Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment: Evidence & Impact

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Chapter One

Was Jesus a Fence Sitter?

How Christian Teachers can Negotiate Conservatism and Liberalism in the Twenty-first Century Learning Environment

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Abstract

If there was ever a time in history when Christian teachers needed to present their students with a balanced view of what is happening in the world around them, it is right now. The world is a confusing place and is changing every day in ways we could not have imagined only a few years ago. This chapter presents a case for a Christian approach to teaching and learning that aims to conserve many Christian beliefs and traditions that have served us well over many years. It also challenges us to be open-minded enough to adapt our biblical principles to a changing culture. The overriding theme is, as a teacher, what would Jesus do?

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Introduction

Who would have thought that the diametrically opposed philosophies of conservatism and liberalism that plague politics,

philosophy, psychology, education, and many other aspects of everyday life would also plague theology, religion, and even the basis of the simple gospel message? Furthermore, how is it that issues such as racial discrimination, gender equality, the place of women in ministry, and other issues of discrimination should be so divisive in the world of Christianity? The most constructive approach to bridge this divide is to figure out what Jesus would have done in each scenario.

In this chapter, we explore philosophical issues as we try to define some of the hallmarks of fundamentalism and liberalism. For each issue, evidence from the life of Jesus is analysed and placed as a backdrop to the behaviours that these two ideological extremes are responsible for. The following question is asked: should Christians be conservative or, as O'Callaghan (2019) argues, is the true Christian identity more closely aligned to liberalism?

People who follow a more conservative brand of Christianity want to hold on to what already exists. Berkowitz (2019) suggested that modern-day conservatives believe that "preserving and reforming no longer suffice. To conserve, one must also restore" (p. 104). There may be many reasons why such people wish to conserve and restore. It may be that they genuinely appreciate the way things were when they were young and wish to honour those people who came before them, including their parents, church leaders and other people who impacted their lives. Each conservative exists somewhere between being fearful of potential change and having regard for the culture, history, and theology within which they have been raised. At times, conservatives can be perceived as "authoritarian, sometimes pessimistic" (O'Callaghan, 2019, p. 138).

However, those with a more liberal viewpoint are convinced that change is possible and necessary and that the maintenance of individual rights is of paramount importance. Again, there are both positive and negative motivations for maintaining a liberal stance towards theology. Those of a more liberal mindset may have a genuine desire to see positive change that helps people and creates more justice for them. On the other hand, liberals may have an unhealthy disregard for the past because of the lives they led in the past and the way the traditional culture, history, and theology translated into a stifling of their lifestyles. According to Rosenblatt (2020), there is not as much of a difference between conservatives and liberals as many people

think. If a liberal holds their view for long enough, they are attempting to conserve it. They gradually become resolved to what they believe and, in fact, begin to fit the definition of a conservative.

The premise of this chapter is that the Christian teacher should embrace elements of both extremes of philosophy. Is it possible for a sincere fundamentalist to come across as lacking in grace and stuck in a form of worship that is more focussed on winning theological battles and looking over others' shoulders in judgement than on sharing the love of God with children? The concern with having a liberal outlook is that it can appear to be idealistic and undefined. Perhaps the Christian teacher should abandon philosophical extremes of theology and not try to win students over to either viewpoint. A teacher can take a neutral position that does not need to be labelled but provides the student with a balanced view of the Christian life and identity.

It should be of interest to the Christian teacher that some academics place moral education and liberalism side by side (Boyd, 2015). There is no doubt that Christianity and moral education should have an intimate connection, but as stated by Dykstra (2008), Lawrence Kohlberg is widely revered as the person who brought the stages of moral development to the academic agenda and did so largely without reference to Christianity (Conn, 1985). Dykstra (2008) rightfully claims that Christians have felt that their religion must have something to do with the sort of people they are and how they live their lives, especially with regard to how they treat people and conduct relationships. Kohlberg uses benchmarks such as "principles, rights and duties, justice and injustice, conflicts and claims, decisions, judgements, reasons and justifications, roles and acts" (Dykstra, 2008, p. 1). These benchmarks can be put forward without a Christian context. When moral education and Christianity merge, the benchmarks change, and the compass looks more to words such as "convictions and meanings, responsibility, good and evil, contexts, visions, stories and images, character, virtues and ways of being" (Dykstra, 2008, p. 1). The former benchmarks are sometimes called the "ethics of decision-making," while the latter are referred to as "character ethics." In Christian education, the teacher bases their work on character development and has a frame of reference around the question, "What would Jesus do?" (Elzey, 1975). By examining

the radical life and ministry of Jesus and the way he related to people, we should be able to work out how liberal Jesus was in his work and teachings.

