HIJACKED

Mike Slaughter & Charles E. Gutenson

with Robert P. Jones

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Responding
to the Partisan
Church Divide

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INTRODUCTION

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Few people who were of voting age at the time of the 2008 presidential election and now in the early stages of the 2012 campaigns would disagree that public discourse in the United States has grown increasingly uncivil. We, Mike Slaughter and Chuck Gutenson, have observed this shift from within the American church, seeing our congregants and colleagues gradually blend their faith and their political persuasions until it is hard to discern which is driving the other.

While we speak from our own experiences and ministries inside the church to build a case for reform that includes normative judgments and prescriptive recommendations, Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute provides objective analysis and description of the best research and polling data available regarding the changing relationship between politics and religion. As a sociological observer of religion, Robert has a distinctive and perhaps unusual task in a book that is primarily an insider's conversation between two ministers and the church at large. With his contribution of this book's first chapter, "The Demographic Shift," Robert serves as our "expert witness," called in to supplement our case for reforming the way Christians relate to politics with statistical evidence of the partisan shift that has occurred in the American church over the past forty years. We begin with our stories of calling and leadership as the church has shifted around us.

CHUCK'S STORY

I reached the age of twenty in 1976, which means that the majority of my early church life occurred in the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

My strand of the Christian tradition would be characterized today as very conservative theologically, probably falling into the fundamentalist camp. I specifically say we were "theologically conservative" because we had not yet been presented (at least in my neck of the woods) with the later popular notion that to be conservative theologically meant to be conservative politically. In fact, while there were the occasional political conversations, there was very little by way of serious interaction in the local church on political matters. I have no real idea how the folk around me voted. We were too busily focused on saving souls to be distracted from that work with engagement in things political. Oh, we had the same complaints folk have had since time immemorial about the relative merits of our current crop of national and state leaders, but that dialog fell more into the category of general bellyaching about the state of the world in which all of us feel obliged to participate. The political rancor, posing as theological disagreement, had not yet infiltrated churches in my area. Though looking back from our current vantage point, we can see that it was emerging in a number of ways.

In addition to growing up in a rather fundamentalist part of the church in the South, I lived in a sparsely populated community, and the average income level was, I'm sure, in the lowest quintile at the time. Our family was at church, quite literally, every time the doors were open. I am not sure how old I was, perhaps twelve, when my reading of Scripture started to make me wonder if the call of Jesus on our lives was not far more radical than we generally thought. I identified with Mark Twain's comment to the effect that the words in the Bible that disturbed him were not the ones he could not understand, but rather *the ones that were so clear that he could not help but understand them*.

While many fretted over the meaning of the book of Revelation and when the end would come (with a seemingly fresh set of predictions each year), I fretted over the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the Great Judgment. How was I ever going to live up to those? Too easily, the church has found reasons why these commands can be "spiritualized" so that they do not have the sort of "bite" they would if taken more literally. I kept wondering: What if God really

does mean for us to live in relationships of mutual interdependence? Relationships in which we put the good of the other above our own? How were we to reconcile the altar calls, complete with twenty-six verses of "Just as I Am," when we pleaded with folk to be saved, with Jesus' own words? When some persons came to follow him, he didn't immediately "extend them the right hand of fellowship," but rather asked why they would want to be his followers. Rather than looking for quick conversions, he warned that we should weigh the cost of discipleship carefully before deciding to follow him. While I was initially converted within this tradition, and while I will be forever thankful to my church for its contribution to my becoming a follower of Jesus, there were serious questions in my mind about what it meant to be converted and then to be a follower of Jesus.

As time passed, this tension only became stronger. Yes, I have always been a firm believer in restoration of right relationship to God through Jesus. At the same time, however, there often seemed to be too wide a separation between the call to salvation and the call to discipleship. Since every sermon seemed to be pretty much focused on the initial conversion experience, it was difficult to find a forum for exploring my nagging concerns, not only about what we were to believe, but also *how we were to live*. Sometimes I am asked how I came to have a passion for what are commonly called "social justice" issues. The fact of the matter is that this passion evolved out of those early periods of deep questioning around the most fundamental questions about what it means to be a Christian. Perhaps the easiest way to say it is that, as I explored more and more, the principles of grace and fairness always seemed to lie at the center of Jesus' message, and to me, social justice is just the way those things work out in communal and societal life. It seems to me that a concern for social/economic/racial justice is not something a person *adds to* being a follower of Jesus, but rather is how being a follower of Jesus *manifests itself in our daily lives*. In fact, living out the most basic of Jesus' commands and recognizing they paint a picture of how God intends us to live together lead one directly to justice concerns.

This was the matrix within which my early life of faith was worked out. However, because political partisanship had not yet become a

factor in my context, my attempt to work through all this did not get obscured by the church's commitment to either particular political party or sociopolitical ideology. Sadly, this is increasingly less true; rather, today the context for these discussions is often one deeply colored by sociopolitical presuppositions that particular strands of the church already hold. Different churches embrace different parties, of course. The upshot of all this is that when a church sees one or the other party as more on "God's side," theology and political ideology get united in a way that creates a lens for biblical interpretation so that, without even intending it, we soon find that the political ideology becomes a way of reading the Bible. Of course, this is precisely backward of what it should be.

While there were one or two pastors along the way who tried to suggest that God might have intentions for me in ministry, such a calling was not obvious to me at that time. Consequently, I wandered off to college in pursuit of a degree that would have good prospects for gainful employment. That degree ended up being in electrical engineering, and my first job was with a major manufacturer of electrical power equipment. It was a good job, and I enjoyed learning a great deal about the for-profit business world from many excellent mentors.

Relatively soon after graduating from college, I married and moved to Lexington, Kentucky. My new wife and I visited a number of churches in the area, deciding which we would make our home. As one might expect, our initial foray into the local church communities was to consider those in the same tradition as the one in which I grew up. The discomfort I had felt around the issues raised above, of course, had not simply disappeared. The consequence was my new wife suggesting we visit another denomination, one she had attended as a child. Much to our delight, we found that a pastor who had been her minister much earlier was now serving a church in Lexington. We visited, and to make a short story even shorter, that church quickly became our home. When asked by some about the difficulty in switching from the denomination of my youth to United Methodism, I generally say that I had always been a Wesleyan but that I just didn't know it until being exposed to Wesleyan theology. As it turned out, the specific points of tension I had felt between my earlier tradition and my

own read of Scripture were seen differently by the United Methodists and were, in fact, more in line with how I understood Scripture.

Between the time of my earlier interactions in the church of my youth and my transition to the Methodist tradition, it seemed to me there was some increasing likelihood that political ideology might make its way into the church. In my local church experience, it had not yet gotten to the point that political ideology and theology were intimately intertwined; but on a national level, there was not just an increasing level of participation in political matters by the church (which I tend to see as a good thing) but also an increase in partisanship. As persons began to see closer and more direct ties between one's political ideology and one's theological commitments, debates on these matters within the church were already headed toward increasingly rancorous divisions. I had no idea at the time how widespread this trend was going to become and how divisive it would eventually be for Christians of differing traditions, and even for folk within in the same church, and I certainly had not adequately thought about its effect on the church's ability to faithfully bear witness to the world of the hope we have in Christ. Few of us realized then, in the early 1980s, that a scant thirty years later non-Christians would list political party affiliation as one of the first things that come to mind when identifying Christians. It is hard to imagine a starker contrast than Jesus' view of how Christians were to be identified (ye shall know them by their love) and how non-Christians would identify us (ye shall know them by their party affiliation).

I worked for nearly fifteen years in the private sector, during which time, I felt an increasing sense of calling to leave the for-profit world to enter ministry. Why that was not more obvious to me during my earlier Christian life, I do not know, but from about age twenty-eight on, it became increasingly urgent. I pursued first an MDiv at Asbury Theological Seminary, spending a term at the University of Munich under Wolfhart Pannenberg, and then I went off to Southern Methodist University to study under my doctoral mentor, William Abraham. It took from 1992 to 2000 to finish all the work, though I did some adjunct teaching at Asbury University (then Asbury College) and took a position teaching theology and philosophy back

at Asbury in the 1999–2000 academic year. What ensued were eight delightful years of teaching, interacting, and counseling seminary students. It was remarkably rewarding at many levels.

During this period, from the middle 1990s all the way to the present, the intermingling of politics and theology was on the rise. Some preachers became so entangled in partisan politics that they began to tell parishioners that voting for a particular candidate was tantamount to sinning against God. Never mind that one could easily enough find pastors who could affirm you in your selection, no matter which party you chose. Increasingly, preachers were willing to flaunt the laws against taking sides politically, even to the extent of risking their tax-exempt status. Sadly, though, it is hard to point at any great successes for the church's willingness to become partisan, and more frequently, the outcome was little more than allowing ourselves to be treated as a cohesive voting block by one party or the other. I recall a sermon during the latter part of the 1990s wherein one of my favorite preachers proclaimed from the pulpit something like the following: "We are coming upon the thirtieth anniversary of the church's major attempt to influence the culture through political engagement, and as best we can tell *church and politics are both the worse for it*" (emphasis added). This was a man who was very conservative theologically and probably conservative politically (though, he never talked about it much in my presence), but he could see how subtly the church had positioned itself to be a player in the political world and how that was negatively affecting both the church and the culture at large.

I imagine I could have continued in academia for quite a long time, but for a couple of reasons. One of those reasons was my deep interest in what I referenced above as "justice issues." And, as time passed, I became increasingly intrigued by how our Christian faith should inform our interaction in the public arena. How should Christian faith affect political life? What sorts of public policies and institutions ought we to support? How should Christian faith guide the positions we take during debates in our multicultural, diverse communities? About the time all these questions were becoming urgent for me, an opportunity came along to take a position that combined my past business experience with my theological training and provided the chance

to work at the intersection of faith and politics. The opportunity was to work with the folk at the Washington, D.C.-area non-profit Sojourners, founded by Jim Wallis.

Being the inquisitive sort, I left the comfort of Wilmore and my fine colleagues at Asbury and moved to Washington, D.C. for a season. As is the case, I suppose, with any employer/employee relationship, I did not find myself in agreement with every position that Sojourners held. However, after a long discussion with Wallis, I was convinced that we were largely on the same page theologically. In fact, I often told folk that Jim could easily have signed the same faith statement that I did at Asbury—affirming the classic ecumenical creeds, defending the authority of Scripture, taking the resurrection to be an actual event, and so on. Given that common ground from which to start, I was not particularly worried about working through the areas of disagreement—surely Christians could come to respectful disagreement as to the implications of following Jesus in different areas of our lives. I would make clear my positions, but the organizational position was under the authority of the CEO and board. Further, the opportunity to gain firsthand experience on the inner workings of many of our political processes seemed invaluable for my own unfolding understanding of what it meant to try to take discipleship seriously in every aspect of our lives.

