

Can We All Get Along?

Our country is in crisis. The church of Jesus Christ is in crisis. The Presbyterian Church is in crisis. There is a religious divide and it has become an increasingly bitter national political divide. The media call it “the culture wars” and it is real.

The question to consider, or I want us to consider as faithful members of both church and nation, is what we can do, if anything, to narrow the divide, temper the differences, bring us back a little closer to one community of all God’s people. For me, this challenge is personal. It is a challenge I would also pose to all of you. CAN WE ALL GET ALONG? Because, if we cannot, I fear for our ourselves, our church, our nation, and our world.

For all the talk we sometimes hear about our living in a society of “secular humanism” with little attention paid to God or to religious values, I think we live in fact in a very religious society where issues of faith are played out every day in public as well as private. I think our problem is not that we have ignored values but that we disagree about values. I believe we are in crisis because we are divided over the core issues of faith and salvation as they apply to the world we live in. Religion is once again tearing God’s Kingdom apart.

The roots of our division go back at least to the 18th century, to differences which arose between what I am going to call “Evangelical Protestants” and “Mainline Protestants.” Over the centuries, each tradition has accrued to itself people of different denominations, some mostly on one side, some mostly on the other, and some themselves split. These include not only Presbyterians and Methodists but also Catholics, Jews, non-believers, and even atheists, all of whom, while rejecting some Protestant principles, have identified with one or another of the two sides on specific issues. Although there are no perfectly uniform lines of demarcation, all Americans are involved and the division has passed over from faith to politics.

On the one hand, we have the Evangelicals focused on certain passages from the Old Testament, especially Genesis and Leviticus, and the New Testament, especially Paul, the Gospel of John, and Revelation. For them, the Bible is “literal,” clear, and immutable. They are certain of its prohibitions and its promises for all believers. They attend especially to issues of sex, sexuality, and gender. They believe they are called upon to have a personal relationship with God, be “born again” through the Holy Spirit, and, in the moment of repentance of their sins, receive the redemption and salvation God promises all who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, attend to salvation primarily through the life and teachings of Jesus in the parables, stories, and instructions of the synoptic gospels -- Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For them, the Bible is the sure foundation but a less certain and specific guide, at times contradictory even among the stories of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They know the most important

passages are those of the "most important commandment" -- to love their neighbors, even their enemies -- and to take care of the poor. But they read the warning of the difficulties ahead for the rich ever getting into the Kingdom of Heaven and know there is no way of knowing exactly how much is enough to give away nor how little is little enough to keep. They know that salvation lies in community but the pathway to it is a responsibility not a promise and certainly not a contract.

Both views are Bible-based. Each leads in a different direction.

Evangelicals are called to save all God's people by getting them to join the community of Evangelicals. For Evangelicals, the emphasis on specific sins and commandments leads to a so-called values agenda the media, in catchy alliteration, mislabels "God, guns, and gays." The Bible is clear: homosexuality is a perversion; sexuality is suspect; abortion is murder. Few Presbyterian U.S.A. Evangelicals may go so far publicly but further out are those who believe Creation occurred in six days a few thousand years ago and women cannot be ministers -- or even lay leaders -- of the church. Society has failed to follow God's commandments because religion has been suppressed in a secular world. Evangelicals want to require public expressions of religion. They are prepared to use government to impose their religious and political agenda.

Mainline Protestants are called to tend to all people as members of God's community. Ironically, this is just as much a religious agenda and it is one for which Mainline Protestants have been using government for more than 200 years. The Civil War, the Progressive Era of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and the New Deal are all high water marks of Mainline Protestant dominance of the nation's religious and political agenda. At some level, obviously varying greatly among individuals, Mainline Protestants know that charity is never enough to meet the needs of the poor and government programs are essential. They know that programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Head Start do work and that the problem with social programs in the United States is not that they have tried to do too much but that they have tried to do too little.

Thus are the battle lines drawn. But our question cannot be: How can we bring these two groups together? The divide is too profound, too bitter. For Evangelicals, the Mainline Protestant agenda is secular, not "spiritual," making too many compromises with God's commandments. It is not focused on salvation and one's personal relationship with God. It substitutes hated government programs for the joy and fulfillment of personally attending to God's commandment to care for the needy.

For Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, Evangelicals too readily ignore Jesus and the New Testament. They favor instead, doubtful interpretations of Biblical passages set in a different time for specific purposes unrelated to issues of sex, sexuality, and gender in the 21st century. Evangelical attempts to impose their public prayers on other people are just what Jesus said they were in Matthew 6, verses 5 and 6: hypocritical. The idea that Jesus's commandment to take care of

the needy can be fulfilled without the commitment of all of society is a cop-out by those who really care only about themselves and not the needy.

The fact is, folks, we already spend too much time on our differences. Efforts to bridge these, our worst divisions, will likely just make them greater and end up tearing apart not only our church but our society. We need to think about what we have in common and whether we have enough to keep us together. I think maybe we do.

