

**A STUDY GUIDE for use with the book:**

***Conservatism and Liberalism in the Christian Faith:  
Toward a Moderate Approach***

**By William E. Hull (2015, Nurturing Faith)**

**Available at [NurturingFaith.net](http://NurturingFaith.net)**

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**How to Use this Study Guide**

This guide is designed to give you ideas for leading a small group discussion using Dr. Hull's book. Pick and choose options of interest to you as facilitator or ones you believe will pique interests of participants. Feel free to use your own ideas and stories to enrich the group experience.

Lesson plan suggestions are designed to help your group enter into dialogue with Dr. Hull's ideas expressed in *Conservatism and Liberalism in the Christian Faith: Toward a Moderate Approach*. A variety of approaches is suggested to stimulate conversation regarding key statements from the book. Introductions to each chapter include quotes from other gifted authors.

Most importantly, pray God's Spirit uses this study experience to awaken consciousness about what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. Jesus calls us to live in unity. May we hunger and thirst that Jesus' prayer "I pray they may be one" becomes reality in our lives and in the life of the church.

## Chapter 1

### The Irony of the Conservative-Liberal Debate

**Central Question:** Can a person simultaneously be both conservative and liberal?

#### **Focus**

Introduce *Conservatism and Liberalism in the Christian Faith* with this true story:

*Terry grew up in North Alabama where his Dad was a self-taught, bi-vocational Southern Baptist pastor. Without question, Southern culture shaped who Terry is, his convictions and beliefs, and his perspective on many things—including Christianity and politics. Looking back, Terry describes the context of his childhood as fundamental-conservative: literal interpretation of scripture, black and white understanding, right-wrong decision making, conviction all Christians think and act a certain way, no dancing, no drinking, no playing cards (except Rook), support for blue laws, fear of education, fear of anything different, love of SEC football, etc.!*

*Terry's wife Joan grew up in the Midwest (Iowa, South Dakota, Wisconsin). Her dad was trained at Northern Baptist Seminary in Rochester, New York, and was a proud student of the Social Gospel Movement. The family participated in Methodist and Lutheran churches during Joan's childhood. Joan's family and upbringing could be described as moderate-liberal: openness to new ideas and innovation, strong convictions about issues while acknowledging "I could be wrong," the continuum of Christian thought and interpretation and practice is wide, drinking in moderation is no problem (German heritage), embracing liberal arts education, and the belief different is not bad—it's just different.*

*Joan and Terry met at a Southern Baptist church in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1979. Prior to participating in a church mission project, Joan and Terry sat on a curb outside Joan's apartment and talked all night long (NOTE: Before that night Terry had never spoken to anyone for more than 5-10 minutes in his entire life). In that relatively brief time together these young adults learned a lot about each other. The lenses through which they looked at life were quite different, but both sensed they shared similar values and life goals.*

*Joan experienced a calling to ministry while in Nashville and began her studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville shortly after meeting Terry. The couple dated long-distance that school year and married the following May. When Terry also experienced a call to ministry, he discontinued his CPA preps and began accepting preaching engagements.*

*Joan and Terry are very different people. Many were surprised when they got together. Joan is very extroverted, emotional, and expressive; Terry is introverted and "in his head" much of the time. These differences, however, drew them together.*

*You might think this couple has lots to fight about because of their divergent backgrounds and personality differences. Not true! For the first five years of marriage the only thing Terry*

*and Joan fought about was theology! Seminary training and exposure to new ideas, interpretations, and perspectives challenged both of them—especially Terry.*

*Joan and Terry have been married for over 35 years and enjoy a deep and satisfying partnership. They no longer “fight” over theology. They still have lively discussions and analyze everything and, for better or for worse, they have rubbed off on each other. Together, they found common ground, and now both of them describe themselves as passionate moderates.*

As you hear this story, what do you think contributed to Terry and Joan’s ability to: 1) navigate their differences, 2) reject beliefs and practices from their homes of origin that no longer worked for them as a couple, and 3) arrive at new understandings without destroying the relationship?

### **Study**

Word Association: Create two headings “conservative” and “liberal” on the board. Ask participants to brainstorm words or phrases that come to mind for each word. Compile a list under each heading.

When you use the words conservative or liberal to describe someone, what do you intend to communicate? NOTE: You could ask this question from a theological or political perspective or both.