When I joined the Sojourners team, I fully realized that not all Christians would agree with my own positions; it has been the case since time immemorial that Christian sisters and brothers disagree on certain issues. What perhaps I did not fully realize was the extent to which partisanship in the culture had infiltrated the church, and thus, the extent to which political ideologies were increasingly affecting the ways Christian sisters and brothers perceived their ability to work together across party lines—not just on political issues, but within the church itself. It turned out to be a very small step indeed from being able to tell parishioners that voting for a particular candidate was a sin to excluding those who might embrace political positions different than our own.

MIKE'S STORY

In the last years of the 1960s, Jesus rocked my world. I'm talking about having a Damascus road, life-shaping encounter. I was raised in a northern Methodist church that had a more liberal theological slant from the one that Chuck experienced. Jesus' life was the moral pattern for our life values and social responsibilities. The Vietnam War was at the forefront of the daily news, Dr. King was leading the civil rights movement, and Rachel Carson had published *Silent Spring,* which is widely credited with helping launch the environmental movement. These were the themes that framed our Methodist Youth Fellowship meetings. Our white suburban youth group would visit black urban churches and participate in urban work camps during the Christmas break. Many of the social issues that were brought to light in my childhood church have shaped the social values that I hold today, including my views on war, capital punishment, and our shared responsibility to care for the poor and marginalized.

I am thankful for my early experiences in my home church, but one major dimension of the Christian faith was missing—the personal dimension of the gospel, that emphasized knowing God in an intimate way. The gospel is personal in its power to save and transform an individual's life, and it is social in its ability to redeem and transform culture. You cannot separate one dimension from the other. I am thankful for those saints of the faith who told me about Jesus in our Methodist church. But that group of "Jesus people" seemed to be in the minority, or maybe I just wasn't ready to hear.

My teenage years were rather turbulent. My parents sent me to kindergarten after I had just turned five. It seemed like I was always playing catch-up due to my mental and physical immaturity. I loved sports but was uncoordinated. My inattentiveness was attributed to misbehavior, causing me to be banished for one month to the corner of my second-grade classroom. I finished my junior year in high school with four Fs and a D-, yet for some reason teachers continued to pass me to the next grade level. I played bass guitar in a local Cincinnati rock band that worked high-school dances and clubs on weekends. The guys in the band were accepting and created the space where I felt affirmed. Two weeks before we were going to open for an internation-

al band at the Cincinnati Gardens, two of our band members were caught with drugs. We met with probation officers, and that ended the dream.

Life crises can open the door for the quest to a life-giving faith. In desperation I dusted off the Bible that I was given in my third-grade Sunday school class. Somehow I sensed that God was calling my name as I began to see the person of Jesus in a new light. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12); "The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest" (John 10:10); "You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you sothat you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you" (John 15:16). Jesus was knocking on my door. The call, "follow me and I will make you a fisher of people," was for me! This sense of Jesus' presence was immediate yet indescribable. I wasn't even sure if I would have the grades to graduate from high school, but I applied to college any way. God was calling me into the ministry!

I found my way to the University of Cincinnati in the fall of 1969 and majored in social work. Campus Crusade for Christ became a supportive fellowship through which I experienced firsthand the art of discipleship and the call for every Christian to be an evangelist. The two dimensions of the gospel (personal and social) that have formed my holistic "evangelical" theology were shaped through these early experiences and then expanded through the prophetic voices that I will discuss in chapter 2. There can be no personal holiness apart from social holiness, and there can be no social transformation apart from personal transformation. Jesus is the hope for the world! Jesus' followers are his agents who are committed to the messianic mission to "rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places; they will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past" (Isa. 61:4).

I carried this conviction to seminary at Asbury Theological Seminary and became ordained in the United Methodist Church. In 1979, I was appointed to Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church, a

tiny congregation that most pastors considered a place to "put your time in" before you were entrusted with a larger church in a more populated area. Thirty-three years later, I'm still here; and Ginghamsburg has grown from a weekly attendance of ninety (and falling) to five thousand (and growing).

Committed to building disciples and serving our neighbors, Ginghamsburg has long emphasized both personal and social holiness. However, I've noticed over the course of my tenure that more and more people are choosing to separate personal morality from social justice, influenced by partisan political extremes to believe that the gospel is about one and not the other.

I have personally witnessed this growth of partisan political influence in the church, which has created an unholy alliance of political ideology and biblical theology. A sound biblical theology must be the determining factor for our political ideology and not visa versa. Jesus is neither a republican nor a democrat, conservative nor liberal. Jesus refused to sell out to the religious and political systems of his day. He stood in prophetic tension with both, and we as his followers must learn to do the same.

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Political powers have long sought to harness the church's influence for partisan advantage. Christians dare not let the terse partisan spirit hijack the inclusive message and mission of Jesus for the world that God loves. Difficult as it may seem in this heated political environment, Christians are called to be actively engaged in the political systems of the world without becoming one with them.

To do so will require an understanding of Christian unity that allows for freedom of belief on politics and other non-essentials of the faith, such that we can discuss and disagree without being uncivil. Have we really come to the place where, to move forward, we have to move backward—to the old position held for so long by so many that we should not talk about faith and politics together in polite company? We sincerely hope not, because we live in an age in which the political processes seem more broken than ever. If ever there were a

time that the culture at large could use some words of wisdom from the church, we surely live in one of those periods now. To say that Christians should not bring a moral voice to the public dialog would leave a critical component of that dialog untouched. Or, have we moved so far in our willingness to intermingle our politics and our theology that we simply cannot go back? We surely hope this is not the case either. It is hard to imagine anything more disastrous for the voice of the church than to have it be perceived as little more than a quasi-moral cover for partisan politics.

We are still hopeful that we can swing the pendulum back in the other direction, without going too far in the opposite direction, that we can reconsider the errors that brought us to where we are, and that we can learn once again to hold our positions with passion, but not let our passion cause us to give up our mutual love and respect for those who disagree with us on some points. It is to that hope that this book is dedicated.

Part I

Defining the Problem

THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

Through decades of experience in the American church, we have observed anecdotally the shift in political framework among congregants, as more congregants bring what seem to be more partisan lenses to theological discussions and their moral convictions. This chapter sets the stage for our overall discussion with the best research and polling data regarding the changing relationship between politics and religion among Protestant Christians in America over the last four decades.

From a research perspective, this anecdotal experience raises several pertinent questions:

1) Has there actually been a broader shift in partisan and/or ideological identification among evangelicals over the last generation?

2) Does religious identity or partisanship matter more for evangelicals' policy attitudes, especially regarding politically charged issues such as abortion?

3) What are the implications of shifts toward more ideological homogeneity for the younger generation and the health of congregations?

This analysis is concentrated on white evangelical Protestant churches, the context in which we are largely working and in which these changes have been primarily observed.

QUESTION 1. HAS THERE BEEN A PARTISAN AND/OR IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT AMONG EVANGELI-CALS OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES?

Partisan Shifts among Evangelicals

White evangelical Protestant churches have undergone a dramatic transformation since the mid-1960s. Just before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, white evangelical Protestants self-identified as 68% Democrat, 25% Republican, and 7% Independent—making up a significant part of what was often referred to at the time as "the solid Democratic South."[1] While Democratic identification fell fairly steadily throughout the 1970s, it wasn't until the presidency of Ronald Reagan, beginning in 1981, that more white evangelical Protestants than not identified their political party as the GOP.

The shift in partisanship with the Reagan election was fairly dramatic—with white evangelical Protestants serving as one of the principal drivers in what political scientists have called "the great white switch."[2] For example, in 1978, just two years before Reagan's election, 53% of white evangelical Protestants still identified with the Democratic Party, compared to 30% who identified with the Republican Party. By the beginning of Reagan's second term in 1984, nearly half (48%) identified with the Republican Party, compared to only 40% who identified with the Democratic Party. Reagan's campaign—during which he famously courted the evangelical vote by saying, "I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you"—was the watershed moment that marked the beginning of white evangelical Protestants becoming a bedrock constituency of the Republican Party.

This about-face in party identity over a fairly short period of time is dramatic and accounts for some of the changing experiences pastors who looked out over the same pews during this period would have
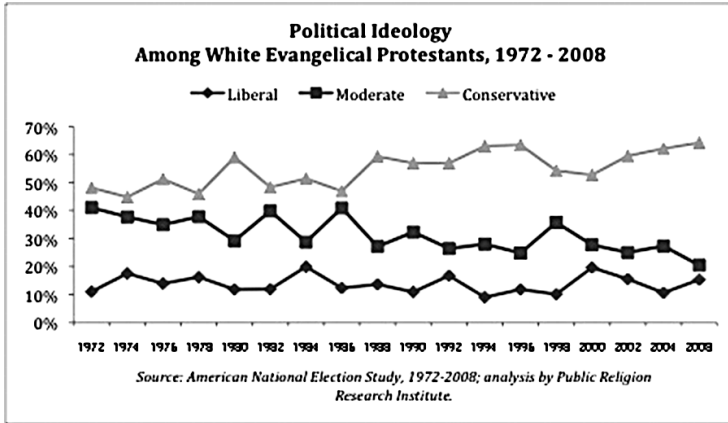
experienced. But the question remains whether these transformations have resulted merely in a switch in majority party preference or in a more dramatic shift toward greater homogeneity. The partisanship shifts in themselves do not on the face of it indicate increased homogeneity. For example, the number of political independents has remained relatively small throughout this period, hovering somewhere around approximately 12%. Moreover, the current balance between Republicans and Democrats, while inverted from its composition in the early 1970s, looks nearly identical. In 1972, 51% of white evangelicals identified as Democrats and 34% identified as Republicans. The year 2008 is nearly an exact mirror image, with 54% identifying as Republican and 34% identifying as Democrat. Thus, the transformation of the party identification rates only tells part of the story, largely because there continue to be viable conservative Democratic candidates at the state and local level in the South and the Midwest.

Increased Homogeneity: Voting Patterns and Ideological Shifts among Evangelicals

If the full effect of the political transformation of white evangelical Protestants is somewhat masked in self-reported party-identification rates, it becomes more clear in voting patterns and especially in ideological shifts over the past few decades. For example, while only 54% of white evangelicals identified as Republican in 2008, voting patterns demonstrate higher levels of homogeneity than these numbers suggest. For example, nearly 8 in 10 (79%) white evangelical Protestants voted for Republican President George W. Bush over Democratic candidate John Kerry in 2004, and nearly as many (73%) voted for John McCain over Barack Obama in 2008.