Where Jesus Positioned Himself

If one were to attempt to place Jesus on a continuum between fundamentalist and progressive, examples could be found that would support both ends of the spectrum, but always with the purest of motives and based on love. According to Mackintosh (1912), who wrote at a time when conservatism was the norm in religion,

> We are shown how truly Jesus belonged to his human milieu; how his courage dealt with the religion and irreligion of that age and land; how his mind moved about in a world of ideas and imaginations now grown faint for us and used them in his great way. (p. 412)

As Kerr (2017) writes in an editorial, "logic suggests people who are admirers of Jesus Christ would align themselves with those who reflect his values" (p. 1). He goes on to say that these values would include being a lover of peace who is free-thinking and in touch with nature. In his own words, Jesus said "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (New International Version [NIV], 1973/2011, Luke 6:27-28). He also said, "If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also" (Luke 6:29), "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7), and "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). It was an ideal world that Jesus was promoting, which was very different from the cold and cruel world that fundamentalists of the day wished to conserve with legislation and punishment.

Jesus did not hold back when it came to calling out the issues with the fundamentalists of the day. Matthew (23:14–36) contains a full treatise from him on the issues with their lives and teachings. He claimed that they taught about God, but had no love for God and were, in fact, blocking people from entering the Kingdom of God. He said that through their preaching, they were converting people to a dead religion. They were condemned because they were taking oaths against "things" in the temple, such as the gold and ornaments,

and were making sacrifices because they saw sacredness in the actual altar and temple instead of looking past these things to what they symbolised and what was truly sacred. According to Jesus, they taught the law but did not practise what they were teaching. They were especially vacant when it came to the basic elements of Christianity, such as justice, mercy, and the faithfulness of God. When it came to the minutia of the law, they were strict, but they bypassed the weightier matters. They paraded themselves around the towns and marketplaces as people who were clean of all worldly desires, but Jesus revealed to them how unclean they were beneath the surface in terms of their carnal and worldly desires. In fact, he could see that they were consumed by self-indulgence and greed. They believed that if they were fastidious about keeping the detailed elements of the law, they were righteous. However, Jesus could see right through them to their ungodly thoughts and feelings. He could see their wickedness. They were "like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men's bones." (Matthew 23:27-28). They claimed a close connection to, and a high regard for, the prophets who had come before them. They also claimed that they would never have been responsible for the persecution and murder of prophets, but Jesus could see that they came from the same template as the murderers of old and that they would be quite capable of repeating those deeds.

While considering this continuum, however, the conservative side of Jesus's life and ministry cannot be ignored. The liberal philosophy does not have a monopoly on the wonderful aspects of Jesus's life; many elements were conservative. Again, Mackintosh (1912) paints a picture of the conservative end of the philosophical spectrum:

> Everywhere religion was his prime care, and religion for him had its focus in God, personal, almighty, holy, near to man. The willpower that companied in Him with most tender inwardness of feeling drew its life from faith. His words, teachings, parables are clear windows through which we may read his own religious experience; and they reveal an inner being concentrated with steadfast and unbroken intensity on the Father and his kingdom. (p. 412)

The part of Jesus that wanted to conserve had no hesitation in referring to the Old Testament to provide answers to questions asked by the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, the more progressive part

of Jesus's ministry put these Old Testament teachings into context. In Matthew (22:34–40), these people asked Jesus what he believed was the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus contextualised and summarised the ten commandments by replying that there were two parts to his answer. The first part was to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37), which refers to the first four commandments. The second part, which refers to the last six commandments, was to "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). He also said, "all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40). Jesus could be called a conservative because he wanted to conserve the essence of the teachings of those who had come before him. Nobody could question Jesus's knowledge of the laws and the prophets. At the age of twelve, Luke tells us that the people were amazed at his answers to questions on the Torah. Jesus continued to call upon the Old Testament and its history and culture to answer his critics. Even when he was by himself and subject to temptation, he used God's word to resist the devil (Luke 4:1–13).