Ask participants to respond to three prevailing assumptions among Southern Baptists and other Evangelicals:

- Describing Christianity within a conservative or liberal conceptual framework is entirely appropriate.
- Whether one’s Christianity is conservative or liberal is of primary concern. The assumption is one’s faith is not just different but better or worse.
- Something mutually exclusive, even incompatible, exists between the two options. One cannot be both conservative and liberal at the same time.

Dr. Hull contends these assumptions “constitute a religious orientation with a theological agenda all its own...What we are dealing with is nothing less than a new kind of Christian self-understanding unique to the contemporary era.” The author also asserts, “this shift from classical religious categories to contemporary secular categories represents the most significant theological development among Southern Baptists in our generation.”

Lead class members to unpack the meaning of the above statements. What is this theological agenda? What do you think Hull means by a *new kind of Christian self-understanding*? Ask class members to wrestle with the shift from “classical religious categories” to “secular categories.” If Dr. Hull’s assessment of these assumptions is accurate, what are the implications for Christ followers?

Discuss the origins of “liberalism” and “conservatism.” Include these statements from Hull:

**Conservatism** comes from the root word referring to weapons or armor and so connotes that which protects from change or destruction. The word originally meant a concern for stable, orderly society rooted in the most enduring traditions humanity has been able to develop.

**Liberalism** comes from a root word meaning to grow, and so implies a process of development that reflects a commitment to progress not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or established norms. The word originally meant a concern for human rights that would free the individual to develop his or her maximum potential.

Lift up the positive aspects of each word! Who would not desire what each of these words connotes?

Quote Hull: “These two movements did not arise in opposition to each other; rather, each arose in opposition to the *excesses of the other*. Liberalism was not a protest against conservatism but against a reactionary medieval authoritarianism, dogmatism, and obscurantism [opposition to human progress] that all of us would oppose. Likewise, conservatism was not a protest against true liberalism but against a reckless radicalism that all of us would abhor.”

If Hull is accurate, how did we arrive at the situation we face today with dualistic thinking and polarization around the two words? If both perspectives are necessary and add value, why do you think we struggle to find common ground?

### **Understand**

Discuss how Hull uses the founding documents of the United States to help us understand the dynamic synthesis of conservatism and liberalism.

- The *Declaration of Independence* was a model of the “democratic-utopian rhetoric of liberalism.”
- The *Constitution* functioned as a conservative counter-balance.
- Our founding fathers fused into one national lifestyle the best features of both movements giving us “historical continuity, organic development, and orderly progress.”

Definitions of words evolve and change over time. This dynamic process leads to confusion and, according to Hull, leaves the words devoid of meaning and causes people to use them derogatorily. It was in this context Southern Baptists turned these words into theological watchwords. This led to negative and destructive caricatures of “conservative” and “liberal.”

### **Reflect & Apply**

In what ways do Baptists still suffer under the negative extreme meanings, applications, and assumptions of “liberal” and “conservative?”

What is your perception of conservative and liberal in this statement?

“Conservatives resist change on the conviction that what is known and approved is more likely to be acceptable than what is unknown and untested. Liberals welcome change because their contentment with the status quo is not as strong as their conviction that change, even though untried, will bring improvements never before realized.”

Based on Hull’s observations, what challenges do you face regarding your use of the terms *conservative* or *liberal*? Share these facts:

1. These concepts do not appear in either of our primary Christian sources, Old Testament or New Testament. The irony (note title of Chapter 1) is many Baptists have made central to their faith a pair of concepts that never played a role in the formation of Christian truth.
2. These terms are absent in the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.
3. These terms do not find expression in creeds or confessions of faith that were written and embraced over the centuries (including the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*).

How can we curb today’s tendency to turn conservatism and liberalism into absolute categories diametrically opposed to a healthy understanding of Christian identity?

Close with prayer.

## **Chapter 2**

### **A Biblical Critique of Conservatism and Liberalism**

**Central Question:** How does the Bible evaluate the adequacy of the two competing viewpoints “conservative” and “liberal”?

#### **Introduction**

In Session 1, we discussed definitions for conservative and liberal, discovered how the definitions for these words have been turned into absolutes, and explored how the words have been used to create an “us vs. them” mindset. Most importantly, we realized Southern Baptists began using these words as definitive categories to determine who is right and wrong despite the fact the terms conservative and liberal are not found in Scripture.