Trends in self-reported political ideology over the last few decades also illustrate this striking transformation toward polarization and overall conservatism among white evangelical Protestants. If we rewind to the early 1970s, white evangelical Protestants were nearly evenly divided between self-identified conservatives (48%) and self-identified moderates (41%), with only about 1 in 10 (11%) identifying as liberal.[3] Over the 1970s and up until the Reagan years, while

there was some movement from year to year, this relative balance remained fairly consistent.

**Political Ideology
Among White Evangelical Protestants, 1972 - 2008**

◆ Liberal ■ Moderate ▲ Conservative

Source: American National Election Study, 1972-2008; analysis by Public Religion Research Institute.

Beginning with the Reagan election in 1980, however, white evangelical Protestants became increasingly conservative, and the percentage of moderates among them dropped precipitously. The number of self-identified liberals remained consistently small at approximately 14%. For example, in 1978, two years before Reagan's run for the presidency, there was an 8-point gap between the number of white evangelicals who identified as conservative and those who identified as moderate (46% and 38% respectively). By the end of Reagan's presidency in 1988, the conservative-moderate gap had jumped to 32 points (59% and 27% respectively). By 2008, the conservative-moderate gap had grown to 44 points, with nearly two-thirds (64%) of white evangelical Protestants identifying as conservative, and only 1 in 5 (20%) identifying as moderate.

In summary, white evangelical Protestant Christians have undergone a dramatic political transformation since the late 1960s and early 1970s. They have gone from being part of the solid Democratic South to being a bedrock constituency of the Republican Party. But more important, they have shifted from being a conservative-leaning group in which the combined number of moderates and liberals rivaled the number of conservatives, to being a solidly conservative group in which the number of conservatives outnumber nearly 2 to 1 the number of moderates and liberals combined.

QUESTION 2. DOES RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OR PARTISANSHIP MATTER MORE FOR EVANGELICALS' POLICY ATTITUDES, ESPECIALLY REGARDING POLITICALLY CHARGED ISSUES SUCH AS ABORTION?

While it is clear from the analysis above that white evangelical Protestants have become strongly associated with the Republican Party and now support Republican candidates in national elections in overwhelming numbers, the question of the independent influence this new partisan identity exerts on issue attitudes, and the question of the relative power of this identity over time, remains open. In order to answer these questions, the Public Religion Research Institute ran a basic regression model to test whether identifying as Republican was an independent predictor of attitudes among white evangelical Protestants on the issue of abortion at different periods between 1980 and 2008.[4]

Between 1980 and 1986, when controlling for a number of demographic factors, identifying as Republican was not a significant predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. In other words, white evangelical Protestants who identified as Republican were no more likely than white evangelical Protestants who did not identify as Republican to oppose legalized abortion.

At the end of President Reagan's second term in 1988, however, identifying as Republican became for the first time a significant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. From 1988 to 2008, even when controlling for a number of demographic factors, identifying as Republican has consistently been a significant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. Specifically, beginning in 1988, white evangelical Protestants who identified as Republican were on average nearly twice as likely (e.g., 1.9 times more likely in 2008) as evangelicals who did not identify as Republican to oppose legalized abortion.

QUESTION 3. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF SHIFTS TOWARD MORE IDEOLOGICAL HOMOGENEITY FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION AND THE HEALTH OF CONGREGATIONS?

There are at least two implications for the shift of white evangelical Protestants toward more conservative ideology and partisan homogeneity. First, it has created a backlash among a significant portion of younger Americans, who are reacting particularly against the close relationship between religion and partisan politics, particularly around social issues such as same-sex marriage. Second, a more ideologically homogeneous profile exposes white evangelical Protestants to the dangers of group polarization, the tendency of like-minded, insular groups to move to extreme positions over time.

Negative Reactions among Younger Evangelicals to Culture War Politics

There is convincing evidence, coming from research conducted by the evangelical-leaning Barna Group, that increased partisanship and ideological uniformity, particularly around anti-gay policies, has resulted in negative judgments about Christianity by younger Americans, including those raised in the church. In *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*, Barna Group president David Kinnaman concluded that "Christianity has an image problem" among America's youth. In a study of younger Americans between the ages of 16 and 29, Kinnaman found that the three most common attributes associated with present-day Christianity were that Christians are anti-gay, judgmental, and hypocritical. These attitudes persisted even among religiously affiliated youth, among which he found that "four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is antihomosexual [sic]; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical, and confusing."[5]

There is also evidence that the effects of the attitudes documented by Barna may extend beyond a rejection of Christianity to a rejection of formal religious affiliation in general. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans—those reporting their

religion as nothing in particular—more than doubled from 8% to 18%.[6] This shift is being driven especially by the Millennial Generation, Americans under the age of 30. One-third of Millennials report that they do not belong to any religious tradition, making them more than three times as likely to have no formal religious affiliation than their grandparents (those aged 65 and older).[7] Moreover, this lower level of affiliation is also not merely a function of life cycle effects. Millennials are significantly more likely to be unaffiliated than members of previous generations at a comparable point in their life cycle. In the 1970s, for example, only 12% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 were unaffiliated with religion. Notably, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) Millennials say they were raised in a religion but are now unaffiliated with any particular faith.[8]

There is also evidence that the association of anti-gay sentiment with the public face of religion may play a strong role in driving younger people away from formal religious affiliation. In *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, well-known sociologists of religion Robert Putnam and David Campbell summarized the dynamic this way: "This group of young people came of age when 'religion' was identified publicly with the Religious Right, and exactly at the time when the leaders of that movement put homosexuality and gay marriage at the top of their agenda. And yet this is the very generation in which the new tolerance of homosexuality has grown most rapidly."[9]

In a set of interviews with religiously affiliated Millennials, researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute also heard strong echoes of this theme. One interviewee summarized the challenge he felt maintaining his connection to his church in the face of widespread negative perceptions about religion among his peers:

> Being intolerant and judgmental of gay people would be the biggest association people [my age] have with religion. I just don't want to be associated with that. Certainly, there are plenty of faith communities who don't believe that, but that to me is kind of the image that I have—religious folks like are judgmental, and like use the faith as a way to judge people. . . . To me, it doesn't match with Jesus' message.[10]

Even inside the church, this generational backlash is evident in the response among younger evangelicals to "The Manhattan Declaration," a document drafted and signed by luminaries of the conservative evangelical and Christian Right establishment.[11] One primary purpose of the document was to be a missive from the older generation to the younger generation on the continued importance of focusing on "the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty."

The document, however, created an unexpected negative reaction among some quarters of its younger target audience. Jonathan Merritt, son of former Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt and author of *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*, wrote a lengthy retort to the declaration for *The Washington Post*'s On Faith section.[12] Capturing the feelings of many in the younger generation about what he called "a new culture war manifesto," Merritt noted the absence of any "notable evangelicals under 40" among the signatories. He also chided the authors both for the condescending tone of the document and for their exclusive focus on a few hot-button issues that dovetail with a partisan agenda.

> Older generations often speak as though a handful of issues are the only ones that deserve our passionate witness and concerted attention. . . . Younger Christians believe that our sacred Scriptures compel us to offer a moral voice on a broad range of issues. The Bible speaks often about life and sexuality, but it also speaks often on other issues, like poverty, equality, justice, peace, and care of creation.[13]

Evangelicals and the Dangers of Group Polarization

In addition to the potential backlash generated among younger Americans and evangelicals by a more homogeneous ideological and partisan footprint, white evangelical Protestants also face an inherent set of challenges because of this increased homogeneity. There is solid emerging evidence that homogeneous communities—whether secular or religious, politically right or left—have a particular vulnerability to becoming more extreme over time. In *Going to Extremes: How Like*

Minds Unite and Divide, Harvard law professor Cass Sunstein unpacks the political implications of a growing number of neuroscience and sociological studies of polarization and extremism.[14] After reviewing hundreds of studies in six countries, Sunstein sums up the clear conclusions of these studies of group polarization as follows: "Groups go to extremes. More precisely, members of a deliberating group usually end up at a more extreme position in the same general direction as their inclination before deliberation began."[15]

In these studies of polarization, the effects of group deliberation are especially pronounced among groups that begin with some level of ideological homogeneity. Deliberations among these groups have two different effects: They increase the distance between these groups and others; and they significantly reduce internal diversity. In other words, interactions and deliberations among like-minded groups tends to tamp down dissenting views and move all individuals in the group to more extreme positions than they might hold without the effect of the group. Sunstein concludes, "When people talk to like-minded others, they tend to amplify their preexisting views, and to do so in a way that reduces their internal diversity. We see this happen in politics; it happens in families, businesses, churches and synagogues, and student organizations as well."[16]

In the case of churches, these effects may also be compounded to the extent to which the homogeneity of the community is reinforced by other social circles that reflect the same worldview and echo the same messages. There is ample evidence in the general public that Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into geographical lifestyle enclaves that tend to share income and education levels, race, and political affiliations.[17] Moreover, Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into liberal and conservative reading networks, with few "bridging books" linking conservative and liberal reading circles.[18] Finally, Americans are increasingly getting their news not from broadcast news but from more ideologically identified blogs and news sources.

White evangelical Protestants are participating in these broad trends and may be more influenced by some of these than other Americans. For example, white evangelical Protestants are concentrated in the

South and Midwest and tend to cluster in suburban or exurban neighborhoods, especially following the outward migration from cities largely in reaction to desegregation in older neighborhoods and the upward mobility of many evangelicals over the last generation. Christian book clubs popular among evangelicals function to populate reading lists with books with ideological or partisan perspectives already familiar to white evangelicals.

Finally, white evangelical Protestants—more than any other major religious group—tend to get their news from ideologically driven sources. For example, more than twice as many white evangelical Protestants say they most trust Fox News to give them accurate information about current events and politics (41%) than say they most trust all the major broadcast news networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS News) combined (20%). In the general population, Americans are evenly divided between those who say they most trust Fox News and those who say they most trust the major broadcast news networks.[19]

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the three basic questions with which this chapter begins, there is indeed convincing evidence of a dramatic political transformation that has resulted in increased partisan and ideological homogeneity among white evangelical Protestants over the last forty years. This transformation has its roots in the cultural upheavals in the late 1960s and the 1970s, but the real change occurred following the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Before Reagan, white evangelical Protestants were still a solid Democratic Party constituency; after Reagan, they had emerged as one of the most powerful groups in the Republican Party. Before Reagan, conservative evangelicals were roughly balanced by the presence of significant numbers of moderate and liberal evangelicals; after Reagan, conservative evangelicals dominated moderate and liberal evangelicals by a margin of 2 to 1.

These partisan and ideological shifts in identity were accompanied by an increase in the independent power of Republican partisanship among white evangelical Protestants. It was not until the last year of Reagan's second term in 1988 that identifying as Republican was a sig-

nificant independent predictor of opposition to abortion among white evangelical Protestants. Since that time, white evangelicals who identify as Republican have consistently been nearly twice as likely to oppose the legality of abortion as white evangelicals who do not identify as Republican.