All of this does not mean that Jesus approved of the way the Torah was being presented to the people. In fact, many people who heard John the Baptist speak were convicted of their need for Jesus as soon as they heard Jesus speak. Luke 7:30 records the ironic response of the Pharisees to what they heard: "but the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves". Jesus points out that those who did not think they needed forgiveness had little need of God. They were only moved by the words of the law and did not recognise the maker of the law. This chapter also points to the perversity of the fundamentalist heart that focuses on outward appearances. John appeared to the people with all of the austerity of a recluse, both in clothing and diet, and was taunted as a madman. In contrast, Jesus lived a normal family life, accepted dinner and wedding invitations, provided the guests with wine, and was taunted for enjoying life's pleasures too much. Here, we know that the Scribes and Pharisees were receiving the same message from two different types of messengers with different ways of life, but both were pointing straight at their hearts and calling them out for their graceless interpretation of the law. These fundamentalists would rather have persisted with name-calling than reflect on their own lives in the light of what they were hearing.

As we represent Jesus to our students in our schools, we must not neglect the coercion that both John the Baptist and Jesus portrayed. The balanced position we need to present, however, is the coercion of love rather than the coercion of force (Barclay, 1973). Chesterton (2013) wrote, "God had written not so much a poem, but a play; a play he had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors and stage managers, who had since made a great mess of it" (p. 9). The irony of Luke chapter 7 is that of the several characters represented, the one person who had faith and had Jesus marvelling at his intuition and understanding was a Roman gentile, not someone with a meticulous understanding of and adherence to the law.

Where Ellen White Positioned Herself

What would Ellen White have to say on these issues? Ellen White was an inspired writer and pillar of advice and admonition for the developing Seventh-day Adventist Church. She authored works for half a century. During this time, her thoughts and theories changed, developed, and modernised. While many see her as very conservative, her work needs to be approached through both historical and cultural lenses. Approaching her work through such lenses brings about a realisation that her works were a mix of traditional thought and developing interpretation, which makes her a fine balance of conservative and liberal – conserving the good, while honing and modifying her words to keep up with new thoughts, cultures, and revelations. The following quotation, taken from late in her ministry, accentuates the balance of her thoughts:

> There is no excuse for any one in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. We are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without examining it thoroughly; neither can we afford to reject anything that bears the fruits of the Spirit of God; but we should be teachable, meek and lowly of heart. (Review and Herald, Dec 20, 1892)

Miller (2016) provides a systematic and logical reason for the growing schism in Christian churches between fundamentalism and liberalism. The growing body of scientific knowledge that can be measured and recorded as fact has become the benchmark for belief in the intellectual world over the years. If an idea put forward could not be measured and proved without doubt, it had to be cast aside. This, of course, placed Christianity at a crossroads because it claimed to have evidence but at its heart was (and still is) based on faith and feelings. The scientific method caused Christianity to place its 'stake in the ground' with the infalibility of the Bible. It was thought that this would emulate science and the Bible would become valid and reliable data, which would translate into perfect propositions of truth.

Again, Ellen White encouraged the ideal balance of taking this scientific or evidence-based approach with the faith and feelings approach that can also be validated through the experiences of the believer:

> There is an evidence that is open to all—the most highly educated, and the most illiterate—the evidence of experience. God invites us to prove for ourselves the reality of His word, the truth of His promises . . . And as we draw near to Jesus, and rejoice in the fullness of His love, our doubt and darkness will disappear in the light of His presence. (White, 2020, pp. 111–112)

The history of this balance that Ellen White espoused came from witnessing and being part of a bitter war of factions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which culminated in a mean-spirited confrontation at the General Conference Session at Minneapolis in 1888. The leaders of the church at the time, G.I. Butler and Uriah Smith, determined to outlaw anybody questioning the Adventist historicist interpretation of scripture, and came head-to-head with two young magazine editors, A.T. Jones and E.J. Waggoner, who were testing some different ideas about prophecy. White, alongside Jones and Waggoner, "uplifted basic Christian themes at Minneapolis and in subsequent years. They especially uplifted Jesus and righteousness by faith in him" (Knight, 1994, p. 11).

