Yancey and Quosigk 2021). Political disagreements can distance progressive Christians from their conservative peers if they are connected to contrasting answers to questions of meaning. On the other hand, conservative Christians are generally more particularistic than other religious groups (Williams 2011; Yancey, Shaler and Walz 2019) in that they are highly likely to believe that their spiritual path is the only correct spiritual path. This particularism may manifest itself in the relatively strong tendency of conservative Christians to reject non-Christians (Kalkan, Layman and Uslaner 2009; Merino 2010), sexual minorities (Laythe, Finkel and Kirkpatrick 2001; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006), and immigrants (Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt 2019; Wong 2019). If conservative Christians center their social identity upon an exclusivist view of reality, whereby they envision salvation as only possible through their religious beliefs, then this intolerance may extend to Christians with different theological beliefs and manifest in a particularistic cognitive approach, whereby conservative Christians envision their beliefs as the only correct beliefs.

Social identity formation is linked to the justification of outgroups. Individuals define themselves by identifying traits they reject, thus distinguishing themselves from their outgroup. The theory of “black sheep” effect suggests that such outgrouping can be even stronger between individuals who share a similar identity if there are perceptions that such individuals fail to live up to group norms. Even though they share the same religious identification, Christians may construct social identities envisioning other Christians as outgroup members (Wellman 2008; Yancey and Quosigk 2021). Even if Christians share a similar religious identity, disagreements on theological, social, and political issues may lead to such outgrouping. If Christians see other Christians as outgroup members, then understanding their justification for rejecting other Christians provides insight into the values certain Christians reject. Furthermore, how Christian groups define themselves in relation to other Christian groups informs us on how they differentiate themselves from other Christians and tells us which elements of their religious beliefs are essential in forming their social identity. Potential conflict between Christian groups may feed into the larger social polarization in the United States.

In the United States, intra-Christian conflict may be manifested among Protestants. Early in the twentieth century, a conflict emerged between modernist Protestants, who emphasize the social gospel, and fundamentalist Protestants, who emphasize otherworldly concerns (Bendroth 2017; Marsden 2006). While the conflict originated between distinct denominations, today it manifests itself in theological and social conflict within denominations more than between denominations (Hunter 1992; Wuthnow 1989). Arguments between theological progressives and conservatives over issues of LGBT clergy leading to denominational splits among the United Methodists (Burke 2020; Mulenga 2020) and the

Evangelical Lutheran Church (Dreier 2014) provide recent evidence of this conflict. There is value in researching Protestants given the history of modernist/fundamentalist conflict within American Protestantism and contemporary disputes between progressive and conservative Protestants. By focusing on a Christian subgroup rather than on the entire faith tradition, there is less theoretical social distance between members of Protestant groups. Findings of outgrouping between the members in this subgroup will be more salient since that outgrouping will occur despite lower levels of social distance.

Understanding how social identity differences within a Christian tradition can generate outgrouping between members of that tradition allows us to comprehend the multifaceted nature of American Christianity and disrupts the myth of the United States as a Christian nation run by a unified religious group. There may be a “black sheep” effect whereby Protestants are highly likely to reject other types of Protestants. The general purpose of this research is to investigate the rationale of progressive Protestants and conservative Protestants to outgroup other Christians. Do conservative Protestants reject progressive Protestants out of a belief that they have the only correct spiritual path? Furthermore, do progressive Protestants reject conservative Protestants because of political differences between the two groups? To accomplish this goal, I use two samples (college teachers and a snowball sample) to quantitatively assess the degree of favorability each group has towards other Protestants, as well as open-ended questions to qualitatively assess the rationale for their favorability or lack thereof.

Religious Intergroup Conflict

Tajfel et al. (1971) define social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him or his group membership.” Social identity is built by categorization. We assign others to distinct social groups and develop stereotypes that shape our interactions with them (Tajfel and Turner 2004). Outgroup members are stereotyped to possess extreme differences, while ingroup members are perceived as similar (Bano and Mishra 2014; Hogg, Terry and White 1995). Conflict against outgroups enables a group to define itself by establishing social boundaries (Ting-Toomey 2005; Voci 2006). Outgroups also provide examples of perceived dysfunctional behaviors and values to the ingroup. Group members select outgroups that are associated with a given social identity (Ledgerwood and Chaiken 2007; Zou, Morris and Benet-Martínez 2008), allowing them to define who they are not.

Religious individuals may see those of other religions as proponents of competing systems of meaning. Individuals from distinct religions have an incentive to envision each other as outgroups. If different religious groups share similar ideals about morality, meaning, and purpose, then those groups may be allies. Christian identity may provide enough similarity between subgroups to be a natural way to gain allies as scholars have discussed notions of a Christian nation (Chang 2011; Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013) or Christian ethics (Gill 2012; Hauerwas and Wells 2011). Nevertheless, religious outgroups can originate within the same religious identity, as seen in persistent intrareligious Christian conflict. In the twentieth century, the source of this conflict became less focused on denominational differences and more on distinct theological interpretations (Longfield 2000; Noll 1992). This religious conflict does not neglect intrareligious conflicts based on racial identity (Gutiérrez 1988; McGovern

2009) and gender roles (Ruether 1993; Sanders 1995), which can work in conjunction with theological struggles to help define Christian groups.

