

Appreciating Conservatives

We are in the middle of a sermon series following the lectionary through the book of Mark. Today's scripture is prompted by an event that occurs in Jesus' ministry:

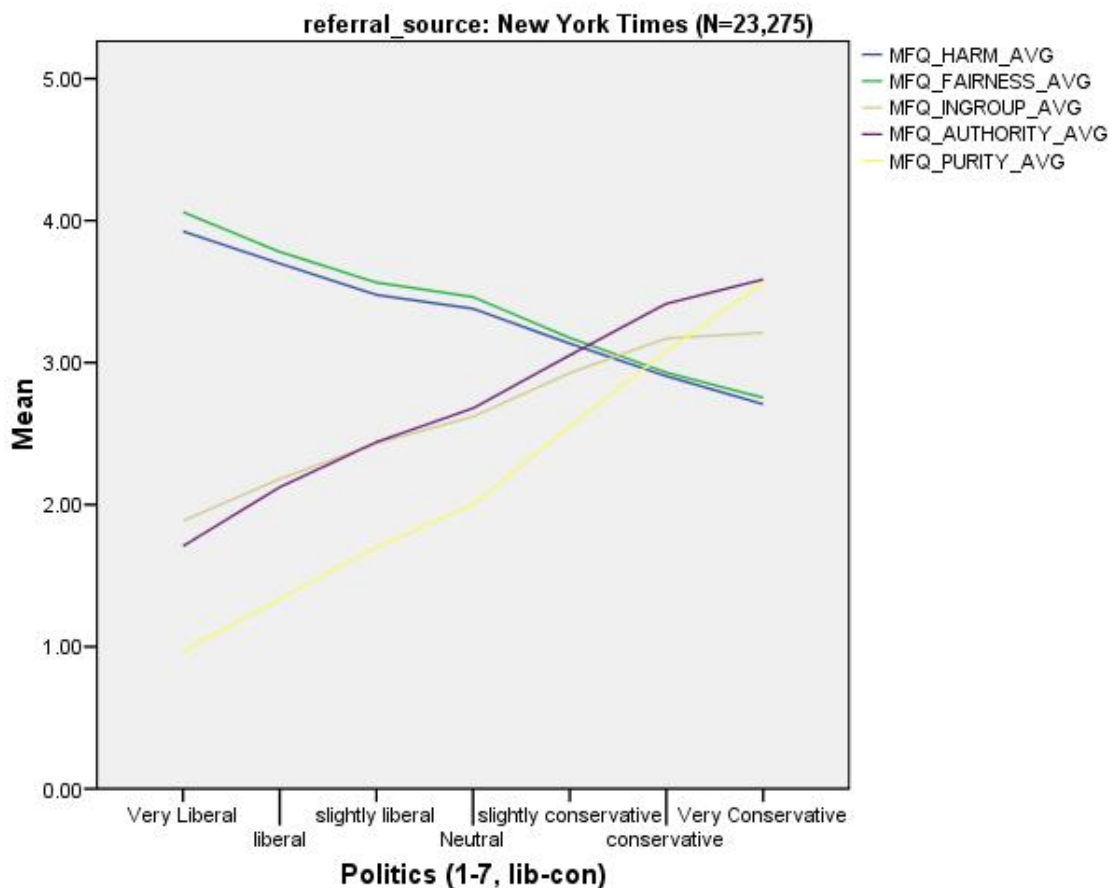
Mark 9:38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

Today, various people perform acts in the name of Jesus: Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, Fundamentalists, Branch Davidians, the Klu Klux Klan, Methodists, and many others. Not all of these people want to associate very closely with each other. Here are a couple of headlines from this year:

"The new Christian left is twisting the gospel"

"9 Reasons most conservatives are not 'Christian'"

Dispute about who is obliged to associate with whom is called in-group/out-group distinction. It is one of three "moral foundations" that modern scientists have found markedly absent in non-conservatives.



The x-axis of this graph represents the degree to which a person identifies as conservative. The y-axis represents the degree to which that person employs a given foundation in their moral decision-making. Each line is for a different foundation and we see that the lines cluster into two patterns. On average, considerations of "harm" and "fairness" are employed by both liberals and conservatives, but considerations of "in-group loyalty," "authority," and "purity" are employed much less by less conservative people.