#### **Focus**

OPTION A: Hull provides a chart showing how the two polarities (conservatism and liberalism) can co-exist within the Christian faith. Read each list at the end of Chapter 1 (p. 13 of manuscript). Ask participants to think of the infinity symbol. Put some of the words under the two headings on the board and draw the infinity symbol encompassing the words to show the dynamic interplay between the poles. Individuals and congregations are simultaneously conservative and liberal!

OPTION B: Using the same chart from Option A, create two lists (A & B - leave off the headings at this point to help reinforce the observation all of us are both conservative and liberal at the same time). Ask participants to choose from the two poles the words with which they most identify. After brief conversation, add the infinity symbol as in Option A.

#### **Study**

For his biblical critique of conservatism and liberalism, Hull uses the metaphor of new wine in old wineskins to illustrate the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament was clearly sacred Scripture for the early church. The stories of the Old Testament were foundational and played a role for both Jewish Christians and the Gentile mission. This is true despite the fact the Old Testament was “an enormous liability” for the Gentile Christians.

Even after the New Testament canon was formed and became the authoritative guide for Christian faith and practice, the Old Testament was retained to show how the faith was rooted in the past. This second book was appropriately called “new” because it held within itself the practices of Jesus who taught new wine cannot be put into old wineskins (Mark 2:22).

Hull contends the New Testament has been around so long it no longer seems new. “What we urgently need today is a fresh awareness that, just as the Old Testament is really *old*, the New Testament is still really *new*.” To recover this sense of newness Hull looks at three central tenets of Old Testament religion and how the New Testament church transformed them.

## GROUP WORK:

Form three groups. Give assignments to address the three Old Testament practices that were re-shaped by the early church. Ask groups to look at Hull's commentary on these three practices and bring a report back to the large group.

Group 1 – Circumcision

Group 2 – Temple Worship

Group 3 – Sabbath Observance

Reconvene the larger group. Call for reports from each group.

Emphasize two points: 1) keeping the Old Testament was a *conservative* move to preserve the Jewish heritage, and 2) having capacity to change practices despite hundreds of passages in their Bible supporting these practices was, according to Hull, the “greatest *liberal* achievement of all time.” Revisit definitions of “conservative” and “liberal.”

Read and discuss Hull's central focus of this section. “Our Bible is both “old” and “new” and yet is also one. The unity of the canon means the conservatism implied in having an Old Testament and the liberalism implied in having a New Testament are thereby set in dynamic equilibrium...each Testament must always be read in the light of the other. To accept the Bible as a whole is to accept the task of being both conservative and liberal at the same time!” (p. 20 in manuscript)

Prepare a brief lecture on the twin foci: Exodus and Exile in the Old Testament. This is important for pointing out how Israel's religious vision looks back to an essential and meaningful past AND looks forward to an equally essential and meaningful future.

## **Understand**

Just as the Old Testament is fashioned around Exodus and Exile—setting conservatism and liberalism in dynamic equilibrium—the New Testament also describes the tension between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity. The fundamental question with which the New Testament must deal is: What does it mean for a movement born within Judaism to move beyond Judaism in less than one century?

Why do you think Jewish Christianity centered in Jerusalem was described as very conservative? (an attempt to preserve historic practices commanded in the Old Testament)

Surprisingly, liberalism came from within Jewish Christianity. In Acts 6 a group of Hellenists, including Stephen, was charged with undermining the Temple and Torah. F.F. Bruce says Stephen's sermon recorded in Acts 7:1-53 is “the most radical manifesto in the New Testament.” Stephen was stoned for blasphemous heresy. Persecution caused Christianity to spread to Antioch where Greeks who had no connection to Judaism were converted. This leads to a pivotal question: What is essential and what is optimal for a Christian believer? This is the conservative/liberal question—past, tradition, stability *and* future, change, innovation.

Hull calls the statements coming out of the Jerusalem Conference the “most carefully nuanced treatises on conservatism and liberalism to be found in the New Testament.” Why?

Hulls asks: What is the proper response to the shift from Jewish to Gentile Christianity? He answers with two key points: 1) a wide spectrum of opinion is both legitimate and desirable, because 2) such diversity allows for creativity in responding to the missionary imperative of the Gospel.

Discuss Hull’s key point: “God had already authenticated their divergent approaches by giving true converts to conservatives and liberals alike!” For example, James clung to local customs even in the face of impending catastrophe, and Stephen would have abolished centuries of venerable tradition without a moment’s hesitation. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Each requires the other to maintain balance.

### **Reflect & Apply**

Why do you think the early church was able to accomplish significant changes from the mother religion in such a brief time? What enabled early church leaders to find common ground?