The “Black Sheep” Effect and Identity Subversion

Christians may reject other Christians due to what has been called the “black sheep” effect (Lewis and Sherman 2010; Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988; Pinto et al. 2010). Generally, outgroup members are accepted less than ingroup members. However, the black sheep effect indicates that individuals form extreme judgments towards likable and unlikeable ingroup members. Those judgments are so extreme that negative feelings toward unliked ingroup members are more intense than unliked outgroup members. Likeability is not conceptualized as a personal characteristic but rather as a failure to live up to group norms (Pinto et al. 2010). The black sheep effect helps maintain the group’s distinctiveness (Lewis and Sherman 2010) by triggering the willingness of individuals to reject deviant ingroup members. The black sheep effect functions to provide judgmental cues that reinforce a group’s social identity (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988). Christians exhibit harsher judgments against Christians engaging in deviant behaviors (Altholz and Salerno 2016; Cramwinckel et al. 2016) but, there is no work exploring whether Christians exhibit a black sheep effect against theologically different Christians or if a Christian black sheep effect is limited to deviant behaviors.

Pressures from the black sheep effect can lead to schisms due to identity subversion, which occurs when a group within a larger group believes that the actions of the larger group deny essential elements of a subgroup’s identity (Sani 2005). Schisms develop as the subgroup recognizes a threat to a central element of their group’s identity. Given the historical division within American Protestantism, a schism can naturally arise between the two Protestant factions if there are fundamental attacks on social identities. Neither group has rejected the Christian label, but progressive and conservative Protestants may still find ways to distance themselves from Christian outgroups. This distancing is seen in primary literature as progressive Protestants condemning conservative Christians as judgmental and accepting a literal definition of the Bible (Kania 2010; McLaren 2005), while conservative Protestants condemn progressive Christians as following false Christianity (Childers 2020; Jensen 2017).

Theories of black sheep effects and identity subversion suggest that intragroup animosity between Protestants may be activated when elements threaten their core social identity. Rejection of other Christians by Protestants can inform researchers about which values in a Protestant subgroup are core and which are peripheral. In a possible black sheep effect, rejection towards other Christian groups may be more intense because groups share a similar religious identity. Comparison of religious subgroups sharing a similar overarching religious identity can aid in identifying the core values of those subgroups beyond mere religious identification.

The Modernist/Fundamentalist Divide

Within Protestantism, religious conflict historically manifested into a modernist and fundamentalist divide (Moberg 2007; Wuthnow 1989), which is better understood today as a split between progressive and conservative Protestants. Modernists emphasized the “social gospel.” Washington Gladden (1877), perhaps the founder of the social gospel, argues that it was important for Christians to play significant roles in reforming dysfunctional social

institutions. Social reform motivated by the values of the social gospel became a defining feature of modernist Protestants. Modernists sought to integrate secular intellectual resources into their theological outlook and so, while maintaining a religious justification for their activism, their movements became shaped more by secular justification than religious justification (Chase-Dunn and Gills 2005; Friesen 2015).

However, fundamentalists feared an overreliance upon secular influences. Thus, they tied their religion to a series of writings between 1910 and 1915 known as *The Fundamentals*. These writings developed in reaction to the emergence of liberal forms of Christianity. One of the issues in liberal Christianity was the teaching of higher criticism of the Bible (Hawley 1999; Shatzer 2013). Fundamentalist Protestants became very defensive of the Bible, coming to see it, along with other traditional religious sources, as representing knowledge on how to live one's life. Some conservative Protestants (e.g. Eissler 2015; LeMay 2016) argue that morality determined by individuals' desires is unreliable since humans are vulnerable to subjectivity. Fundamentalists encouraged each other to avoid worldly pursuits (Noll 1995) and refused to concern themselves with political reform. Those fundamentalists did not oppose the political agenda of modernist Christians as much as they saw attention to working for social change as a misplaced priority.

Initially, much of the division between fundamentalists and modernists played out between different Protestant denominations. However, denominational identity becomes less important over time than theological disagreements (Hunter 1992; Wuthnow 1989). Wuthnow (1989) argued that cultural similarity between individuals in various denominations lessened the differences in the social groups within denominations and lowered boundaries between denominations. Theological disagreements threaten to split into progressive and conservative wings of former denominations (Burke 2020; Ostling 1999). Accordingly, academics have focused less on denominational disputes but instead assess how distinct theological orientations produce distinct social organizations (Delehanty 2018; Fulton and Wood 2017) and social values (Wellman 2008; Yancey and Quosigk 2021). However, terminology has changed, and in contemporary America, the division of fundamentalist/modernist Protestantism is better defined as conflict between progressive and conservative Protestants.

Progressive and Conservative Protestants

Contemporary conservative Protestants are similar to fundamentalist Christians in most respects. However, they differ in one critical way from their theological ancestors: they have become more politically active. In the 1970s, organizations such as the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family mixed Christian faith and conservative politics. With claims of motivation to protect unborn life and the sanctity of the family, conservative Christians linked their political activism to their religious beliefs (Lewis 2017; Lienesch 2014). They conceived political liberalism as connected to the theological liberalism they rejected (Kidd and Hankins 2015; Young 2016). While there is evidence that the commitment of conservative Christians is not as strong as the commitment of progressive Christians to political goals (Yancey and Quosigk 2021), conservative Christians have created a stronger political presence since the original writing of *The Fundamentals*. This increased political presence may increase their tendency to outgroup Christians who do not support the same political ideals. Determining the importance of conservative Protestants' potential political disagreements with progressive

Christians provides insight into how central political beliefs are to their social and religious identity.