The “on average” caveat is important. Even if your brain remains wired over the course of your entire life to be conservative, you may at times have called yourself liberal or acted liberal. To be clear, from here on out, I will use the term “conservative” to name a physiology, rather than to name the corresponding identification or behavior. The conservative moral foundations have been compared to flavors detectable only to people who are physiologically conservative. They aren't actual flavors, but there *are* actual flavors that liberals are less able to detect. Liberals are less able to taste phenylthiocarbamide and less able to smell androstenone. The differences that distinguish conservatives from liberals are physiological, but not as obvious on the surface as those that distinguish men from women, or blacks from whites, so when a conservative responds to something a liberal cannot detect, like when some disciples reacted to the invasion of their in-group, liberals may suspect the conservative is delusional.

Mark 9:38 comes right after a passage about disagreement among the disciples, but it does not directly say that the disciples disagreed about how to treat the exorcist nor that they didn't understand why they disagreed. We need to infer that from human physiology, just like we infer that the disciples had eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Unless Jesus called only conservative disciples, some would be more conservative than others, and they would get into the same in-group/out-group disagreement we do today.

Which is right, the liberal or the conservative? The good news, I think, is that Jesus was able to address the disagreement in a loving way, and provided an example we can follow:

39 But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. 40 For he that is not against us is for us. 41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.

42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the

kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

If you are liberal, you will tend to focus on "Whoever is not against us is for us," and conclude that we should accept outsiders by default. Conservatives will object that some outsiders may be against us, so technically Jesus is *not* telling us to accept outsiders into the in-group before their true motives are known. As most, he is talking about one particular exorcist.

If you are conservative, you will tend to focus on "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off," and conclude that we should be wary of developing dependence on strangers. Liberals will object that this is just a metaphor for doing whatever it takes to avoid sin, and that it might be possible to avoid sin without reducing association with people who drag us down.

I believe Jesus demonstrated love by affirming both sides. You might think logic forbids affirming both sides, but Jesus defies such logic. This is even more obvious in the book of Luke:

Luke 9:49-50 "Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he is not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

Luke 11:23 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters."

The idea that Jesus affirms both sides is somewhat controversial. Although it is standard practice in rhetoric to present multiple sides of an issue, I have yet to find another biblical scholar who believes this passage does not ultimately pick a side on the in-group/out-group issue. Of course, we have yet to examine Jesus' conclusion...

I am passing out some bags of salt that look something like the salt of Jesus' day. Please take one. There's enough for everybody. These last two verses are considered one of the most difficult passages of the New Testament:

49 "For every one will be salted with fire and every sacrifice will be salted with salt. 50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Do you see why these verses are considered difficult to interpret? If you are following in the pew bibles, you will see lots of footnotes. The passage about salting sacrifices is not in the original text--it was added later, but some scholars believe it helps to clarify the meaning. I'll present just two interpretations that I think represent the scope of the controversy.

The first interpretation says that Mark, or Mark's source, misunderstood Jesus. Just as the English word "bat" can refer either to a flying mammal or to equipment used in baseball, the Hebrew word *malach* and its Aramaic translation can mean either "to salt" or "to destroy." Instead of "everyone will be salted with fire", this interpretation claims a better translation would acknowledge that Jesus selected words that could alternatively mean "everyone [of them] will be completely destroyed."

In that case, Mark 9:49 would not be part of the conclusion, so Mark 9:50 would stand on its own. What's Morton Salt's famous line about its refined salt? "When it rains, it _____." Morton refines salt so that it won't absorb the moisture out of the air, but the salt familiar to Jesus' disciples was not refined. If not stored in airtight containers, it would absorb moisture from the air and lose its saltiness. So we might think Jesus is telling us that the path to peace is to maintain certain social boundaries most of the time, like keeping salt in airtight containers.

Rather than warn us to protect our saltiness, the second interpretation claims that Jesus was explaining how to *regain* our saltiness. This interpretation links the phrase "salted with fire" to the practice of offering sacrifices to God. Leviticus 2:13 instructed the Jews to add salt to their sacrifices. According to this interpretation, salt and fire purify, and we can analogously regain purity through interaction with things beyond our normal in-group. This places the passage among many referring to a "refiner's fire", telling us, in the terms of Kelly Clarkson's modern anthem, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

So we have two very different interpretations of Jesus' teaching on in-group/out-group distinction. On the second interpretation, Jesus is claiming that mixing will ultimately make you stronger, so conservatives should find the courage to overcome their aversion to in-group/out-group mixing. On the other interpretation, Jesus is warning that mixing will make us weaker. On one interpretation, Jesus affirms liberals. On the other, He affirms conservatives.