Finally, these ideological and political shifts have important implications for white evangelicals. First, the close identification of evangelical Protestantism with conservative partisan politics—particularly anti-gay sentiment and policies—has created a negative backlash among a significant portion of younger Americans, including those within the church. Second, increasing homogeneity puts evangelicals at a higher risk of being effected by the process of group polarization, in which like-minded groups push their members to extremes.

In short, there is solid evidence that many of the anecdotal experiences we have noted are representative of a sweeping sea of change in the church that has happened in the relatively short period between Reagan's presidency and today. As the demographic research reveals, the overall shift among white evangelical Protestants has been toward a more conservative ideology and political affiliation. But conservatives are not the only ones inappropriately linking their religion and politics. Christians on both the conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum (with an ever-shrinking moderate middle) can fall victim to the tendency to conflate their theology and political ideology in unhealthy ways that limit civil debate and Christian cohesion. Our hope is that this analysis and the proscriptions that follow will make some contribution to sharper theological thinking, deeper moral reasoning, and more productive deliberations among Christians about the future paths of their churches as they engage public life and politics.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH?

You are not preaching the gospel!"
This was the response I (Mike) was hearing from a group of long-time attendees and members who were leaving Ginghamsburg Church for a nearby Assemblies of God fellowship. I was shocked.

My faith is based in the trinitarian confessions of the Apostles Creed. I believe and preach that Jesus is the unique Son of God, who was crucified for our sins and rose from the grave on the third day. The foundational principle of my life is centered in the Lordship of Jesus. I am committed to Jesus' mission that he outlined in his inaugural message, which he based on Isaiah 61: "The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for the captives, and liberation for prisoners" (Isa. 61:1).

If it is not good news for the poor then it is not the gospel. God is the God of justice, as so many scriptures emphasize: "I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and dishonesty" (Isaiah 61:8); "The Lord is famous for the justice he has done" (Ps. 9:16); "Your throne is built on righteousness and justice" (Ps. 89:14). As Jesus' company of followers, we are to be sacrificially giving ourselves with him, "rebuild[ing] the

ancient ruins . . . [and] restor[ing] the formerly deserted places; [we] will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past" (Isa. 61:4).

The gospel of Jesus is the good news of the kingdom of God. The church's mission is to function as God's redemptive restoration movement in the world, reclaiming the lost, rebuilding the broken, and restoring God's created order. This is the same gospel that I have been proclaiming at Ginghamsburg Church for more than three decades. The gospel of Jesus has lead Ginghamsburg Church to be deeply involved in Christian community development in at-risk neighborhoods, to work as advocates for the poor locally, nationally, and globally. We sponsor GED programs, Clubhouse after-school tutoring programs for at-risk elementary children, and senior adult feeding programs. Our food pantries feed over 1,500 people each week, and our medical equipment facility supplies the uninsured and underinsured with at-home hospital equipment that they can't afford. Ginghamsburg people have established three nonprofit organizations in the greater Dayton area including a counseling center that gives over $300,000 of free services to the uninsured each year. We have sent groups to Washington, D.C. to march for Darfur. We helped organize the Sudanese community in Dayton, Ohio, for the South Sudan Referendum vote for independence in January 2011. The people of Ginghamsburg have built more than 180 schools in Darfur, provided safe water sources for almost 100,000 people, and initiated a sustainable agricultural program feeding 82,000 people. Over seventy work teams have served in the gulf-rebuilding effort following Hurricane Katrina, and teams continue to travel to the New Orleans area.

Without apology I tell all people, "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life." Every summer we hold an outdoor baptism event where adults who have made a first-time commitment to Jesus are baptized. Jesus calls the church to go out and make disciples of all nations. Almost 70% of the people who attend worship at Ginghamsburg are involved in a class or cell group. Fifty-eight percent of the folks who attend worship will serve somewhere in the world on a mission experience this year. Will someone please tell me how we are not pro-

claiming and demonstrating the gospel? This is the same gospel that I was proclaiming when I came to Ginghamsburg in 1979. Some of the people who have left have been with me for most of those years. What has changed?

WHAT'S CHANGED?

Former Fox News talk-show host Glenn Beck made a statement on his March 2, 2010 show that became the litmus test for theological fidelity for some conservative Christians in the evangelical church. Beck said: "I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words," terms he believes indicate communism or Nazism. He also said: "If you have a priest that is pushing social justice, go find another parish. Go alert your bishop."[1]

Beck was correct in his statement that some Marxist groups have used the term "social justice." But he is wrong in connecting Marxist use of the term with biblical theology. Beck's biblical hermeneutic is lacking and greatly distorted. God is the God of justice. Justice is not just a principle for the church. God holds nations accountable for acting justly. As numerous scriptures say: "I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plum line" (Isa. 28:17); "Truly, because ou crush the weak, and because you tax their grain, you have built houses of carved stone, but you won't live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you won't drink their wine" (Amos 5:11); "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24)!

Beck seems to interpret the faith and scriptures from his partisan political perspective rather than from a sound biblical hermeneutic. Many liberals have been guilty of making the same error when they applied a modernist, closed-system, scientific hermeneutic to the scriptures, which resulted in disclaiming Jesus' miracles and bodily resurrection. All of us have been guilty at some point of bending the scriptures to support our own worldview. But I have noticed a more drastic shift in the church world and especially in the evangelical

church world during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Values of justice and compassion for the poor are now associated with only the liberal end of the Christian spectrum (if associated with Christianity at all), while evangelicals are known primarily for political conservatism.

So how did the evangelical church get here? Why do some people who claim to hold such a high view of Scripture confuse its prophetic message with the distorted partisan tirades of mass-media pundits? When did our passion for partisan politics, and the debates that have ensued among us, begin to eclipse our passion to demonstrate Christ's love for the world?

THE EARLY EVANGELICAL INFLUENCERS

Carolyn and I came to Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church in April 1979, with our seven-month-old daughter and many of our belongings packed into our Volkswagen Jetta. Ginghamsburg was my first experience as lead and only pastor (I was also the janitor, secretary, receptionist, and youth pastor, and I played my guitar as the worship music leader).

Ginghamsburg had about ninety worship attendees show up our first Sunday, eager to check out the new young pastor. In spite of my enthusiasm, the movement "grew" from ninety to about sixty during those first four months. I outlined a sermon series for my first year at Ginghamsburg studying the book of Acts. We focused on the nature of the church and what it means to be a missional community. As you can see, about a third of the folks didn't want to be committed to discipleship or mission.

Carolyn and I had experienced the fruit of discipleship through "church within the church" (i.e., cell group) ministry, and so our strategy was to identify the responsive people whose "hearts were strangely warmed" from the teachings in worship and then invite that group as potential future leaders to our home for discipleship and the deeper experience of community. After three months I was able to identify a group of twelve to fifteen people who were serious about going for-

ward in their faith and life mission. We began meeting in our home on Wednesday evenings, exploring together the deeper meaning of discipleship, community, and mission. This group would become the core leadership team for the momentum of the movement that would begin to germinate in our little rural/small-town community. We cut our teeth on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* and then dug deeply into the writings of the day's leading evangelical leaders, who embraced a rich, missional faith grounded in Scripture.

One of the young leaders in our group introduced us to Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. Ron Sider was one of the key influencers for evangelicals in the area of social justice during the 1970s and 1980s. Dr. Sider founded Evangelicals for Social Action in 1978. ESA describes its mission as follows: "To challenge and equip the church to be agents of God's redemption and transformation in the world." ESA subscribes to the following core values: [LB]

- All of LIFE is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our culture, economics, science, arts, social interactions, politics, etc. are all subject to his authority;

- All TRUTH comes from God. The Bible, as God's written word, is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice;

- The GOSPEL has the power to transform and renew both individuals and society;

- The CHURCH is called to be a model of the Kingdom of God as it points to the person of Jesus Christ and works towards God's vision of a just society. Evangelism and social transformation are indivisible in the work of the kingdom. Women and men enjoy full rights of service and leadership at every level of the church;

- PEOPLE are the focus of God's love. Any injustice or disrespect for human life—whether in the form of racism or abortion on demand, sexism or neglect of the family,

nationalism or euthanasia—is an affront to the Creator who made persons to bear the very image of God. Poor and oppressed people have a special place in God's heart. Christians are to weigh their actions and lifestyles by their impact on the least of these;

- CREATION is the personal handiwork of God and points us to the majesty, extravagance and creativity of God's character. God has entrusted humanity with the responsibility to steward the creation for the mutual benefit of all.

These are essentials of missional, Kingdom-focused Christianity. And far from a Communist organization, ESA adheres to classic evangelical theology. ESA adopted the 1974 Lausanne Covenant as its official statement of faith. The Lausanne Covenant is one of the most influential documents in global evangelical Christianity. The covenant was produced and adopted by more than 2,300 evangelicals from over 150 countries at the International Congress on World Evangelization that met in Lausanne, Switzerland in July 1974. The conference was initiated by a committee headed by Billy Graham. British pastor and theologian John Stott chaired the drafting committee for the document. The document acts as a confession of faith that covers fifteen key points, ranging from the purpose of God, the authority and power of the Bible, the uniqueness and universality of Christ, the nature of evangelism, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the return of Christ. The fifth section of the document, Christian social responsibility, was interwoven into the tapestry of this confession as indispensible to true faith:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all people. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.

> Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead. (Acts 17:26, 31; Gen. 18:25; Isa. 1:17; Ps. 45:7; Gen. 1:26, 27; James 3:9; Lev. 19:18; Luke 6:27, 35; James 2:14-26; John 3:3, 5; Matt. 5:20; 6:33; 2 Cor. 3:18; James 2:20)

The Lausanne Covenant clearly distinguished the neo-evangelical movement from the errors of rigid fundamentalism that focused only on the hopes of a heaven to come, as well as from modern liberalism, which affirmed social justice but did not hold the same high view of Scripture.

Ginghamsburg Church began to grow missionally through the prophetic ministries of other influential evangelical leaders of this period who emphasized both the personal and social dimensions of the gospel. After Bonhoeffer and Sider, our home group studied Howard Snyder's *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (IVP, 1975) and *A Kingdom Manifesto: Calling the Church to Live under God's Reign* (IVP, 1985). Snyder's chapter on ministry to the poor in Wineskins reflects the holistic nature of his writing and the movement: "In America, the gospel to the poor implies an especial Christian responsibility for the inner city, for the inner city is the particular kingdom of the poor" (p. 42). Snyder wrote these words at a time when many mainline churches were moving their campuses to the suburbs. In *A Kingdom Manifesto*, Snyder addresses the need to find new models of economic life, "transcending the capitalist/socialist debate and getting back to fundamental kingdom values." He goes on to state: "Again, because Western Christians have often been

beneficiaries of the present economic system, they have not been able to get far enough away from it to see some of the spurious assumptions on which it is based" (p. 101). This is some pretty radical stuff coming from an evangelical more than twenty-five years ago who would later become a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary and one of the founding members of the Center for the Study of World Christian Revitalization Movements.