The disagreements progressive Protestants have with conservative Christians do not end with political disagreement. Progressive Protestants have been critical of conservative Christians' judgmentalism and intergroup bigotry (McLaren 2005; Spong 1992) as well as their reliance on a literal definition of the Bible (Kania 2010; Spong 1992). A significant way in which progressive Protestants may develop their social identity is by rejecting these perceived dysfunctions. These areas of disagreement suggest that progressive Protestants question the moral character of their religious outgroups. Progressive Christians' rational, tolerant, and humanist approach to their faith has been favorably compared to a humanist epistemological understanding (Metzger 2013). Theologically progressive Protestants may have more affinity towards the moral sensibilities in humanist groups than towards conservative Christians.

Previous research documents the relative intolerance of conservative Christians towards non-Christians (Denker 2019; Merino 2010), perhaps tied to exclusive salvation beliefs (Sherkat and Ellison 1997; Tomek 2017). Conservative Christians may practice global intolerance, as previous research indicates that conservative Christians are comparatively intolerant of sexual minorities (Coley 2018; Todd and Ong 2012) and immigrants (Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt 2019; Wong 2019). Conservative Protestants are also more intolerant of alternate beliefs than Catholics (Brown and Brown 2011; Merino 2010). The particularistic values of conservative Christians may lead them, more than other religious groups, to a stronger tendency to reject other social groups in a variety of dimensions. The nature of the theological particularism of conservative Protestants towards other Christians is unclear. They may be relatively unlikely to accept non-Christians but accept other Christians, regardless of their theological disagreements. However, progressive Christians may threaten the theological framework of conservative Protestants, who perceive them as heretics watering down the Christian message.

The historical implications of contrasting an activist social gospel modernist Protestant perspective against an otherworldly focused fundamentalist Protestant perspective have ramifications for the political dynamics of Protestants today. On the one hand, how progressive Christians describe conservative Christians as bigoted, intolerant, and non-inclusive (Lichterman and Williams 2017; Wellman 2008) is similar to how cultural progressives perceive conservative Christians (Yancey and Williamson 2012). Many political and social goals of progressive Protestants focus on a larger, active public sector that addresses issues of diversity, inequality, and inclusiveness (Braunstein, Fuist, and Williams 2017; Sager 2017), similar to stated political and social goals of political progressives (Forster and Rehner 2013; Poppendieck 2012). On the other hand, conservative Christians, especially Protestants, have become more politically active, tied to concerns about abortion and in an attempt to project traditional sexual morality (Marsden 2006; McKeegan 1993). Such issues are related to their particularistic interpretation of the Bible and the belief that the Bible is inerrant. The activism adopted by political conservatives leads them to be political adversaries of progressive Protestants. Modern conservative Protestants may reject progressive Christians more for specific political disagreements than for contrasting priorities on how politically active a Christian should be.

While there is research on the historical and contemporary separation of progressive and conservative Christians (Marsden 2006; Wellman 2008; Wuthnow 1989), there is a lack of solid qualitative investigation of this separation. Understanding the rationale of progressive and conservative Protestants to outgroup other Christians can inform us whether concepts such as black sheep effects and identity subversion are applicable between Protestant groups. Given the previous history of fundamentalist/modernist Protestants, it is reasonable to hypothesize that contemporary progressive Protestants are likely to reject conservative Protestants for their failure to support social justice oriented political goals. It is also reasonable to hypothesize that the theological rigidity of conservative Protestants produces a particularism that leads them to reject others who do not agree with them on theological issues, including progressive Protestants.

In addition to these research questions, this empirical endeavor will shed light on the degree of unity or disunity between Protestants, in particular, and Christians in general. Such inquiries also provide knowledge about how progressive and conservative Protestants use outgroups to shape their social identities. To answer these questions, I asked members of each group about their attitudes toward potential Christian outgroups and how they justify those attitudes. This research included two distinct samples. The first is a sample of college teachers used in my previous research examining attitudes towards Protestants among academics (Yancey, Reimer, and O'Connell 2015). During that study, I first noted certain tendencies of progressive Protestants to reject conservative Protestants more strongly, as well as their propensity to do so for political rationale. However, given that this is a specialized population, I endeavored to use a snowball sample to collect data for the second sample to find out if the trends discovered among the college teachers could be replicated.

For the sake of reflectivity, I come into this research identifying as a Protestant. Theologically, I am a conservative Protestant. However, I am often in political agreement with progressive Protestants, which provides tools to understand their perspectives better. My experiences with both conservative and progressive Protestants have produced a bias that there is a difference in the motivation for each Protestant group to reject other Christians. Using interrater reliability measures to establish conceptually solid codes to compare Protestant groups helps control that bias.

Study 1: Examination of College Teacher Protestants

Participants

Respondents for the first study are college teachers, examined in a previous research study (Yancey, Reimer, and O'Connell 2015). In 2012, after IRB approval (application 12-023), an online survey was sent to 4,500 teachers at colleges and universities. MKTG Services of Wilmington, Massachusetts, a marketing company specializing in lists of different occupations and used in other research exploring college teachers (e.g. Tobin and Weinberg 2007), compiled the list. All listed individuals were sent a link to an online survey and two follow-up reminder emails. A paper survey and two postcard reminders were sent if the respondent's email address was not found. One hundred ninety-nine individuals could not be located by email or mailing. While 598 college teachers started the survey, there were 464 completed surveys gathered for an adjusted response rate of 10.79%. Individuals identified their particular

religious traditions. Ultimately, 76 conservative Protestants and 105 mainline Protestant college teachers responded to the survey.