What issues today push Christians into theological corners, i.e., conservative vs. liberal?

Why do you believe we seem unable to navigate the extremes and find common ground?

To what degree does the incivility of our day impede our capacity for fruitful conversation around difficult topics like abortion, homosexuality, environmental concerns, government’s role in creating a safety net for people struggling economically, etc.?

What do you think is required to empower substantive conversation around difficult issues in the church and in society? What role does the church play in bridging the divide?

To close, play the song, “Bridge Over Troubled Waters.”

## **Chapter 3**

### **An Historical Critique of Conservatism and Liberalism**

**Central Question:** Was the creative balance Christianity struck between conservatism and liberalism possible only in the early church or is it an essential feature of our faith today?

#### **Focus**

In *Falling Upward* (p. 150), Richard Rohr says, dualistic thinking is “insufficient for the really big issues of love, suffering, death, God, and any notion of infinity. In short, we need both dualistic thinking and non-dualistic wisdom (contemplation)...Nothing is going to change in history as long as most people are merely dualistic, either-or-thinkers.”

How do you respond to Rohr’s perspective? How is Rohr’s understanding consistent with what you read in Dr. Hull’s book?

#### **Study**

How can 2,000 years of Christian history relative to conservatism and liberalism be effectively critiqued? Hull focuses on one theological development in each of three periods of the classical era.

OPTION 1: Prepare a brief lecture on each section and engage participants in conversation around Hull’s understanding of how conservative and liberal played out in each period of history. Questions are included to aid the conversation.

OPTION 2: Form three groups and assign each group one of the three periods to discuss. Appoint a spokesperson for each group. Call for reports after 10 minutes.

#### ***1. Patristics Period – Hellenizing of Christianity – Aurelius Augustine***

While Christianity was “conceived in a Jewish womb,” the early church began taking on Graeco-Roman features in its organizational life, worship practices, and theology. This process has been called the Hellenization of Christianity.

- Liberal expression – Patristic theologians felt much freedom to innovate by using philosophic material drawn from the pagan world and abandoning important features of New Testament faith—like eschatology and charismatic enthusiasm. Patristic theologians were responsive to new situations and were willing to experiment with central affirmations of the gospels.
- Conservative expression – The church showed interest in defining the canon of Scripture. The church decided to elevate to canon status a group of ancient writings that expressed faith in primarily Jewish categories. Of course, this was happening at the same time doctrinal statements that expressed Greek categories gained elevated status.

Discuss this important point: “The church was only creating trouble for itself by conferring sacred status on writings that nowhere authenticated or even encouraged the basic

direction in which the church itself was moving.” By doing so, “the church was declaring its intention to be both liberal and conservative at the same time. Indeed, an entirely new context for ministry demanded a dual response.”

The Old Testament and New Testament walk hand-in-hand. Why is this negative or difficult? Why is this beneficial or positive?

In what ways did Augustine embrace and see the necessity of both conservatism and liberalism?

## ***2. Medieval Period – Aristotelianizing of Christianity – Thomas Aquinas***

Often referred to as the Dark Ages, Hull reassures us not all was “dark.” In fact, he calls this a rich and varied era, especially the thirteenth century. This era saw advancement in culture, literature, commerce, science, and intellectual thought.

Thomas Aquinas was an intellectual modernist who believed Christianity must come to grips with scientific philosophy or lose the confidence of the educated class. Following his death, Aquinas was condemned as a heretic. Eventually, however, it became clear to the church that Aquinas had in fact “been able to conserve undiminished the substance of Christian truth despite his revolutionary alteration of its form.”

Key Points: A strongly liberal response in a particular situation may be the best way, maybe the only way, for conservatives to protect what is under attack. Conversely, a strongly conservative response may be the best way for liberals to advance their most cherished values and prevent their destruction.

## ***3. Reformation Period – Existentializing of Christianity – Martin Luther***

Likely this period is of most interest to Protestants. Hull makes this observation about the dominant figure of this period:

“Luther was surely the most conservative Christian who ever lived. His mind and heart were captive to the Word of God...Luther was surely the most liberal Christian who ever lived. For he dared to put his solitary convictions above the collective consensus of the church and to follow the logic of those convictions wherever they might lead.”

Do you agree with Hull’s assessment? Why or why not? Point out the importance of Luther looking *inward* to rest faith on an existential [relating to individual freedom and responsibility] commitment, an approach that helped launch the modern era. Previously, key church leaders reached *backward* to ancient structures for affirmation of faith.