Our early group discussions at Ginghamsburg demonstrated an air of openness and respect. We by no means agreed on all of the issues, but we realized that Jesus was calling us to follow in a radical way of divergence that transcends the political/cultural/economic platforms of the world. Jesus said, "My Kingdom transcends all worldly political structures" (my paraphrase of John 18:36). The kingdom of God is neither blue nor red, tea nor coffee! The church must stand in prophetic tension with Constantinian political systems and never underwrite or accommodate itself to a partisan political world order including American democracy. Howard Snyder came and led a weekend retreat with our leadership team during the mid-1980s. His influence on limiting church-building structures and maximizing mission continues with us today.

Tom Sine, who identifies himself as a futurist, was much in demand as a speaker for church and student groups during the late 1970s and early 1980s. He appeared as a commentator on the *700 Club*, was on the faculties of two universities, as well as was involved in various Christian relief and development organizations. In his 1981 book, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy: You Can Make a Difference in Tomorrow's Troubled World*, he writes concerning environmental issues: "Even as environmental hazards increase, there is evidence that Americans are already backing away from environmental protection as a national priority. 'Jobs first'—not environment—is already becoming the watchword of the eighties."[2]

Evangelicals were tackling social issues, addressing the needs for economic justice and environmental care. The evangelical renewal was showing promise in leading a movement that was inclusive of spiritual, racial, economic, and environmental transformation. Evangelical churches were on the verge of a promising awakening that

would be a demonstration of John Wesley's vision of a biblical countercultural community that would embrace both personal and social holiness.

It was during this era that Ginghamsburg Church began to grow and reach out into our local community in relevant, need-meeting ways. We started a local food pantry and a gently used clothing store within the first two years of my ministry at Ginghamsburg. The economy in our area has long been dependent on the automobile industry, which has been hit hard in the economic downturn that began in late 2008. The last General Motors plant in our area closed its doors in December 2009. Our food pantries went from serving 300 people a week in 2008 to over 1500 by 2010. Who would have known that we would be serving this many families today when we started a simple food ministry out of a closet in a church basement in 1979? The people of Ginghamsburg have also restarted a dying urban church in the Fort McKinley area of Dayton, an at-risk neighborhood in which 35% of the homes are currently sitting vacant—a perfect haven for drug dealers and crack houses. When we moved into the urban community in 2008, we immediately began a community-development project that included placing 80 volunteer tutors in the elementary school, established a GED program, instituted after-school and summer programs for children, and opened a teen recreation center in an old fire station. We continue to pursue grants for housing renovations and have opened a computer-training center to teach job skills, equipping people for creation of resumes and employment interviews. Where did the inspirational seeds for these ministries come from?

John Perkins has been involved for many years with issues of biblical justice and the economic development of the black community. He founded Mendenhall Ministries in Mendenhall, Mississippi, in 1962, and with others he expanded the ministry in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1975 under the banner of Voice of Calvary Ministries. John was one of the early innovators of Christian-community development. A team of teens and adults from Ginghamsburg Church traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer of 1981 to study and work with Dr. Perkins in the area of Christian-community development, which has become the core DNA of Ginghamsburg's mission. John's

missional commitment to biblical justice and economic development attracted an amazing group of evangelicals who wanted to participate in his work: Chuck Colson and Prison Fellowship, James Dobson and Focus on the Family, Ted Engstrom and World Vision, the Pew Memorial Trust, and the Stewardship Foundation are just a few of the groups creating an association of ministries to support biblical justice and economic development in black communities under John's leadership.[3] John MacArthur also became involved in the struggle. As a matter of fact, MacArthur was with John Perkins in Mississippi in 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. Perkins reflects on his association with MacArthur during those years: "I witnessed how his life was challenged as he understood racism and bigotry anew, as it was inflicted on him, a former Bob Jones University student. And through all this I, too, was struggling with the reality of knowing God's reconciling love while in the middle of all this hate."[4]

Tony Campolo (redletterchristian.org), professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University, a former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania and the founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, was a leading prophet in the evangelical movement. Many from my generation who had been raised in the dry institutional formalism of our parents' churches and had awakened in the campus and street ministries during the Jesus movement connected to his fresh revolutionary biblical message. Tony challenged the churches' anemic offering of institutional faith and civil religion. He made it clear that the call of Jesus was a radical departure from the American dream. Evangelicals bought his books and traveled to conferences to hear Tony speak. People from Ginghamsburg would make the annual pilgrimage to Indianapolis for the Gaither Praise Gathering where Tony seemed to be a yearly staple. Tony has continued to be a theological force throughout the church, authoring almost forty books and speaking about 350 times each year around the world. Dr. Campolo has worked to create programs for at-risk children in cities across North America and has helped establish schools and universities in several developing countries. Tony spoke several times during the 1980s and 1990s at Ginghamsburg-sponsored events. Ginghamsburg's Clubhouse programs (dreambuildersgroup .org)—an after-school tutoring ministry that works with children from

at-risk neighborhoods in multiple cities and states—had its embryonic beginnings birthed through Tony's inspiration.

Jim Wallis identifies himself as an American Evangelical Christian writer and political activist. He attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois where he joined with other young seminarians in establishing a community that eventually became Sojourners. The journal, *Sojourners*, originated in Deerfield, Illinois, as *The Post American* in 1971. Jim's advocacy focuses on peace and social justice. Wallis wrote in 1974 that "the new evangelical consciousness is most characterized by a return to biblical Christianity and the desire to apply biblical insights to the need for new forms of sociopolitical engagement."[5] Wallis has been quoted as saying, "I would suggest that the Bible is neither 'conservative' nor 'liberal' as we understand those terms in a political context today . . . It is traditional or conservative on issues of family values, sexual integrity, and personal responsibility, while being progressive, populist, or even radical on issues like poverty and racial justice."[6]

These prophets and others like them were the early heralds of the prepartisan political evangelical movement. Their voice gave hope for a new reformation of biblical faith that would work for the well-being of the poor, care for God's creation, and witness to new life found in the Lord of creation, Jesus Christ. The movement would not align itself with the political systems of Caesar. The church represents a third way, "The Way," that is neither left nor right. The people of God's kingdom must stand in a healthy prophetic tension with all the systems of the world.

SO WHO HIJACKED MY CHURCH?

Philip Yancey is a well-respected Christian author in the evangelical community. In an early 2011 interview he spoke of the negative reaction that people have when they hear the word *evangelical*. He asked a person on an airplane what she thought when she heard the word: "We had a good conversation; but when I asked that question, the words that came up immediately were 'judgmental,' 'telling me how to live,' 'intolerant.'" Philip went on to say in the interview, "I

would put it this way, evangelicalism is flexible, and it appeals to many people if they give it a chance. It got quite complicated by right-wing politics. That really exacerbated the image problem."[7]

The evangelical movement of the 1970s could not be pigeonholed in such a way, but that all changed as partisan organizations gained prominence with their claims that Christian faith meant voting a certain way. The political strength and media savvy of these groups sent the message that evangelicals were a monolith of conservative voters. Even today, evangelical Christianity is much more diverse than its public perception. Peter Wehner made this observation:

> Evangelicalism, contrary to conventional wisdom, is broad, diverse, and difficult to define. It encompasses personalities ranging from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush, from James Dobson to Jim Wallis. It includes magazines like *World, Christianity Today*, and *Sojourners*; and organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ and International Justice Mission. For our purposes, evangelicals can be defined as those who profess to have undergone a "born again" experience and claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus, whom they believe to be the Messiah. Evangelicals believe the Hebrew Bible and New Testament have been given to us by God and therefore have authority over our lives. And they believe, too, that it is a privilege and obligation to witness their faith to others.[8]

Party politics were never a factor during my first five years at Ginghamsburg Church. It was just assumed that the foundation of the movement was broader that any particular partisan political platform. I couldn't honestly tell you how any one person voted in the elections during those early years. Folks were more passionate about Jesus and his mission in our community and world. No one asked about a person's political ideology when he or she making a profession of faith, pursuing membership, or interviewing for a staff position. Political ideology was not as important as theology, acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God! So when did things begin to change? When did partisan politics become a determining hermeneutic for evaluating authentic faith?

As I look back over my tenure at Ginghamsburg, I can point to 1984 as the year when some of our people began to marry evangelical

faith with conservative politics. Phil, a really great guy who loved to serve and was a real support for my young family, asked if I thought it would be okay for him to insert voter guides in the Sunday morning worship bulletins. He handed me one of the brochures to peruse. I called Phil a couple of days later and mentioned that I noticed all of the recommended candidates were Republicans. He assured me that all of the candidates stood on a pro-life platform and that was the reason for the lack of inclusion of Democrats. Well, I was all for the pro-life part, so I asked why my friend Tony Hall, a U.S. congressional representative from our area, wasn't listed. Tony was pro-life, an outspoken Christian, an advocate for the poor, and a Democrat who had spoken at a men's dinner at Ginghamsburg that year. Phil's response: "Tony's economic ideology is too liberal."

Where in Jesus' teachings do we find the outline of a conservative or liberal economic platform? And when did we begin to align ourselves with political positions and candidates that may align with Jesus' moral and ethical mandates in one area but are divergent in many others? How do Jesus' teachings on war, divorce, and our responsibility to the poor influence our attitudes and responses? What do our political divisions have to do with Jesus' one overarching command: "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35)?

THEOLOGY, PATRIOTISM, AND POLITICS

Moral Majority, a political action group, was founded and led by televangelist Rev. Jerry Falwell in 1979. The group made considerable grassroots organizational efforts (i.e., voter guides in local churches) that played a significant role in the 1980 elections through its strong support of conservative candidates. The organization lobbied for prayer and the teaching of creationism in public schools, while opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexual rights, abortion, and the U.S.-Soviet SALT treaties.[9] The Moral Majority was dissolved in 1989, but the influence of accommodating evangelical theology and

conservative politics continues to compromise the integrity of the biblical message today.

Televangelist Pat Robertson, founder of the *700 Club* and the American Center for Law and Justice, ran during the primaries of 1988 seeking the Republican nomination for President of the United States. He surrendered his ministerial credentials and turned leadership of the Christian Broadcasting Network over to his son while he focused on his candidacy. He ran unsuccessfully in the primaries but spoke at the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans. Please understand. My issue isn't with a Christian's involvement in the political arena. We need Christians involved in the political process. But we must not equate a political party's platform as representative of the Kingdom's purpose on earth. Nor should we demonize those who disagree with our political positions. Legislation, though important, cannot create change and transformation in the human heart. Power corrupts!