Demographics of the sample were compared to a previous study of college teachers conducted by Tobin and Weinberg (2007) that utilized similar variables. The same rankings order in Tobin and Weinberg's study was found in this current sample. Respondents in both samples ranked evangelicals lower than Mormons, who were lower than atheists. The religious composition of this current sample is similar to Tobin and Weinberg's, with comparable percentages of Evangelicals (13% v. 11%), Mainline or non-Evangelical Protestants (22% v. 25%), Catholics (12% v. 18%), and Jews (5% v. 5%). There are also similarities in sex (56% male v. 57% male) and race (90% white v. 85% white). Differing measures assessing age and marital status made comparisons in these categories untenable. The only notable difference is this sample's higher percentage of respondents with a doctorate (81% v. 41%), indicating that my sample has a lower percentage of community colleges and four-year college instructors. Without access to Tobin and Weinberg's data, chi-squares cannot be calculated.

The final sample was compared to the MKTG Services list on selected variables. That sample does not significantly differ from the original list by percent male (56.3 v. 56.0: $\chi^2 = .0031$; $p = .9015$), percent living in the West (21.2 v. 24.9: $\chi^2 = 1.9078$; $p = .1672$), percent living in the North Central (23.1 v. 19.5: $\chi^2 = 2.2617$; $p = .1326$), and percentage living in the South (51.0 v. 45.9: $\chi^2 = 1.5547$; $p = .2124$), but does significantly differ in being less likely to live in the Northeast (4.8 v. 9.7: $\chi^2 = 10.6135$; $p = .00112$). There is a significant difference in percent married between our sample and the list (66.8 v. 52.6: $\chi^2 = 11.3573$; $p < .00075$), but there is no significant relationship between being married and ratings of the Protestant groups. While the response rate is low, there is little evidence of significant nonresponse bias. This research is qualitative, and one should not automatically generalize the results, but the degree of representation is higher than one would normally expect in qualitative research. Demographic characteristics of the conservative and mainline Protestants in this sample are in Table 1.

Measures

This research is a mixed-methods design containing strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Respondents were asked to rate ten religion groups on a thermometer scale of 0 to 100 according to whether they feel favorable or warm towards the group or if they feel cold toward the group. Three of the groups asked about were Fundamentalist Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, and Mainline Protestants. Then the respondents were asked in an open-ended question why they provided the ranking they gave them. They were then asked three open ended questions about how they would define Fundamentalist Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, and Mainline Protestantism. Finally, they filled out three more open-ended questions asking for the main difference between Fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestantism, Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism, and Fundamentalist and Mainline Protestantism.

Table 1. Demographic and Social Characteristics of Conservative Protestant and Mainline Protestant Academics

	Conservative Protestants (n = 76)	Mainline Protestants (n = 106)
Age (on 1-7 scale)	4.27 (74)	4.476 (105)
Percent Female	44.4% (32)	47.2% (50)
Percent White	91.7% (66)	88.6% (93)
Percent Married	76.7% (56)	67.0% (71)
Percent working at Ph. D program	54.1% (40)	56.2% (59)
Mean Years at Job	15.432 (74)	16.647 (102)
Percent working at Religious School	35.9% (23)	18.5% (17)

Note: Percentages do not always conform to total N due to missing data.

Procedures

Open-ended questions provide a relatively high number of respondents in a short period but do not allow for the in-depth follow-ups typically done with qualitative interviews. While there is a sacrifice in the depth of information collected from each respondent, the relatively high number of respondents better detect social patterns. The information from 181 Protestants is more than can be interviewed within a reasonable timeframe. Responses were coded and entered into MicroCase 5.0, a statistical program, to assess frequencies of codes and comparisons between progressive and conservative Protestants. Mean time to complete the survey for Protestants was 20 minutes and 18 seconds. Data is available upon request from the author.

I conducted thematic analysis on why progressive and conservative Protestants may have antipathy for other Christians, allowing for a nuanced assessment of differences between conservative and progressive Protestants. Rather than predetermined thematic codes, an open coding approach created coding themes as they emerged. For a comment to receive multiple codes, it needed multiple phrases or terms to justify them, as multiple codes were not applied to a single term. The author and a trained graduate student coded the first one hundred respondents to calculate interrater reliability scores. The answers were coded according to how they described those in their Protestant outgroup. Discrepancies were checked for miscoded responses. If there were no clear miscodes, the author assessed which coding was more accurate. The scores ranged from 87 to 100, with an average of 97.82 (SD = 2.32). When representative comments are quoted, they are quoted precisely as written, except for minor placement or removal of commas for clarity.

Results

Table 2 contains the thermometer ratings respondents provided for conservative and mainline Protestants. Conservative Protestant college teachers, those who self-identify as

evangelicals or fundamentalists, rated mainline Protestants with a mean of 76.592 (SD = 18.723) on a scale of 0 to 100. College teachers who self-identify as mainline Protestants ranked fundamentalists with a mean of 50.143 (SD = 25.237) and evangelicals with a mean of 55.619 (SD = 24.953). Mainline Protestant college teachers rate evangelicals lower than all other groups except fundamentalists and atheists, but evangelicals are not rated significantly higher than atheists. However, conservative Protestants rated mainline Protestants higher than all other groups except for evangelicals, and evangelicals are not rated significantly higher than mainline Protestants. Furthermore, conservative Protestants do not rate mainline Protestants significantly lower than where mainline Protestants rank themselves. Regression models (available from the author upon request) explore potential mediating factors. Identification as a conservative Protestant predicts a higher rating of both fundamentalists and evangelicals even after applications of controls but does not predict the rating of mainline Protestants. Since conservative-mainline Protestant religious identity is only important in predicting attitudes towards conservative Protestants, the antipathy of mainline Protestants towards conservative Christians is the most potent factor explaining attitudes of Protestants towards other Protestants in this sample.