What is the meaning of the Reformation?

*Catholic substance:* heritage of ancient tradition, liturgy, and dogma that leaders of the Reformation were determined to preserve even if they faced excommunication.

AND

*Protestant principle:* the critical reverence toward the inherited faith in order to reconstruct it in the name of the Gospel and by authority of the Bible.

Again, Hull sees the Reformation as both conservative and liberal. The task of the Reformation continues: the need to preserve (put essential “big rocks” in the bucket first) and the need to purge (remove that which limits innovation and responsiveness to Spirit nudges). How does a denomination or congregation determine what needs to be preserved and what needs to be purged? How does the dynamic counterbalance of conservative and liberal affect this decision-making process?

What would you “reform” in today’s church?

Hull asserts the birth of the Baptist denomination represented a powerful expression of the Reformation principle. While not a part of the original Reformation, early Baptists sought to reform the Reformation. How? Discuss.

### **Understand**

Key Points:

- Conservatism and liberalism are not only reflections of one’s personal temperament or convictions but are also reflections of one’s social situation, life experiences, educational exposure, and historical frame of reference.
- Because Baptists fall all along the ideological spectrum, they have been responsive to the challenges and influences of each new socio-historical reality. In America, our context has changed drastically over the years.
- The deepest instinct of Christian faith is to “fine tune” the process of change so it conserves what is normative from the past while liberating what is needed for the future.

### **Reflect & Apply**

- 1) How has your family of origin affected the lens through which you view the conservative/liberal continuum?
- 2) Given your tendency to lean toward the conservative or liberal perspective, how do you navigate new experiences that call into question your ideology or theology?
- 3) How do you balance your world, i.e., conserving the essentials for Christian faith and practice WHILE liberating what is necessary for the future?
- 4) How would your community of faith answer question #3? Does your congregation regularly engage in substantive conversations about tensions that naturally exist between the conservative and liberal perspectives?

Close with silent prayer for the church as she discerns what to preserve and what to reform.

## Chapter 4

### A Theological Critique of Conservatism and Liberalism

**Central Question:** Does sound theology presuppose “dynamic equilibrium,” i.e., creative tension between conservatism and liberalism?

#### **Focus**

Dr. Clay Stauffer, pastor of Woodmont Christian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, wrote a message of the week published in *The Tennessean* called “Polarization is not Christ’s will.” He says, unthinkingly throwing around the terms “liberal” and “conservative” is not helpful. Doing this is actually part of the problem. These words are deeply imbedded in our vocabulary. Stauffer quotes psychologist Jonathan Haidt who says both liberals and conservatives make valuable contributions to society because of their different interests and passions. “My research confirms the common perception that liberals are experts in thinking about issues of victimization, equality, autonomy, and the rights of individuals, particularly those of minorities and non-conformists. Conservatives, on the other hand, are experts in thinking about loyalty to the group, respect for authority and tradition, and sacredness. When one side overwhelms the other, the results are likely to be ugly. A society without liberals would be harsh and oppressive to many individuals. A society without conservatives would lose many of the social structures and constraints that are so valuable.”

How do these comments reinforce the primary message of Hull’s book?

#### **Study**

Hull begins his theological critique of conservatism and liberalism by looking at eschatology—Christian understanding of end times. Some assert Jesus expected the end to come soon, so when the end didn’t come right away, Jesus’ disciples had to redefine their faith. The view that Jesus’ coming was a decisive event in history and that Jesus will come again in the future, evolved. Hull says this past/future perspective is both conservative and liberal at the same time.

True or False: Everything we know about the historical Jesus must be “conserved.” [Hull says this is true.]

What is the significance of the early church’s designation of Jesus as “the Christ?” [Hull contends this was the most conservative thing they could have done because it forever linked Jesus to his Jewish heritage.]

Why does Hull call the early church’s conviction that the ministry of Christ has both past and future expectations a “very liberal” viewpoint? [Judaism always envisioned Messiah would come at the end of history, never in the middle. The always imminent coming of Jesus means we live confident Jesus will complete what he began in the first century.]

### KEY POINTS:

- 1) Past and present orientations must be kept in proper balance.
- 2) We work to “conserve” everything that came to us during Christ’s earthly ministry.
- 3) We work to “liberate” everything presently in bondage that will one day be set free by his glorious return.