We certainly have – or had -- a lot in common once upon a time. Do we not both believe in the same God? Do we not both believe in the redemptive Power of the Holy Spirit? In Jesus Christ. Protestantism was founded on the idea of individual responsibility flowing out of each person's individual relationship with God. Many Evangelical Protestants envisioned the American Revolution as a fulfillment of their own revolutionary doctrine of collective, indeed utopian, salvation for the community as well as the individual.

What we didn't know also used to be part of what we had in common. We at least accepted other Protestants' understandings of the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. That was the major reason why the people demanded that a religious freedom and anti-establishment clause be added to the Constitution in the 1780's. To claim, after all, that there is only one way to the Kingdom of Heaven and you alone know what it is, is to pretend to know the Mind of God -- what only God can know – and altogether miss the wonder of God's Grace! But now the Missouri Synod Lutherans won't even accept other Evangelicals' beliefs and the Southern Baptists seem to be headed in the same direction.

It seems like now, what we most have in common is our pretension, our arrogance. We need to put them aside.

Are Mainline Protestant types not in fact a little weak on the old prayer thing, so easily getting involved in all their dutiful activities as if these would be enough and somehow substitute for faithful consideration of each person's relationship with God? And whom are the Evangelical Protestants fooling when they pretend that charity – mostly someone else's – could ever substitute for programs like the Women, Infants, and Children program (called WIC) which the government created in 1972 to meet the then unmet nutritional needs of four million of this country's poorest children five years old and younger.

Mainline folks: when you embrace science as the source of Truth, it seems to me you are about as overbearing as the Creationists are about the Bible. How about cutting the Evangelicals a little slack here? Science isn't all facts either. How could you possibly pay any attention to science news without seeing that at its core, where science is most beautiful and most powerful, doing science is a process of ever-changing theories and models in search of a Truth which, like God, is ultimately unknowable? Talk about pretension and arrogance!

Evangelical folks: you really have sold out to the corporate deregulation agenda on stewardship of God's Creation. You have become so dependent upon

corporate money to promote your values agenda politically that you have accepted going backwards on clean air, clean water, and global warming? Do you really want our national parks turned over to for-profit corporations? Do you really care about the Florida manatee, cougar, and sea turtle?

Then again, Mainline folks: you really do seem as befuddled as the Evangelicals when it comes to sex. Couldn't you both get together to condemn the continuing problems of some people using their power – physical, emotional, economic, and social -- to impose sex on others, of more and more sexual acts and exposure of nudity on television, and of the absolute plague of pressure on girls to appear like young women and young women to look like street walkers! In fact, you use the First Amendment to cover up your wishy-washiness about socially destructive sexuality. Citizens speaking out against social wrongs is not censorship; it is free speech. Precisely because the government has no place in limiting social and political speech, it is your responsibility to speak out. Rather than condemn Evangelicals who want to boycott Disney for the wrong reasons, have the guts to boycott NBC for the right reasons.

And Evangelicals: you abuse the First Amendment just as badly. Are you ever going to stop spouting off about prayer in the public schools? No court in this country has EVER banned any student, teacher, or administrator from either private prayer or voluntary small group prayer around something like a lunch table. What courts have banned are school-sponsored prayer and public prayers where the only way one can avoid them is to leave the event – be it school assembly or a football game. Let's face it: your real agenda is not freedom to pray, but coercive prayer, and not just a solemn meditation or prayers by all religious groups but your version of Christian prayers. You want to limit sex education to church and family but use the public schools to impose religion.

I know that abortion is a lost cause for reconciliation, but I yet wonder about the possibilities for putting aside our so very hard-over stands on homosexuality. Couldn't those who want to affirm consensual sex between committed and faithful persons of the same sex stop trying to make their position into a civil rights plank to which all faith communities must adhere? And couldn't those who think sexual relations between people of the same sex is always a sin consider the possibility that individual faith communities could see something different in the people right there with them whom the community knows and loves? It seems to me like both sides are more interested in beating each other up than finding God's way.

At last, I think we can, and we really do, care more about each other than our issues. I know people in this church with whom I will never come to much agreement on so many issues I have described between Mainline and Evangelical Protestants. But when I think of them – and I am thinking of some of you right now – in physical pain, at times of great loss, in financial difficulty, I cannot think of anything else but your need and my caring. It is a time for prayer. It is a time for our presence, physical and spiritual, with the people of the God who is always with us. This is the God of all people: young and old, female and male, all the various shades of color, rich and poor, straight and gay, Christian and

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non-Christian, American and every other country of the world. It is a time to wonder at God's Grace. We can all get along.

Thank you, God, for the blessing of this world you have given us all to share. May we yet be worthy of your charge to tend it and all the people in it.

Amen.