Table 2. Comparisons of Means of Thermometer Ratings of Selected Religious Groups by Conservative Protestant and Mainline Protestant Academics

	Conservative Protestants (n = 76)	Mainline Protestants (n = 106)
Hindus	53.237*	61.705
Atheists	34.053***	54.019
Catholics	71.605	73.476
Jews	70.803	71.429
Fundamentalists	71.263***	50.143
Evangelicals	81.395***	55.619
Mainline Protestants	76.592	78.19
Muslims	45.507**	59.657
Mormons	52.579	57.629
Agnostics	45.507**	57.19

* - Conservative Protestants Differ from Mainline Protestants at $p < .05$

** - Conservative Protestants Differ from Mainline Protestants at $p < .01$

*** - Conservative Protestants Differ from Mainline Protestants at $p < .001$

Conservative Protestants tend to envision mainline Protestants as average or not very religious. As said by a conservative Protestant college teacher: “Mainline Protestantism includes anyone who has some form of belief that is tied to the bible but they often ‘go with

the flow' of societal changes, even if they fluctuate from biblical teaching" (Female, Psychology, age 46–55). Another conservative Protestant described mainline Protestants as "non-Catholic believers in the Christian faith who only practice their faith a few times a year" (Female, Biology, age 36–45). Almost half (34 of 76 or 44.7%) of the conservative Protestants envision mainline Protestants as just another type of Christian exhibiting only minor, if any, criticism.

Generally, when conservative Protestants criticized mainline Protestants, they were not seen as being as faithful and strong in the Christian faith. Some conservative Protestant college teachers asserted in comparison of conservative Protestants to mainline Protestants:

Evangelicals generally believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible and of heaven. Mainline Protestants do not necessarily believe biblical narratives and are more likely to be focused on social issues as the purpose for their church participation. (Male, Education, age 56–65)

Mostly lip service to their religion. Comfortable and lethargic in their faith. Evangelicals tend to take their faith more seriously. Mainline members are more "cultural" Christians. (Male, Information Systems, age 46–55)

Some conservative Christians see mainline Protestants as weak Christians. To varying degrees, they are still in the Christian fold but may not be reliable Christians.

They are more "passive" on parts of scripture that feel uncomfortable, so they don't press their congregates to adhere to those principles. [Mainline Protestants] have picked and chosen to eliminate certain precepts from their basic doctrine and, as a result, have a rather watered-down Christianity. (Male, Theater, age 56–65)

Positive relationships with persons in this category but questions about their theological and cultural stands. Scripture and theology is often engaged more "liberally" than the previous two. Social justice is given high standing with reduced orthodoxy related to Scripture and theology. (Male, Psychology, age 46–55)

Even while they envisioned mainline Christians as weaker Christians, they still were generally seen as valid Christians by conservative Protestants. There are relatively few moral judgments against mainline Protestants, and instead, there was a concern about the theological priorities of mainline Protestants. This type of approach resembles the concerns of historical fundamentalists about the social justice priorities of modernists. While conservative Protestants may possess a powerful sense of particularism, those in this sample appear to exhibit relative acceptance of mainline Protestants as fellow, albeit weaker, Christians. The central theme from the attitudes of conservative Protestant college teachers is that mainline Protestants practiced a less powerful version of their Christianity. However, there is little evidence of rejecting mainline Protestants as evil or out of the Christian faith tradition.

However, mainline Protestants did not envision conservative Protestants as merely theologically different. They argued that conservative Protestants lacked moral character. Many indicated great concern about proselytizing and intolerance. Over half of the mainline

Protestants (52.8%) included proselytizing by evangelicals as a feature in their definition of that group. This attitude is captured in comments such as:

Evangelicals, again, intrusively try to lead others to salvation. Mainline Protestants have been taught similar beliefs of “Bible only,” but they are more flexible—more realistic. They are not so assiduous in church attendance or hardline adherence to “Bible only” (Female, English, age 56–65).

Most often interested in winning you over to their way of practicing religion than in your own beliefs (Male, Kinesiology, age 66–75)

Furthermore, when ranking fundamentalists, about a third (32.1%) of the mainline Protestants discussed intolerance as a reason for their ranking of fundamentalists. As one mainline Protestant college teacher (Male, Economics, age 26–35) remarked: “Very conservative views and stubborn. Sticks to literal interpretation of the Bible and insists everyone else do the same.” Conceptually intolerance and proselytization are related since one who proselytizes likely does so out of confidence to have the only correct answer. For related reasons, mainline Protestants distance themselves from both fundamentalists and evangelicals. For mainline Protestants, conservative Protestants rudely intrude into the world of others with either proselytizing or intolerance. Distaste for proselytizing and intolerance led to a desire to distance themselves from conservative Christians as mainline Protestants saw them as not accurately representing their faith.

Many of their beliefs are also cruel—anti-gay, etc. Jesus would never have taught this . . . anti-Christian in their beliefs. (Male, Psychology, age 66–75)

I believe that their judgmental behavior does not reflect the teachings of Jesus Christ. Mainline Protestantism believes that Christianity is a personal choice and does not try to force others to believe the same way. (Female, Music, age 56–65)

Unlike conservative Protestants, themes emerging from the answers of mainline Protestants do not focus on the weaker form of faith of their Protestant outgroup but rather perceived moral failings of conservative Protestants. Mainline Protestants feel more freedom to complain about the character of conservative Protestants. Mainline Protestants promoted a notion of being qualitatively different from conservative Protestants rather than merely differing in degree. This level of critique indicates that an essential part of their social identity can be reflected in their condemnation of the intolerance and proselytizing they envisioned exhibited by conservative Protestants.