This experience was a turning point for Ellen White's publishing and communication career. Her writing became more Christ-centred after 1888 and, according to Knight (1994), she had her work published outside the Adventist network to ensure her now-pure

gospel message would not be tampered with before publication. This move also brought about a wider circulation of her work.

Swan (2006) refers to the 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith, which was put in place by conservative Christian reformers who believed that keeping "true Christianity" should be the work of the Church and state combined. Legislating religious beliefs, along with punishment for deviations from the accepted beliefs, was an accepted legal practice in this era. To imagine a church establishment of today overlooking the peace-loving example of Jesus on Earth is inconceivable. The Westminster Confession of Faith read:

> . . . for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity, whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation; or to the power of godliness; or such erroneous opinions or practices as, either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church: they may be lawfully called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the Civil Magistrate? (Swan, 2006, p. 164)

As the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has unfolded in phases of returns to fundamentalism accompanied by calls to return to Jesus as the heart of the gospel, it is good to recount White's admonition: "The correct interpretation of the Scripture is not all that God requires. . . We are to bring into our practice, in our association with our fellowmen, the spirit of Him who gave us the truth" (White, 1888). Skrzypaszek (2021) reinforces this point that "The organizational structure's escalating expansion, theological debates and arguments, confining the distinctiveness of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and fundamentalism's augmenting influence, effaced the movement's focus on the spiritual nature of its calling" (p. 4). How much more should Adventist teachers avoid the idea of letting the Church's focus on Jesus and the spiritual life be eroded?

As Miller (2016) continues, after the death of Ellen White, the southern states of America returned to fundamentalism and would not speak out against societal issues such as segregation of races, slavery, alcohol abuse, treatment of American indigenous people, and the

free use of firearms. The Protestants of the northern states, however, were willing to discuss these issues. This, then, is an example of the geographical separation of fundamentalist beliefs and progressive thinking.

In 2021, there is still much debate in America surrounding these issues. The Black Lives Matter movement and the divided opinion on every citizen's right to carry firearms indicate the lack of separation between church and state. These case studies show that conservative politicians are supported by fundamentalist Christians, while progressive politicians are supported by the more liberal Christians.

The recurring theme of this chapter is a call for balance in our thinking about theology. This brings about a balance in how our Christianity is portrayed to our students. Critical thinking and analysis of issues need to be part of everyday education practices. A diversity of thought should only add to this process and provide the "checks and balances" that are so vital in any learning experience. If tolerance is displayed and balance of thought promoted, we will have an ideal learning environment:

> As Ellen White demonstrated, the way to read and apply Scripture is not with a rigid fundamentalism that shatters in the face of reality. Nor is it with a vague liberalism that embraces theories and practices explicitly forbidden in Scripture. Rather, a balanced, thoughtful, principled centralism produces a growing understanding that brings us closer to God and His truth, while learning from each other. (Miller, 2016, p. 1)

Where George Knight Positioned Himself

Where would George Knight fit into this debate? Knight is a prominent historian, philosopher, and commentator on Adventist history and education. When setting out the philosophy of Adventist education as he sees it, he mixes the fundamental aspects of recognising a creator God and the significance of all he created, including the Sabbath, with the idea that the world we live in is wholly good and of great value. He also argues that "According to the biblical view, the physical environment we inhabit should be respected and cared for because it is God's good creation" (Knight, 2016, p. 26). He also promotes the teaching of Jesus, who commanded Christians

to be socially active in their world. Here again, his views reflect a compromise between conserving the basic precepts upon which Adventist education was built and the more liberal idea of mixing freely in our communities and having special regard – and indeed being caretakers – for the environment in which we live.