I could see the change beginning to unfold. Just like a Jedi starfighter caught in the gravitational pull of the Death Star, evangelicals were becoming less prophetic and were being drawn into the allure of the possibility of world change through grassroots organizations that would lead to political control and dominance. We were forgetting Jesus' warning: "You know that those who rule the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant" (Matt. 20:25-26). The way of Jesus is an alternative way!

James Dobson, an evangelical author and psychologist, founded the organization Focus on the Family in 1977, with the primary mission of helping parents raise their children. The heading on Focus on the Family's Web site states the mission as "Helping Families Thrive." Dobson's focus began to move more and more into the political arena and drift from its nurturing focus. His daily broadcast had a swaying influence on the political thinking of millions of young mothers, with more than 220 million people in 164 countries tuning in. Dobson's voice contributed in a significant way to the marriage of conservative politics and evangelical theology.

Dr. James Kennedy served for forty-seven years as Senior Minister of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Dr. Kennedy was a powerful evangelical preacher and teacher. My wife and I made it a priority to visit his church when we were vacationing in the area in 1978. I had used his lay-witnessing training program, Evangelism Explosion, in one of my first ministerial appointments. Kennedy was another evangelical leader, like Falwell, Dobson, and Robertson, who began to see the hope for America's future in a conservative political construct. The cross logo on Coral Ridge Ministries' Web page is in red, white, and blue colors. He wrote the book *What If America Were a Christian Nation Again?* and his messages began to be more frequently about the founding fathers' intention of creating a Christian nation. In his book, *Character and Destiny: A Nation in Search of Its Soul*, Dr. Kennedy states: "How much more forcefully can I say it? The time has come, and is long overdue, when Christians and conservatives and all men and women who believe in the birthright of freedom must rise up and reclaim America for Jesus Christ."[10] Kennedy grew more active and outspoken in the conservative political arena in the last two decades of his ministry. Dr. Kennedy started the Center for Christian Statesmanship on Capital Hill in Washington, D.C. and the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ and was also instrumental in establishing the Alliance Defense Fund, an increasingly active Christian counterweight to secular civil liberty groups.

The influences of these ministries reclaimed a form of American civil religion that associated America as a nation established by God, advocating our form of democracy as ordained by God and the U.S. Constitution as Spirit-breathed. Forget all about what was done to Native Americans and that the founding fathers built the early nation on the backs of slaves. The awakening movement born with such hope and possibilities for diversity, unity, biblical justice, and Holy Ghost revival began slowly to fall back into a church subservient to Caesar. Why do we continue to find ways to bring Jesus into our own political worldviews rather than be transformed into his?

Please understand me when I say I am not advocating for either conservative or liberal political persuasions as being definitive for the

church. I heartily agree with the position that Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon take in relationship to the church and politics: "We believe both the conservative and liberal church are basically accommodationist (that is, Constantinian) in their social ethic. Both assume wrongly that the American church's primary social task is to underwrite American democracy. In so doing, they have unwittingly underwritten the moral presuppositions that destroy the church."[11] They go on to say, "We would like a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God's kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price."[12]

The congressional health-care debates of 2010 intensified the great American political divide. Many of the people in my church were more passionate in venting their anger about health-care reform than they were in telling others the good news about Jesus. I haven't experienced such partisan political hostility since the civil rights marches in the 1960s and the Vietnam War demonstrations in the 1970s. In one of my sermons during that period of 2010, I simply mentioned the fact that we have a health-care crisis in America. The number of Americans lacking health insurance rose by nearly 8.6 million to 47 million from 2000 to 2006. The increase was driven by the continued erosion in employer-provided health insurance.[13] I didn't advocate for any of the positions being presented or recommend a left or right political solution. I simply stated, "We have a problem." You would have thought that I had told folks that Jesus had returned and they had been left behind. Some called me a socialist; others challenged me with the accusation of not defending the Constitution. (I thought we were supposed to be advocating for the Bible, but who knew?) A rather large group left the church for one that aligned more closely with their political hermeneutic. Yes, many of us in the church seek out places of worship that tend to embrace our personal political persuasions. We want to be with people who look and think as we do, economically, socially, and politically.

Jesus tells a story to a partisan "legal expert" (a guy who clearly knows his Bible) that demonstrates the bipartisan spirit of the king-

dom of God. The question is asked of Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus responds with the story about the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The idea of a good Samaritan would have been an oxymoron for an orthodox Jew. Samaritans were racially mixed and considered unclean. Samaritans were the descendents of Babylonian captors and the Jewish remnant that were left behind during the captivity period, considered too old or weak to be of benefit as slaves for the conquerors. The Samaritans also rejected important Old Testament doctrines essential to Jewish interpretation, primarily concerning the atonement and means of sacrifice. You can imagine what went through the Bible expert's mind when Jesus asked the question: "Which of the three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hand of robbers?" The man replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus' directive was: "Go and do likewise." Point made: right action trumps right doctrine and even legally correct ideology when all is said and done. Does truth matter? Absolutely, but God's truth will always be demonstrated through loving, redemptive actions.

As followers of Jesus we are not to define nor are we to divide ourselves according to the ideologies and platforms of Caesar. The two extremes of rigid conservatism and relativistic liberalism can destroy Christ's mission in the world through his church. But I see a new generation of Christians who are seeking a way that is neither left nor right, red nor blue. They are striving together to reclaim the radical and inclusive message and mission of Jesus by tearing down the partisan divides that separate us.

Part II

Theological and Sociological Assessment

UNITY, LIBERTY, CHARITY

In essentials, unity; in non-essential, liberty; and in all things, charity.

—attributed variously

To emphasize the extent to which disagreements on theological matters are common, I (Chuck) used to suggest to students that they undertake the following exercise. Randomly select one book of the Bible. Then, go to the library and randomly select ten commentaries on that particular book of the Bible. Begin reading the commentaries from the first verse of the chosen book and go until you find a noticeable difference in the interpretations given by the different writers. I suspect that those who took me up on the exercise did not have to read very far before they discovered a noteworthy difference in interpretation. So, what are we to make of that? What is the significance of the fact that so many different experts can come to markedly different conclusions about the meaning of different parts of Scripture? It is an easy thing to demonstrate the variety of opinion that Christians have on matters theological. How to deal with that while maintaining healthy Christian fellowship in and between churches, however, is not so obvious.

Before we get into attempting to work through to the issues implied by our theological differences, let me relate a story told to me by a colleague. It seems a student and a professor were engaged in lively debate about the meaning of a particular Greek construction in a New Testament passage. When the professor said that the student's interpretation was wrong, the student responded, "Well, if I am wrong on

this point, then I am wrong on the bigger passage; and if I am wrong on the passage, I am wrong on this chapter; and if I am wrong on this chapter, then I am wrong on how I read this book; and if I am wrong on this book, I am mistaken on how I understand the New Testament; and if I am wrong on the New Testament, then I am fundamentally wrong about the Bible as a whole; and consequently, the entirety of my faith is undermined from the beginning." Allegedly, the professor responded by simply observing that, as sorry as he was that the student felt that way, the student was nevertheless mistaken on the construction in question. The rest of the class found it rather humorous.

Perhaps we can find it both humorous and instrumental as we delve into the question of how we interact with those who see things differently than we do and how we navigate the passion with which folk often hold their differing opinions about what constitutes the Christian faith. The student in this story had attached ultimate significance to an issue that was clearly seen as much more secondary by the professor. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the professor was correct, the elevation of a "non-essential" to the status of an "essential" had created a basis for unnecessary disagreement.

The introductory quote to this chapter is often erroneously attributed to John Wesley, and while the attribution is mistaken, the sentiments it puts forward are consistent with those contained in his sermon "Catholic Spirit." What Wesley addresses in this sermon is what we have been discussing so far: the recognition that, even among Christians, there will be differing opinions on a wide variety of things. The sermon explicitly addresses different opinions on matters of church governance and worship styles, though we could easily expand these differing opinions into matters beyond just those two. Similarly, while this quote does not appear in Scripture, it seems evident that it is consistent with the teachings both of Jesus and of Paul. When the disciples found another casting out demons in Jesus' name, they instructed him to stop because he "isn't in our group of followers [the disciples]" (Luke 9:49). Jesus was quick to rebuke them, reminding them that those who were not against him, were for him. Jesus was unwilling to allow works done in his name to be disrespected simply because they originated in a "non-sanctioned" group. Of course, in the

Pauline writings, Paul frequently reminds his readers to add no requirements beyond faith in Christ as the demarcator of those who are to be taken as sisters and brothers—fellow followers of Christ. And, if one moves into the early church period, the early church fathers and mothers used the strongest language to describe those who would divide the Body of Christ. They often used metaphors such as "rending the Body of Christ" to capture the seriousness of separating individuals or groups from the broader ministry, work, and fellowship of the church. The fact that injunctions against the tendency to divide over "nonessentials" shows up with such frequency within the tradition should serve as a sobering reminder of how easily we humans find excuses to separate from one another. It should likewise serve as a reminder of the extent to which such separation is inconsistent with the life God calls us to as fellow believers. To hold differing opinions and to hold those differing opinions with great passion is not the problem. Rather, the problem, as the reader might guess from our introductory quotation, is allowing ourselves to become confused about what constitutes "essentials" and what constitutes "non-essentials" as far as our Christian faith and practice are concerned, and, then, allowing that confusion to create obstacles to fellowship and to our engaging together in the work of serving the Kingdom with those who hold differing opinions from ours.[i]

There are three distinct and very short phrases in the introductory quote, and we will need to pay attention to each of them as this chapter unfolds. The first phrase calls for unity among believers on "essentials." The second calls for an attitude of liberty as regards non-essentials—in other words, on non-essentials we are to "believe and let believe" without feeling the need to impose unity. The third calls for what we as followers of Christ ought always to expect: regardless of any

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[i.] Consider Ted Campbell's comments from his *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* ([Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999], 19]: A consistent trait of the Wesleyan heritage and the Methodist churches has been a notable liberality or openness on doctrinal issues. John Wesley encouraged what he called a *catholic spirit*, a willingness to be open to, and to work closely with, those with whom he differed significantly on matters of worship and teaching not affecting the essence of Christian brief. In describing his vision of "catholic spirit," John Wesley distinguished between essential doctrines on which agreement or consensus is critical, and *opinions* about theology or church practices on which disagreement must be allowed.

disagreement, whether on essentials or non-essentials, charity must characterize our interactions with others. These raise a particular set of questions that we have to investigate. First, we have to spend some time talking about what constitutes the essentials and the non-essentials of Christian faith. Once we get our arms around that, second, we have to consider what exactly we are being called to in terms of unity and liberty. What do we do, for example, when a disagreement is about essentials? And are there boundaries even for the liberty we are to allow on non-essentials? Finally, we will need to turn our attention to what it means to interact in all things with charity. To those questions, we now turn.