The data allow for the assessment of college teachers within both Protestant groups. Results indicate that mainline Protestants are more likely to reject conservative Protestants, perceiving them as morally inferior, than conservative Protestants are to reject mainline Protestants. Conservative Protestants do critique mainline Protestants as being weaker Christians than themselves, but they still discuss them as part of their ingroup. Nevertheless, these results come from an opportunistic collection of data limited to only college teachers. It is valuable to locate a different sample to investigate whether these results are tied to a unique academic subculture. Thus, a second study was conducted utilizing deliberate Facebook and

personal contact-initiated snowball sample to explore whether similar findings of progressive and conservative Protestants can be documented outside of college teachers.

Study 2: Examination of Protestants in Snowball Sample

Participants

In 2019, after receiving IRB approval (application 19-125), clergy from several local conservative and progressive Protestant churches agreed to send the survey link, with a mixture of open and closed-ended questions, to church members. The strategy was to collect as many respondents as possible. The author joined conservative and progressive Christian Facebook groups and placed a link to the survey in those groups. The data allowed expanding the sample beyond friends and acquaintances. Due to contacts with local pastors and the fact that the author lives in a college town, an educational and regional bias is expected. To enhance the willingness of the respondents to fill out the survey, all who completed the survey were entered into a drawing for one of six Amazon cards, each worth \$150. The drawing was set up to protect respondents' identity unless contacted to let them know they won.

A question distinguishing Protestant Christians from Catholics and other non-Protestant Christians limits the sample to Protestants. The survey included a question about whether the Bible was the actual word of God, inspired by God but not to be taken literally, or is fables, history, and moral precepts recorded by humans. Respondents were asked if they believe that salvation only comes through Christ, allowing for a measurement of Christian particularism. The final sample consists of 113 Protestant respondents with seventy-five, or 44.4 percent, having a literal definition of the Bible and thirty-eight, or 22.5 percent, of the Protestant sample who reject the idea of Christ as the only way to salvation. All seventy-five individuals with a literal definition of the Bible believed that Christ is the only path toward salvation. None of the respondents rejecting the idea of Christ being the only path to salvation envision the Bible as literal. These findings confirm two groups with theologically conservative (those who state the Bible as the literal word of God) and progressive (those who do not see Jesus as the only way to salvation) theological orientations. This sample had no one who did not accept the Bible as the literal word of God but did accept Christ as the only way to salvation. Those ($n = 56$) who do not see the Bible as literal but see Christ as the only path to God were not included in the final analysis. Such respondents can be conceptualized as being in the middle of progressive and conservative Protestants, perhaps having qualities of both groups. Their inclusion can make it harder to clarify distinctions between progressive and conservative Protestants.

Measures

The survey asked the respondents to rank four groups: conservative Christians, liberal Christians, atheists, and Muslims, in order of which one they felt most warmly. Respondents were then asked four open-ended questions about why they ranked each group first, second, third, and fourth. Each of those open-ended questions was followed up with two more open-ended questions. The first question asked what are the characteristics of the group that the respondent liked. The second question asked what are the characteristics of the group that the respondents don't like. These twelve open-ended questions provided qualitative information.

Procedure

The terms conservative or liberal Christians were not defined for the respondents to avoid priming. Unlike the first study, respondents are asked about liberal and conservative Christians, instead of about mainline and conservative Protestants, since some of them may not know how to define a mainline Protestant. In the sample of college teachers, on the open-ended questions distinguishing between mainline Protestants with fundamentalist (4.8%) and evangelical Protestants (4.5%) less than five percent of the sample indicated that they did not know the groups well enough to make such a distinction. Given that popular media is relatively uninclined to use the term mainline to describe denominations (Jenkins 2021), it seems unlikely that non-academics would have the same strong ability to distinguish between mainline and conservative Protestants as college teachers do. It is reasonable that this research endeavor captures similar attitudes towards Christian outgroups for this sample of Protestants. Mean time to complete the survey for Protestants was 17 minutes and 38 seconds. Again, MicroCase 5.0 was used to investigate systematic patterns in the coding of the data. The same thematic open-ended coding strategy discovered themes as they emerged instead of using predetermined codes. A graduate student coded the first one hundred respondents to conduct an interrater reliability test. Only codes with at least eighty-five percent agreement with the assistant were included. After removing codes that did not reach this level of agreement, scores ranged from 85 to 100 with an average of 94.83 (SD = 4.01). The data is available upon request from the author.