Another way Hull shows how conservatism and liberalism are not in opposition relates to the work of Holy Spirit. Hull sees Holy Spirit’s assignment in perfect balance—two sides of the same coin:

- Conservatism: Jesus is the source of truth; Holy Spirit, apart from Jesus, has no separate and independent authority to reveal anything.
- Liberalism: Holy Spirit helps believers on their faith journeys comprehend (reflect upon, test) what has already happened and anticipate what is to come, i.e., discover “all truth.” Holy Spirit provides the creative freedom to respond to new situations.

Agree or disagree with these statements:

- The Source never changes; the situation always does.
- We must ever be conservative about the substance of our faith yet liberal about its shape.
- One should not attempt to be either a true conservative or a true liberal without first appreciating and affirming the importance of the other.

### **Understand**

We experience dynamic tension between constancy and change. Both creation and consummation are presented in the Bible as continuing processes that permeate all of history. Hull observes:

*On the one hand, the connotations of “creation” suggest many of the ultimate values undergirding conservatism: antiquity, preservation, givenness, concreteness, stability, realism, structure, order, being. On the other hand, the connotations of “consummation” suggest many of the ultimate underpinnings of liberalism: change, innovation, originality, idealism, hope, freedom, equality, universality, becoming.*

Do you agree with Hull’s conviction, “we cannot choose between conservatism or liberalism because we cannot choose between creation and consummation, between alpha and omega”? Explain.

### **Reflect & Apply**

Reflect upon the following:

1. What is your ultimate concern? What do you seek to “conserve” from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ?
2. Read again the “ultimate values” undergirding both conservatism and liberalism in the Understanding section above. Challenge participants to ask Holy Spirit to convict them regarding words they need to embrace that they currently reject (either as a result of the enculturation process, theology taught in church, or the influence of political rhetoric).

Close by reading the text of “The Church’s One Foundation” that expresses both creation and consummation themes. [from *The Baptist Hymnal*]

*The church’s one foundation Is Jesus Christ her Lord,  
She is His new creation, By Spirit and the Word:  
From heav’n He came and sought her To be His holy bride,  
With His own blood He bought her, And for her life He died.*

*Elect from ev’ry nation, Yet one o’er all the earth,  
Her charter of salvation, One Lord, one faith, one birth;  
One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses, With ev’ry grace endued.*

*’Mid toil and tribulation, And tumult of her war,  
She waits the consummation Of peace forevermore;  
Till with the vision glorious, Her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious Shall be the church at rest.*

## Chapter 5

### Applying Conservatism and Liberalism: Case Studies

**Central Question:** What can we learn about conservatism and liberalism by looking at the schism in the Southern Baptist Convention?

#### **Focus**

Begin this session with a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World* (pp. 98-99):

*I know that nothing strengthens community like a common enemy. I know that when religious people are feeling overwhelmed by a world with little use for their ancient truths, they can find new meaning by identifying a great evil to oppose. I know that the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are especially vulnerable to the formation of "oppositional identity," both because the stories of their struggles with their enemies have been made sacred in their scriptures and because monotheists—one-true-God people—have never wasted much charity on those who do not acknowledge their one true God. Here is a law as reliable as gravity: the degree to which we believe our faith is what makes us human is the same degree to which we will question the humanity of those who do not share our faith...If we can convince ourselves that God (wants what we want)—even if it means making God in our own image so we can deny the image of God in our enemies—then we are free to engage in combative piety. We are free to harm others not for our own reasons but in the name of God, which allows us to feel holy about doing it instead of just plain bad.*

Thoughts or reactions to this quote?

#### **Study**

Hull begins Chapter 5 by once again talking about the early church's struggle over circumcision. Two observations are noteworthy: 1) how ineffective the solution was, i.e., the struggle continued to divide the church and led to persecution, and 2) how hard it was for leaders to "cross category boundaries" (veteran leaders lost leadership over a singular issue). Ask: Are these observations applicable to today's church struggles? Examples?

Hull shares a litany of "crises" that occurred in America. Religion seemed impotent to address the chaos. Hull appropriately points out "fear and uncertainty about the future" were the dominant reactions to this massive destabilization and apparent assault on cherished values. Events of the 1960s and 1970s led to anxiety, and the South especially permitted its fears to be exploited. The perceived antidote for immorality, decline in the work ethic, and disrespect for authority was recovery of traditional morality. In this climate extreme conservatism (often called fundamentalism) gained strength. Southern Christianity thrived on phobias that fed religious resentment. What does Hull believe prompted this fear? Do you agree with his assessment?