ESSENTIALS

Attempts to develop an ecumenical answer to what constitute the essentials of the Christian faith are bound to be fraught with difficulty. If one were to look in detail at the three major strands of the Christian faith (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy), one would immediately find areas of significant disagreement. For example, the role Scripture plays is noticeably different in each of these strands. Once one goes beyond the "big three" and delves into denominational difference, unfortunately, things get even more complex. Whether anyone really knows how many different denominations there are is at best an uncertain question. However, it seems clear that the number runs into five figures, with common estimates from 10,000 to more than 30,000 different denominations. Presumably, every one of these groups developed out of what they took to be "essential" differences with those from whom they separated.

One cannot help but be reminded of C. S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce*. This book is a speculative examination of the kinds of personality traits that drive a wedge between humans and God, even to the point of eventually resulting in humans ending up in hell. The premise of the story is that hell is "locked from the inside," so that persons can leave hell and go to heaven any time they wish. In the course of the story, our narrator recounts the experiences of many who get on a bus that will take them from hell to heaven—experiences that

almost always result in the people who left hell returning to hell because heaven is too uncomfortable for them. They prefer a hell that takes them as they are to a heaven that requires them to give up their sins.

On the bus trip Lewis narrates, the passengers no sooner get on the bus than a quarrel breaks out amongst them. It seems that the occupants of hell are so quarrelsome that they simply cannot stand one another's presence. Consider the following picture:

> As soon as anyone arrives [in hell] he settles in some street. Before he's been there twenty-four hours he's quarreled with his neighbor. Before the week is over he's quarreled so badly that he decides to move. Very likely he finds the next street empty because all the people there have quarreled with their neighbors—and moved. If so, he settles in. If by any chance the street is full, he goes further. But even if he stays, it makes no odds. He's sure to have another quarrel pretty soon and then he'll move on again. Finally, he'll move right out to the edge of town and build a new house. You see, it's easy here. You've only got to think a house, and there it is.[1]

It's a sobering picture, isn't it? We get so wrapped up in ourselves and in our way of doing things that we inevitably quarrel with those who see things differently. We have all experienced this, have we not? A grumpy elder for whom no work is adequate? A teen for whom nothing is done "right"? Bosses who have convinced themselves that only they really know how to get things done? We need not get into the psychology of it, but the point remains: we as humans inevitably engage in divisiveness, and that divisiveness is often focused on those who see things differently than we see them. As Christians, though, we have to ask if it should be so.

Once one begins seriously to attempt to identify the core, the essentials of Christian faith, one of the first things we have to ask, in light of the comments above: are there really enough "essentials" to Christian faith that we can justify the existence of thousands upon thousands of different denominations? Or, has Lewis got us figured out with his picture of humanity so quarrelsome that division is an integral part of our sinful natures? Our own pride in our own beliefs and

commitments creates an unwillingness to admit the possibility of error on our part. So, we inevitably criticize and, if possible, separate ourselves from those who see things differently. Often, I suspect, this is because we fear our own beliefs may not be able to withstand the serious examination that would be required for serious dialog with those who differ. Given that Jesus tells us that his followers are to be known, not by their *inability* to get along with their neighbors, but rather by their *ability* to love their neighbors (with the paradigm case being that we are to love even our *enemies*), it seems those are more likely correct who hold that our tendency to create ever new reasons for division is more a sign of our sinfulness than of real differences in matters *essential* to Christian faith.

So, with tens of thousands of Christian denominations and subdenominations, how might we engage a discussion about what constitutes the essentials of our faith? Well, if we want to undertake this question at a global level, we might look to the great ecumenical councils for guidance, perhaps considering one of the classic creeds as identifying the essentials of the faith. Or, one might look at, say, the Nicene Creed, the Creed from the Council of Constantinople, and the Chalcedonian Definition and consider the beliefs ensconced in these creeds collectively to be the essentials of the faith. If we were to take the later approach, we might come up with a list of essentials that look likes the following:

1) God exists.

2) God is trinitarian, consisting as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3. God created all there is.

4) Jesus was the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.

5) Jesus had two natures, one divine and one human.

6) Humans need salvation from their sins.

7) Jesus' death served to enable human salvation.

8) Jesus was raised from the dead.

9) Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

One would like to say that all those who claim to be followers of Jesus, to be Christians, would affirm at least all of these as essential to the faith. However, this would not be the case. There are those who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus, but would find one or more of the affirmations above problematic. Sadly, this is not the only problem. Not only are there some who would deny that all these are "essentials," there are likewise those who would argue that there should be additional ones. Recognizing this, of course, only makes our task more difficult.

How will we go about identifying those beliefs that are "essential" so that we can give meaning to our introductory quote: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity? Perhaps, given current realities, the best solution we can give to the quest for essentials is to give a "tribal" solution to the problem. In other words, maybe the best we can do is to identify essentials by particular substrands of the faith. If so, then our reader will be left to work out what constitutes the essentials in his or her particular denomination, sect, or substrand of Christ followers. The Methodists will have their own take on what constitutes the essentials of the Christian faith, the Lutherans perhaps another, and of course, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox might have yet other lists of what constitutes for them the essential beliefs one must agree upon before one can be considered that particular kind of Christian (and in some cases, whether one can be considered a Christian at all).

For the purposes of our examination here, however, we need not push this a lot further. Rather, we need to return to the set of concerns that we laid out in the introduction. Recall that, there, we identified as problematic the extent to which *political ideology* and *political commitments* had intruded into the church and were being treated as if they were essentials to the faith. And, then, consider the sorts of things that, for example, Wesley identifies as essentials. Without

exception, they fall into a single category: theological beliefs that focus most exclusively around questions relating to the order of salvation—those beliefs implicated in the saving of humans from sin. In other words, Wesley (and those like him) did not see the embrace of a particular form of government as an "essential" belief around which one might justify separation from Christian sisters and brothers. In fact, Wesley was not particularly happy with the colonies when they decided to declare their independence from the Crown, implying directly that he did not agree with many American Christians on the form of government one ought to follow. In a similar vein, beliefs in a particular form of economy or about how one might structure the social order of a society were never judged to be an appropriate basis for breaking Christian fellowship. A popular slogan from the early 2000s said, "God is not a Republican or a Democrat," and the truth embodied in this slogan reminds us that God is not a respecter of political parties. While there might be some small set of theological beliefs that are genuinely essential to Christian faith so that the denial of one or more of them places one outside the communion of the faithful, it is exceptionally hard to see how any ideological/political beliefs fall into the category.

PARTISANSHIP AND FAITH

Why is it, then, that we have allowed political partisanship to enter so deeply into our churches? And, perhaps more important, how is it that we have allowed those differences to divide us, to create obstacles among us, and to have created an environment in which one or the other can be somehow considered less a "follower of Jesus" simply on the basis of one being the supporter of a particular political party or ideology? The extent to which we have allowed our politics to trump our theology can be no clearer than laid out above in chapter 2. Roughly twenty-five years ago, a congressional Republican who was a Southern Baptist tended to vote like a Southern Baptist; a congressional Democrat who was a Catholic tended to vote like a Catholic. The single most dependable indicator of how a particular congressperson would vote was *not* their political party, but rather the theological tradition with which he or she identified. Now, the reverse is

true—the single most reliable indicator of how a given congressional member will vote is his or her party affiliation. Regardless of what party you belong to, surely we can agree that when party affiliation either trumps our theological commitments or has become so thoroughly confused and intermingled with our theological tradition that we cannot tell where one stops and the other begins, something has badly gone wrong. And that something wrong is badly in need of correction. Let us take a look at some factors contributing to these developments.

If one were to ask folk who give the perception that their decisions are being driven more by political ideology than by their theological commitments whether or not they perceived this to be the case, I am entirely convinced that many of them would look at you with great perplexity and vigorously deny the claim. In fact, I suspect that they would be nonplussed at the accusation and that they would wonder why anyone could possibly imagine that they had allowed politics to trump theology. From their perspective, they would see themselves as simply acting in accord with the implications of their theological positions in the political realm. I am sure we have all had discussions with those who find it utterly self-evident that to be Christian is to be a member of a particular political party (though, of course, different folk will come to different conclusions about *which* political party). They would likely argue along the following lines: "To be a Christian is to hold X position on this particular issue. Republicans(/Democrats) hold X on this issue. Therefore, if one is Christian one will be a Republican(/Democrat). Simple as that!"

Of course it is not as "simple as that," but it seems that the growing infiltration of partisanship into the churches is connected to the phenomenon of attaching particular positions on certain issues with being a Christian and then to draw the further conclusion that one must be a member of the party holding that position in order to be a Christian—or at least in order to be a "serious" Christian. We have seen in previous chapters some of the reasons why the partisanship this leads to is creating havoc in our churches, with the threat of even greater havoc in subsequent generations. Consequently, because understanding how to move away from these trends is important for

the future of the church, we need to explore further in attempting to understand the underlying causes that give rise to allowing ourselves to be divided over political matters. From there, then, we can begin to explore ways in which these trends might be overcome, with the result being a stronger church.

The core of this problem of growing partisanship within the church is the similarly growing tendency to conflate politics and theology. For example, it seems popular lore in contemporary American culture to assume that there are only two theopolitical positions.[2] According to this popular way of categorizing people, there are conservatives and liberals. If you are conservative, then you are politically and theo-logically conservative; if you are liberal, then you are politically and theologically liberal. The problem with this popular way of framing things is, well, that it suffers from what my one of my mentors called a "fatal loss of complexity." In other words, the idea that there are only two positions—conservative and liberal— is false just because it is far too simplistic. To begin with, let us note at least four broad positions on the theopolitical spectrum. One can be theologically conservative and politically conservative; one can be theologically liberal and political-ly conservative; one can be theologically conservative and politically liberal; and one can be theologically liberal and politically liberal. To be clear, let's outline each of these in a little more detail.

Imagine an individual who holds to the great ecumenical creeds of the church—say, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Constantinople, and the Chalcedonian Definition of the two natures of Christ. Let us also assume this person has a high view of the authority of Scripture. Now, on the political side, let's say this person tends to be a strong defend-er of limited government and unencumbered free-market capitalism. Further, let's say this individual favors a strong military and champi-ons a fiscally austere budgetary position. From this information, it would be safe to expect that this person would be both a theological conservative as well as a political conservative.