Because some of the author's acquaintances are in the sample, identifying or personally sensitive demographic questions were not asked. Questions about race, income, region of the country, or marital status were not asked, but the survey did inquire about age, political orientation, and education. Progressive Protestants are substantially older (5.526 v. 3.547 on an 8-point scale with higher numbers indicating an older age), more female (71.1% v. 52.0%), and more politically progressive (1.921 v. 5.053 on a 7-point scale with higher numbers indicating more political conservatism) than conservative Protestants. Data from the 2011 Faith Matters survey indicates that Christians who see Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation are significantly older ($r = -.085$; $p < .01$), and more politically progressive ($r = -.182$; $p < .01$) than other Christians, but the sex difference is not significant ($r = .017$; ns). While progressive Protestants were significantly more educated than conservative Protestants (5.789 v. 5.24; $p = .035$; on a 1–7-point scale), both groups scored above 5, indicating a mean of the respondents having some graduate school. The sample is highly educated, and it is important to be aware of this potential skew to the data. Demographic characteristics of the progressive and conservative Protestants and their mean ranking of progressive and conservative Christians can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic and Social Characteristics and Reverse Coded Means of Ratings of Conservative Christians and Liberal Christians by Conservative Protestants and Progressive Protestants

	Conservative Protestants (n = 75)	Progressive Protestants (n = 38)
Age (on 1-8 scale)	3.547	5.526
Percent Female	52% (39)	71.1% (27)
Political Progressiveness (on 1-7 scale with higher numbers more politically progressive.)	1.921 (49)	5.053 (2)
Percent graduate school degree	53.3% (40)	78.9% (30)
Rank average of Conservative Christians	3.6	1.526
Rank average of Liberal Christians	2.587	3.895

Results

The rankings are reverse coded so that higher numbers equal a higher ranking. The mean conservative Protestant ranking of liberal Christians is 2.587. The mean progressive Protestant ranking of conservative Christians is 1.579. Moreover, twenty-five (or 65.8%) of the thirty-eight progressive respondents evaluate conservative Christians as the worst group. Only nineteen (or 25.3%) of the seventy-five conservative respondents rank liberal Christians last. Almost as many conservative Protestants (fifteen or 20.0%) rank liberal Christians first as those who rank them last. About a quarter of conservative Protestants (22.7%) stated that progressive Christians were good Christians at some point in the open-ended questions—only 5.3% of the progressive Protestants stated that conservative Christians were good Christians. Conservative Protestants show a higher willingness to accept their Protestant outgroup than progressive Protestants.

Protestants who envision the Bible as the word of God are more likely to comment on at least one of the open-ended questions of having some degree of agreement with conservative Christians than Protestants who do not see Christ as the exclusive path to salvation (41.3% v 2.6%). Protestants who reject the exclusivity of Christianity are more likely to comment on agreeing with liberal Christians than those who believe the Bible is the word of God (31.6 % v. 10.7%). Members of these groups envision themselves as progressive or conservative Protestants under this study’s operationalizations.

Once again, the theme of Conservative Protestants’ willingness to see progressive Christians as just another type of Christian emerges. About a quarter (22.7%) of the conservative Christians characterized liberal Christians as good Christians. This tendency is seen in these statements by conservative Protestants:

Liberal Christians are still my brothers & sisters in Christ. Generally, Liberal Christians want to pursue Jesus and show love to others. (Female, age 40–49)

Still many shared commitments, including religious commitments. Make some efforts to follow Christ. (Male, age 40–49)

While many other conservative Protestants disagreed with liberal Christians, there still is a sense that they belong to the larger Christian ingroup. When they did criticize liberal Christians, it was due to their perception that they have made theological mistakes and are relatively weak in supporting the Christian faith. Two-thirds (66.7%) of the conservative Protestants criticized the theological stances of liberal Christians. For example, some respondents stated:

They tend to lead people from the truth. Interpret scripture for their own benefit. (Male, age 50–59).

Many liberal Christians that I know have taken what suits their lives out of the Bible and tossed the rest. They live to be accepted by the mainstream and work hard to be politically correct. They seem to be pleasers of men rather than pleasers of God. They want to hear only what suits their “gospel” which is really no gospel at all. (Female, age 50–59).

Disagreements with liberal Christians centered on liberal Christians corrupting the theological understandings of conservative Protestants. Generally, this disagreement was seen as a weakness of liberal Christians to uphold these theological principles, often due to temptations to find more comfortable theological ideals. Other than a failure to resist that temptation, there is little criticism of the character of liberal Christians but rather a focus on theological disagreements. Thus, while they disagreed with liberal Christians, the particularism of conservative Protestants does not tend to exclude liberal Christians, as seen in the relatively high rankings of liberal Christians by conservative Protestants. They were still seen as Christians but weak Christians. If criticism of progressive Christians conceptualizes them as weaker Christians, then there is little difference in the attitudes of conservative Protestants in both studies.

Thematically there is also a great deal of similarity between the answers of progressive Protestants in this sample and mainline Protestants in the college teacher sample. When progressive Christians in the snowball sample criticized conservative Christians, they commonly questioned the morality and character of those Christians. The questioning of the morality of conservative Christians occurred with substantial percentages of progressive Protestants envisioning conservative Christians as intolerant (28.9%), judgmental (28.9%), imposing their values on others (10.5%), and hateful (13.2%). Some indications of this attitude are:

They profane the name of God by using it as an excuse to hurt immigrants, which Christ was, queer people, of whom Christ never spoke, and the poor, which Christ was. They spread their messages of hate across the globe, and the devil sings their praises for it. (Male, age 18–29).

Where do I start? Fundamental Christians give the rest of us a bad name. They dishonor the teachings of Jesus. They worship hate and exclusion. They shame and demean folks who read the Bible differently from them. They won't bake cakes for nice people. They harm their kids with their rigid ideas. They tell people they are going to hell. They use scripture as a weapon. But you know... other than that... (Female, age 60–69)

Progressive Protestants' critiques speak directly to the character and morality of conservative Christians. Progressive Protestants criticized conservative Protestants on moral values, which other research (Wellman 2008; Yancey and Quosigk 2021) indicates as essential to them, such as tolerance and inclusiveness.