How do I personally pick between these interpretations? First, I note that Jesus is loving. I believe He made this passage poetic on purpose because He didn't want to empower either side to use His words as a weapon against the other. Second, I note that Jesus is impressive. The interpretation I offer would be farfetched if Jesus were a normal man--it would be way too difficult for a normal man to construct such an intricate puzzle of words. Finally, I note that Jesus is always correct. Does mixing make people stronger or does it make people weaker? Only one of these can be correct. Only one will be supported by science. Thus, this scripture is a time-capsule, with a special message for people with sufficiently advanced science to unlock it.

Here's how to apply science: There are at least four ways to pursue morality: Self-control, Empathy, Prudence, and Inspiration. Self-control is the conservative way. It is not the only

approach a conservative ever takes, and conservatives aren't the only people to engage in self-control, but conservatism does not exist without self-control.

Self-control requires willpower. If a conservative parent administering discipline lost her willpower, she might resort to empathy, and the child might be spoiled. If a conservative soldier facing a scary enemy lost his willpower, he might resort to prudence, and run away. If a conservative trudging through detailed specifications to manufacture airplane parts lost her willpower, she might resort to inspiration, and airplanes might be less reliable.

In-group boundaries shield conservatives from having to use as much willpower. The question to test scientifically is "Does use of willpower increase willpower (the way love can inspire more love) or does willpower become exhausted the way muscles become exhausted?" If willpower needs to be conserved, then there is good reason for conservatives to maintain in-group boundaries, and I will go with the conservative interpretation of this scripture.

The classic way scientists measure a person's willpower is to ask him/her to hold their hand in ice water as long as they can. The longer you can keep your hand in the ice water, the more willpower you've got. So I've got a cooler of ice water here, and I've got a video of someone trying this experiment. Does someone want to volunteer, or do we go to the video?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PW3Au9RiZW0>

Keeping your hand in ice water takes willpower, and the experiments show that willpower becomes exhausted. We also expend willpower to keep from cursing, so the average person cannot endure the pain as long if they do not curse. We also expend willpower on shopping and math problems, so the average person cannot endure the pain as long after shopping or doing math problems. Judges spend willpower when they judge sentencing appeals, so their judgments become less and less consistent as the day wears on. We have tons of evidence that conservatives need to conserve their willpower.

There *are* a few ways willpower can boost willpower. Diet, physical exercise, mental exercise of prayer or meditation, maintaining regular doctor visits, and maintaining healthy relationships are all activities that can take and boost willpower, but only because they help avoid situations that would take even more willpower. If you have the physiology of a conservative person, or you have a son or daughter or other loved one who is predisposed to approach life through self-control, then you should not belittle the value of in-group/out-group distinctions.

Without the protection of segregation, conservatives would more readily lose their willpower, and thus lose their freewill. I realize it is not intentional, but the impact on conservatives of the liberal world, with its loose music, tight clothing, and free-flowing love, is like invasion of the

body-snatchers. When willpower becomes exhausted, no one can be conservative. We need to be more sensitive to the different needs of different people. We need to treat conservatives as precious, like the disciples treated salt.

Before I "come in for a landing," as George puts it, I need to assure you that the freewill of non-conservatives is just as vulnerable to other threats, but that's a different day's scripture. I also need to explain that it is good for willpower to be limited. A conservative with infinite willpower would be like this: the Terminator. If the terminator were as wise as God, then it would be great that it never stops, but we are not God.

On May 6, 2010, the stockmarket crashed a trillion dollars in just 36 minutes. Why? Because the automated trading computers had infinite willpower. They got on a bad path, and stubbornly stuck to it through transaction after transaction, making it worse and worse. If humans didn't turn-off the computers on May 6th, America might not be here today. Designs to prevent this from happening in the future basically involve giving computers the capacity to have their willpower exhausted like humans.

We are designed to be diverse. For example, some of us are conservative and some are liberal. Thank God Jesus gave us an example of how to handle this diversity. It's a compromise: the value of the salt is protected by providing an environment that preserves its purity. Some of our children need that kind of environment. Yet salt is not the only ingredient in our families. Our families may also include liberals for whom Kelly Clarkson's song rings true at a moral level. As diverse families, we can have it all, but we should affirm each other with sensitivity to our differing needs and strengths.