Knight (2016) also proposes that the role of Adventist education is to be conservative to the extent that it needs to be transmitting the biblical truths that are so important to the development of the child but in many ways needs to be revolutionary and stand up for change in a sinful world. That change is more than the complete transformation of the young person to the Christian life. He states, "Christian churches (including Seventh-day Adventism) have too often been conservative bastions of society, when they should function as agents of change. The life of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible can best be seen as modelling change rather than conservatism. He was the Reformer of reformers" (Knight, 2016, pp. 127–128).

Addressing the Issues

Here, we address those issues that are difficult for Christians to come to terms with. According to Kerr (2017), in relation to racism and gender issues, Jesus was a Liberal. This clearly derives from his love for people, who always came first to him. Kerr (2017) makes the following assertion:

> I don't think conservatives are evil, but logic suggests people who are admirers of Jesus Christ would align themselves with those who reflect his values. And it's pretty hard to argue Jesus was anything but a peace-loving, free-thinking, tree-hugging liberal. (p. 1)

Essentially, we are asking a question of priorities. Is it most important to have our students concerned about precepts, behaviours, and theologies, or focused on people, their needs, and their right to think and make decisions. From an anthropological perspective, it is difficult for people to project themselves into the lives of others and understand what they feel and experience. It is far easier to deal with facts and readily observable behaviours. According to Ybarrola (2019), it comes down to culture, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism. The issue is that we suffer with a condition labelled "naïve

realism," which means that we believe that people see and experience the world in exactly the same way that we do, and that most people are quite happy to allow the beliefs of their own culture to implant themselves in their world view and to impose them on others. If, as a white, heterosexual, middle class male, I have not experienced racial discrimination, gender discrimination or homophobia, naïve realism would suggest that it would be difficult for me to project myself into the world of those who experience these things at the hands of others, particularly those who have lived their lives in a conservative Christian culture. Jesus worked with all people to understand and to help them; people were at the centre of his ministry. As teachers, we should be striving to help our students understand others outside their own culture and understanding. This is part of their learning. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann states "If I know only what is like me, or what already corresponds to me, then, after all, I know only what I already know" (Moltmann, 1999, p. 136).

The aspects of a liberal philosophy that, as teachers, we should want our students to learn from us, are aspects that define the life and work of Jesus. He was one who was happy to 'rock the boat.' He healed a man's hand on the Sabbath in front of a group of Pharisees, even though the recipient did not approach him or ask for a miracle. Jesus did this to prove that acts of kindness and helpfulness were more important than the stringent rules they had attached to Sabbath-keeping. Jesus was always working for the poor, the forgotten, and the unknown, and he always gave reference to nature as a centrepiece in God's creation. I cannot see Jesus endorsing the use of force, the carrying of weapons, or any form of discrimination. In fact, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus counted peacemakers as "children of God" (Matthew 5:9). The values most dictionaries claim to be held by liberalism include "belief in progress, tolerance, individual freedom, and the essential goodness of humanity" (McLennan, 2009). These values also appear to be the values held dear by Jesus in his ministry and are the values our students need to learn.

Conclusion

I must confess to changing my position on the continuum between conservative and liberal theology as I have read about and researched this topic. I began this study with the clear perception that as teachers

we should position ourselves right in the centre of this spectrum of philosophy. The issues are so significant, however, that I have come to believe that taking a position in the centre is like "sitting on the fence". The position we should be taking as teachers is the position that Jesus took. The evidence is apparent in the stories of his interactions with people. Let us not label things as "conservative" or "liberal", but rather study his life and emulate his approach to people so that we may have the same sort of impact on the lives of students as Jesus had on all the people he met. Depending on the translation of the Bible one uses, the word "love" is used between 500 and 1,000 times. This should be the mantra for all Christian teachers.

Whether we are studying the life and teachings of Jesus, considering the admonition of Ellen White, or recapping the history and philosophy of Adventist education, it can be clearly seen that there is always a specific philosophy that underlies our motivations for being teachers. Christian education, as for all education, should be about helping students to construct a view of God that is their own, but should also conserve the wonderful histories of a creator God who not only formed us out of love, made plans for our salvation, and cares for us daily, but who also cares about emerging theological implications, conservation of the environment, and the elimination of discrimination in all its forms. The Christian teacher should be people-centric as Jesus is.

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