This type of critique is much more fundamental than the criticism offered by conservative Protestants towards liberal Christians. Progressive Protestants did not merely envision conservative Christians as weaker Christians but as possessors of a qualitatively different and defective faith.

They claim to worship Jesus, but their actions are often the opposite of Jesus's teachings regarding health care, poverty, immigration, etc. (Male, age 60–69)

They use their faith as a weapon. Belief that God punishes people with whom they disagree. AIDS was punishment for being gay. Shootings have been God punishing "loose morals." (Female, age 60–69)

As true as in the first study, conservative Protestants often envisioned liberal Christians as fellow, albeit weaker, Christians. This type of acceptance was less forthcoming for progressive Protestants in their rating scores and qualitative comments about conservative Christians. Conservative Christians are seen as not upholding the moral order supported by progressive Protestants.

Violators of values held in a religious context can be envisioned as moral violations. Conservative Protestants perceive liberal Christians as weaker but still part of their ingroup. Progressive Protestants do not merely conceptualize a weaker version of their faith or merely theologically incorrect but perceive conservative Christians as qualitatively different and morally inferior. Conservative Protestants are more likely to see non-Christians as the violators of their values than Christians with different theological beliefs. Despite academic attention to conservative Protestants' political activism (Laats 2018; Stokes and Schewe 2016; Stokes, Chicotsky, and Billings 2018), these findings did not pick up a strong tendency of conservative Protestants to use political boundaries to define their separation from progressive Christians.

Discussion

Progressive Protestants are more aggressive in rejecting conservative Christians than conservative Protestants rejecting progressive Christians. The religious identity of progressive Protestants is at least partially based on an active rejection of conservative Christianity. The results indicate less focus on direct partisan political victories and more on undesirable personal, or even moral, characteristics such as intolerance and judgementalism, although the failure of conservative Protestants to support politically progressive values may play a role in this rejection. For progressive Protestants, questions of meaning revolve around promoting moral values such as acceptance, inclusion, and tolerance. Their perceptions about the unwillingness of conservative Christians to support those values feed into their antipathy. Progressives can interpret that unwillingness as violation of their moral values and expected norms. In both samples, progressive Protestants rejected conservative Christians more than they rejected other religious groups. As suggested by the black sheep effect, potential ingroup members violating the expected norms of progressive Protestants are more harshly rejected than non-Christian groups. Theories of identity subversion (Sani 2005) indicate that

progressive Protestants perceive a need to protect their social identity from conservative Christians' actions and attitudes, which motivates them to distance themselves from those Christians. Progressive Protestants, rather than conservative Protestants, may drive the division between the two groups.

The black sheep effect does not appear to impact conservative Protestants' evaluation of progressive Christians, as they do not indicate stronger rejection of progressive Christians relative to other religious groups. Nor do critiques of progressive Christians by conservative Protestants focus on the morality and character of other Christians. Instead, conservative Protestants envision progressive Christians as weaker members of the same ingroup. This perception can be informative about conservative Protestant social identity. Their lack of willingness to reject progressive Christians, even as research has indicated their relatively high willingness to reject non-Christian groups (Merino 2010; Yancey, Eisenstein and Burge 2017), indicates their value on adherence to their particular religious beliefs and Christian identity. Conservative Protestants' biggest factor in rejecting progressive Christians was related to whether they perceived them as good Christians, who articulated the correct theological beliefs for many conservative Protestants. Some conservative Protestants value the mere adherence to a basic form of Christianity regardless of specific disagreements with progressive Protestants. Not being relatively willing to envision progressive Christians as an outgroup reveals the high value conservative Protestants place on being specifically labeled "Christian." They are more likely than progressive Christians to accept others merely because they stated themselves to be Christians.

The particularism embedded in the social identity of conservative Protestants may not be global but rather is activated by a Christian/non-Christian rubric, which allows conservatives the freedom to accept different types of Christians. Conservative Protestants may have a more expansive definition of a Christian if their social identity is built upon a defense of their Christian identity and a need to identify many potential allies. This inclusive motivation can make it difficult for a black sheep mechanism to activate, since stating oneself to be a Christian may be all that many conservative Protestants need to accept individuals in their religious ingroup. Conservative Protestants may overestimate the degree of unity they have with other Christians. Such miscalculations may lend them to overconfidence in their relative popularity. Future research should explore the possibility of such overconfidence and how it plays out in their interpersonal, social, and political relationships.

These findings reinforce the multifaceted nature of American Christianity. Within a segment of that faith tradition—Protestantism—there are at least two factions that are so distinct that it is reasonable to consider them nearly separate from each other. To the degree that Protestants construct different answers to their social identity and address questions of meaning, it is plausible to consider how much scholars should discuss Protestantism as a religious group. Instruments such as RelTrad separate different Protestant groups and have had a reasonable degree of success identifying the differences between the two Protestant groups. While religion scholars often make these distinctions, those differences are often not made in the general public. A deliberate effort to clarify the qualitative difference between these Protestant groups to the general public is warranted.

This research focuses on two populations, college teachers and a social media snowball sample, that are not automatically generalizable. For example, both samples are highly educated, and the findings in this study may not apply to less educated populations. It would be ideal to attempt replication of these findings with a more representative sample, or at least qualitatively different samples such as one with lower levels of education. Finally, this research project only focuses on the attitudes of Protestants. Future work exploring the attitudes of non-Protestant Christians can help to document whether these results reveal unique elements within Protestantism or are a general feature of U.S. Christianity.

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