Based on previous conversations, discuss why group participants believe extreme conservatism or fundamentalism gained strength during this time of national

destabilization. [conservatism clings to status quo, established patterns, rehearsed methodology, known entities, and proven results]

Southern Baptists were in decline. They looked to three groups for direction:

- 1) Exclusive, non-establishment denominations known for their strictness and an authoritarian approach that offered simplistic, literal, and “absolute” faith conservatives sought.
- 2) Evangelicals—independent or non-denominational descendants of fundamentalism.
- 3) Media preachers who solidly leaned to the ideological right.

As church growth became Southern Baptists’ primary focus, SBC leaders quite logically determined their future was with folks on the theological right. This led to their conviction that the convention must dismiss employees not sympathetic to this conservative direction.

The takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention was made possible by using the term “inerrancy” to describe Scripture. The word became a battle cry for those who believe every word of Scripture is “without error doctrinally, historically, scientifically, and philosophically.” In other words, the Bible must be preached as “literally true.” This posturing led in many cases to a shift in understanding pastoral authority (they have the literally true and right answers; others do not) and to protests by laity who believed each person reads and interprets Scripture under the leadership of Holy Spirit.

Conservatives won this contentious battle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Fusing theological idealism and political realism, the conservative path resonated with the emerging Southern mindset.

### **Understand**

Ask participants to describe the “emerging mindset” in the South that Hull discusses in this chapter. Talk about how fundamentalism is more a mindset than a set of beliefs and is present in many faith traditions—not just Christianity. How does understanding the mindset of a fundamentalist help you understand the militant tactics fundamentalists employed in the takeover process (firing convention leaders, replacing boards with like-minded people, derailing reputations of seminary professors/leaders)? How does the phrase “the end justifies the means” apply to the takeover of the SBC? Were these tactics (that fundamentalists genuinely believed were God’s will) consistent with the teachings of Jesus? Discuss. [Jesus insisted on faithfulness with integrity, humility as the real power, and love of enemy.]

Why do you think Southern Baptists were unable to appreciate what Hull calls “dynamic equilibrium” (both conservatism and liberalism are needed to give balance)? The democratic process in which “winner takes all” made no provision for the minority. What contributed to this myopic focus and willingness to control who is *in* and who is *out*? Have you ever felt like you were in a “minority” group?

**Reflect & Apply**

This chapter hits very close to home for many people. I personally know many whose lives were very negatively impacted and altered by the SBC takeover process. Multiple volumes have been written telling these stories, so we will not deal with that here. Instead, practice personal reflection on lessons learned in this chapter:

- 1) Do you use the word “inerrancy” to talk about Scripture? If so, why do you think a word not found in Scripture is often used as a framework for describing biblical authority given the fact we have no access to original autographs?
- 2) In what ways are you using “us vs. them” language that separates and divides instead of unites?
- 3) How do you relate to friends or family members who seem incapable of appreciating the “dynamic equilibrium” Hulls says is needed?
- 4) Can you tell personal stories appreciating both conservative and liberal viewpoints among your family and friends?

Close the session by reading 1 Corinthians 1:10 (the verse many believe is Paul’s thesis statement for the letter).

## Chapter 6

### Applying Conservatism and Liberalism: Partisan Politics

**Central Question:** Is it possible for conservatives and liberals to reconcile and work together for the sake of the kingdom?

#### **Focus**

Hear these words from Glen Stassen in *A Thicker Jesus—Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age*:

*Churches must hear, trust, and obey Jesus Christ...For that message to give us solid ground, we must not reduce Jesus to a principle so thin it can fit into the cracks of powerful ideologies; we need a thicker Jesus who can confront ideological manipulations...By “ideological” I mean a belief system invented in order to defend special privilege for an in-group and provide justification for excluding other groups while covering up what the belief system is doing. It becomes a rival to God’s truth, which is higher and more inclusive than our special privileges. The prophets called it idolatry, and Jesus called it hypocrisy. It distorts people’s understanding and blinds them from seeing the truth...All nations, corporations, and even churches can be deceived by falsely self-serving ideology. We need to exegete [explain or critically interpret] Jesus concretely so Jesus can give us specific guidance and help us see the truth about our own unintentional hypocrisy.*

#### **Study**

Compare...

the New Testament period when Palestine was culturally Greek and militarily controlled by Rome. Jews believed their distinctive way of life would disappear if they were assimilated into the prevailing Greek culture. Jewish leaders practiced politics of polarization. Judaizers refused to accommodate—insisting all Christians obey requirements set forth in the Hebrew Bible.

with...

the rightward movement of the Southern Baptist Convention in order to preserve Southern ways of life.

