

**Liberal and conservative Christians seem to have a hard time getting along these days. We both believe in God and have other basic beliefs in common, but on some issues, including homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia, we approach things very differently and end up getting frustrated and angry with each other. Can you help liberal and conservative Christians “bridge the gap” and get along better? Any ideas about how we can better understand and respect each other?**

This won't be a complete answer, but I hope it helps explain why liberals and conservatives are so often at odds.

A basic difference between modern and traditional mindsets involves epistemology (how we know things). The traditional belief is that what is true is unchanging, has always been known, and is to be found in the wisdom of the ancients, perhaps transmitted orally but often written in a book. Truth is found in an authority from the past. Each culture has its ancient, revered wisdom. For Christianity, and especially Protestantism, it is the Bible. (Catholics and Eastern Orthodox also use Holy Tradition, in addition to the Bible).

In contrast, the modern mindset (since the Age of Reason, 1650-1780) has said

we should accept nothing on authority but test all things (including religious claims) at the bar of reason. With this mindset, the contents of Scripture are evaluated in the light of reason and experience, and what is unreasonable or contrary to experience (such as miracles) is rejected as false. This lack of respect for all authorities and insisting on the right to come to one's own opinion based on one's own experience and reason remains a feature of the modern mindset.

For the traditionalist then, whenever there is a conflict between ancient truth (such as the Bible) and reason, experience or modern science, ancient truth wins out and whatever disagrees with it must be mistaken. For moderns, how-

THE REV.  
WILLIAM G.  
GARTIG



How does understanding this difference help?

Liberals need to understand how traditionalists feel bound to maintain whatever they believe the Bible clearly teaches, whether they find it easy to accept or not. (Some conservatives may, for instance, feel some inclination to being accepting of gay people but feel constrained to take a strict and disapproving stance since that seems to be the biblical teaching). Liberals should not expect traditionalists to modify their positions unless and until they can be shown that they had misinterpreted the biblical text.

ever, reason and contemporary experience “trump” the Bible (or the Pope) if there is a conflict. Here we have, in a nutshell, a basic difference between conservative and liberal Christians.

Conservatives need to understand that just quoting biblical verses will not do any good unless what the verse says “makes sense” and seems true to experience. Verses that go against modern sensibilities (because they sound derogatory to women, for example) are not going to have any persuasive power. You're going to have to find areas where you agree and start from there to gently explain the other beliefs that are dear to you.

My advice to both sides is to identify and emphasize what you agree on. See how much you share. And visit each other's churches with the determination not to find fault or criticize or persuade but to listen and learn. Yes, the differences are significant, but we share a common humanity and a common belief in a good and loving heavenly Father and in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at [gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com](mailto:gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com).