Say, “While Paul and others worked for the acceptance of Gentile Christians without forcing them to first become Jews, they could not anticipate the role partisan politics would play. In the same way, moderates within the Southern Baptist Convention expected the pendulum to swing back to a more inclusive centrist position. They, too, were unable to anticipate the role of partisan politics in religious life.”

Why do you believe finding a centrist position—one that embraces both conservative and liberal understandings—is so difficult?

Show how the rightward shift in the Southern Baptist Convention paralleled the conservative political shift in the United States. How did the political climate in our country aid the agenda of the Religious Right?

## **Understand**

Unpack seven principles Hull believes are often relevant to religious controversy:

1. Conservatism is motivated by fear and liberalism by hope.
2. Culture is the catalyst and politics the driver of public attention.
3. Very few people possess the sophistication to adopt one ideology politically and another religiously.
4. We honor the dominant ideology of those with whom we work.
5. There is strength in allegiance to only one ideology (SBC became conservative and Republican).
6. Despite their minority status, moderates can have a disproportionate influence by forging ties with one of the major traditions. They deliberately seek to learn from both traditions.
7. In coping with the intensity of polarized controversy, we must not succumb to the Manichean heresy, i.e., look for adversaries and highlight differences rather than similarities.

A key point from this chapter is Hull's insistence that associating only with their own ideological crowd is unhealthy for both conservatives and moderates. "It makes them too totalitarian in what they claim, too contemptuous of those who differ with them, and too dependent on group loyalty to risk diversity." Do you agree with Hull? What are the advantages of following Hull's instruction?

## **Reflect & Apply**

Hull is correct when he asserts it is *not impossible* for Christians of different stripes to be reconciled and work together for the good of the kingdom. What will it take to bring folks in your church to a centrist perspective that honors the beauty and variety of God's creation?

The world "will know we are Christians by our love." When all is said and done, the highest law is love. The Great Commandment instructs us to love God and love neighbor, and love demands action. What encourages us to hear Spirit's voice calling for embrace—not exclusion?

## **ON BOARD:**

Brainstorm ways we can make a difference. Examples might include:

1. Pray for a change of heart for yourself.
2. Stop labeling people. Labels dehumanize and erect walls of separation. Shifting our language to talk about **people** *with conservative or liberal thoughts* could empower more civil dialogue around important issues that matter.
3. Spend time building relationships with people who are ideologically different from you. We are less likely to condemn people we know and care about.
4. Attack issues, not people.
5. Practice humility. Follow Jesus' example—he humbled himself and became obedient to death on the cross (Philippians 2:8).

### **Call to Action:**

#### **OPTION A:**

If time allows, return to Glen Stassen's comments (under Focus) about systems we create to exclude others.

#### **OPTION B:**

As we close our discussion of Hull's provocative book ponder these words from Jim Wallis in *The (Un) Common Good* (p. 16):

"A central purpose of this book is to challenge the hateful ideological warfare between the conservative and liberal sides in our ongoing political battles, as well as their inability to listen and learn anything from each other. I believe the best idea of the conservative political philosophy is the call to *personal responsibility*: choices and decisions about individual moral behavior, personal relationships like marriage and parenting, work ethics, fiscal integrity, service, compassion, and security. And the best idea of the liberal philosophy is the call to *social responsibility*: the commitment to our neighbor, economic fairness, racial and gender equality, the just nature of society, needed social safety nets, public accountability for business, and the importance of cooperative international relationships...*The common good comprises the best of both ideas—we need to be personally responsible and socially just.*"

Close with prayer asking God to awaken consciousness regarding OUR efforts to preserve special privilege. Pray we embody the presence of Jesus as we relate to all, especially those who express different ideologies.

## **STUDY EVALUATION**

1. Do you define conservative and liberal differently now than when you began the study of Hull's book?
2. In what ways have you built greater capacity to love and extend grace to people who see things differently from you?
3. Did the Holy Spirit convict you about your behaviors, thoughts, beliefs, or practices as a result of Hull's materials?
4. Have you experienced an attitude adjustment?
5. What actions have you taken or will you take in response to what you learned?