Now, let us imagine a second individual. This person attends the same church as the first one and holds many of the same theological positions. This person affirms the classic creeds, has a high Christology (in affirming strongly both the deity and the humanity of Jesus),

affirms a strong sense of the authority of Scripture, and stands firm on the bodily resurrection of Christ. At the same time, let us imagine that this second person is a champion of what we often summarize as "social justice." This person defends, say, a strong safety net for those poor and otherwise on the margins of society, and he also affirms a role for government in ordering society to accomplish these goals. Further, this person might hold a much more chastened and circumspect position about defense spending; and while holding himself to be a capitalist, he might favor a more restrained capitalism that involves government regulation to maintain a "level playing field." Now, in this case, we have an individual who holds to a theologically conservative position but a more liberal position politically. Is this person any less a theological conservative because he concludes that a theologically conservative position calls for a more liberal political position than the one who thinks the opposite? But, hold on, we are only half done—with our first-order distinctions.

Imagine yet a third individual. Let us imagine this person agrees with the first one politically—that is, he favors more limited government, a stronger military, unencumbered free-market capitalism, and a fiscally austere budget. In short, then, this individual is easily categorized as a political conservative. However, let us imagine that, theologically, this individual is more inclined to see the resurrection as "metaphorical"—that is, he holds that Jesus did not rise from the dead bodily but rather that resurrection is a metaphor for the changed life one lives after recognizing the effects of Jesus' life and death. Further, let us imagine this person does not hold a particularly strong view of Scripture, seeing it as one of many books that reveals the Divine to us in some way—sometimes better, sometimes worse than other religious books. Finally, this individual sees the classic creeds as great expressions of the human struggle with faith, relevant for their own times, but more relics than authoritative for us today. In sum, then, this person is a theological liberal and a political conservative. There are a good many folk who stake out this position on the theological spectrum; and if you add in those who seem only to offer the passing tip of the hat toward Scripture and the creeds, we imagine this is rather a large contingent of our culture.
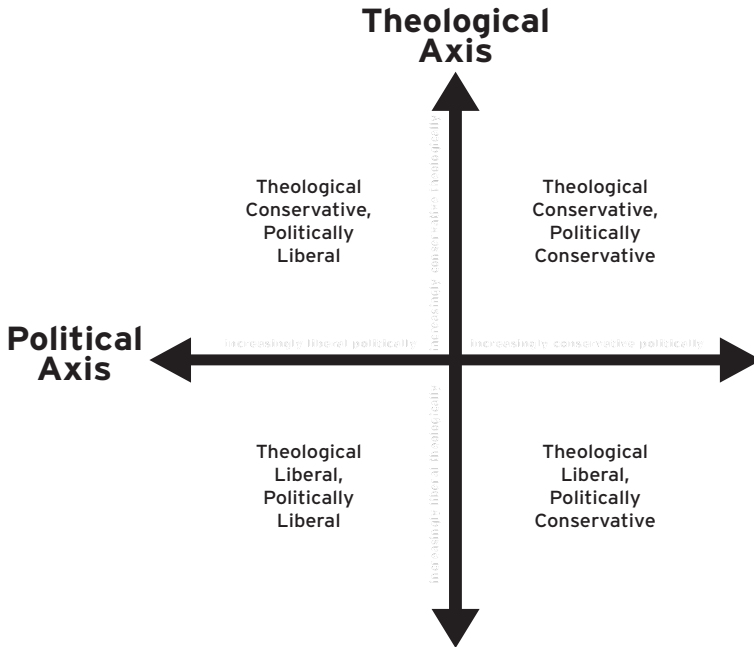
Finally, one can be theologically liberal, that is, holding the sorts of theological positions that were outlined in the last paragraph, and at the same time politically liberal, that is, holding to the sorts of positions outlined in the second paragraph back. There are a good many folk who occupy this position in the theopolitical spectrum.

So, as one can easily see, the attempt to divide everything into two camps, one conservative and one liberal, is far too simplistic to do justice to the nuanced positions held by many Americans. Sadly, however, the division that we have just explained, that which identifies four positions, while an improvement, is still far too simplistic. Let's see why that is the case.

Let us imagine a fifth person, and just for fun, let's say this person is a young evangelical. Theologically, let's say this individual holds to the authority of Scripture and affirms the normative nature of the classic creeds. However, on the two issues that have most been identified with evangelical conservatism—abortion and homosexuality—this person is divided. In particular, this person is a staunch opponent of abortion on demand, likely even favoring criminalization of so-called convenience abortions. At the same time, however, this person supports gay rights and the right for gay" to marry.[3] Clearly this last position is one that has been popularly identified with political liberalism, while the former has been identified strongly with political conservatism. How do we classify this person? Is he conservative, because he is theologically conservative and holds only one position popularly identified with liberalism? Or, is he liberal because he identifies with a liberal position on such a central issue as homosexuality?

We could multiply examples, easily finding folk who are less theologically conservative, but more politically conservative, and vice versa. The reality is that, as a general rule, the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are abstractions that identify *hypothetical* positions. We suspect that, when push comes to shove, there are relatively few Americans who neatly fall into either blanket "conservative" or "liberal" identifiers. In fact, rather than thinking of these as positions, it is far more accurate to think of our theopolitical commitments being mapped to two spectrums, perhaps laid out on a grid as shown below. One spectrum is for political commitments and the other for theolog-

ical commitments. There are, then, an infinite number of points which can identify actual persons with actual positions, positions that are complex and that intermingle positions on individual issues that are sometimes more to the liberal side and sometimes more to the conservative side of the spectrum. Even the grid laid out below ends up being too simplistic as well, but it does have the advantage of being a significant improvement over the idea that everyone can be fit into either the conservative or liberal camp.

Theological Axis

Theological
Conservative,
Politically
Liberal

Theological
Conservative,
Politically
Conservative

Political Axis

increasingly liberal politically

increasingly conservative politically

Theological
Liberal,
Politically
Liberal

Theological
Liberal,
Politically
Conservative

This complexity is fairly obvious as soon as you think about it. Given that, one wonders why the overly simplistic conservative/liberal divide is so popular. We suspect there are a few reasons.

In the first place, we have been seduced by sound bites. It is difficult to imagine how we are going to have an intelligent conversation around complex theopolitical issues as long as the average news consumer in America is willing to be sound-bite driven. We face a sorry state of affairs in our culture when few people seem willing to take the time for nuanced discussion on the complicated challenges we face.

Politicians of all parties have been willing to foster this sound-bite mentality because it has worked for them. Most Americans work hard and are faced with too little time and too many distractions to study the issues well enough to make an informed judgment on them. As long as news consumers are willing to be manipulated by sound bites and are unwilling to commit the time to understand the complexities, we will continue to see artificial and simplistic distinctions drive too much of our conversation, resulting in divisions and disagreements that rarely get at the substantive issues.

In the second place, this sound-bite mentality has likewise made its way into the church. We want preachers who can give us catchy phrases that capture our imaginations and that move us emotionally; whether or not the catchy phrases are particularly accurate becomes quite secondary in the process. Just as politicians have found that the overly simplistic sound-bite approach has worked for them, some religious leaders who operate at the intersection of faith and politics have been too ready to embrace a similar approach. Many leaders to whom we should be looking to help us make wise, scriptural, theologically sound decisions have also found that they can further their own agendas by using the exploitative sound bite rather than taking the time to help their parishioners grasp the complexities of issues. Now, it is entirely possible that these religious leaders are taking these steps with good intentions. For example, many, no doubt, have studied Scripture and the theological tradition with some care and have come to a conclusion on some particular theopolitical point. Of course, they think they have come to the truth on the matter, and they believe others will see this as truth as well. Further, they imagine that if they only had the time to help folk through the nuances, folk would come to the same conclusion they have. So, they justify oversimplifying arguments in order to get folk to agree with them and to take the actions they wish them to take. Since they are sure a longer, deeper discussion of the subject—one that avoids the sound-bite mentality—will lead to the same conclusion, they justify the use of shortcuts. The problem is, of course, by taking the shortcut, they preclude the possibility of critical interaction with the position they believe to be correct—a critical interaction that would both improve understanding of the issue as well as help uncover errors that may have remained hidden in the process.

There can be little doubt that the descent of our public discourse into a less thoughtful, more rancorous form will not be exorcised like the demon it is until we are all willing to address the real complexities that surround the theopolitical challenges that face us. We might wish them less complex, but unfortunately neither wishing them to be less complex, nor pretending they are, does anything to actually make them less complex.

There are two other factors that require our attention, but they require a more extended discussion than warranted in this chapter. In the next chapter, we delve into more detail around how it is that our theological positions and our political positions can become so deeply entangled. Understanding the steps that allow one to draw the conclusion that "real Christians" are members of one political party (even if we disagree on which one) will be critical to our discussing how we move beyond the unhealthy conflation of theology and politics.

The other factor contributing to the growth of partisanship both in our churches and in the culture at large will be addressed in part III, in which we discuss ways to move beyond our current predicament. We can name it here briefly, however. With the growth of 24/7 news channels and the migration of "news" reporting to become more and more deeply intertwined with partisan opinion on the one hand and entertainment on the other, we now live in a culture in which it is entirely possible to live the vast majority of one's life inside a ideological bubble. In other words, folk can select the news channels they watch, the newspapers they read, and the Web sites they frequent in order consistently to reinforce their current political beliefs. If you are a political conservative, you can pick partisan news sources that allow you to feast upon a steady diet of criticisms and affirmations that align with what you already believe. While this is a little more of a challenge for liberals, it is only a wee bit more challenging. Living in the ideological bubble allows us constant affirmation of the things we believe and relatively little, if any, challenge to those commitments. And when these commitments are conflated with our faith commitments, we find ourselves within a matrix ripe for partisan division. More on this to follow.

Before we can summarize the discussions of this chapter, we must return to the quote with which we began—specifically, the final

phrase: in all things, charity. Let's face it, we as Christians are perhaps as unsuccessful as any at being able to disagree passionately, while still maintaining fellowship with those with whom we disagree. As Christians, it is true that we need to look for unity in the things essential to the faith. It is true that we need to allow diversity of opinion on things that are not essential. But regardless of whether we agree or disagree, it is a fact that we are always to model love for one another.

Remember that Jesus said Christians would be known, not by their ability to draw lines between themselves and those with whom they disagree, not by their ability to hold only true opinions on all matters, but rather by their love for one another quite apart from whether or not they fully agree on all the issues. The oft-recited notion that we are to "believe and let believe" is not adequate for those who claim to be followers of Jesus. No, we must not only "tolerate" one another and our differing opinions. Rather, we are to love one another in spite of our divergent opinions—a love that bridges the ideological differences and allows us to join hands with one another and with God in his great work of reconciling the world to himself. "In all things, charity" means being able to look past the points at which we differ and to look instead at the deep unity of belief and commitment we have in naming Jesus as Lord and following him. It is to recognize a deeper fellowship around our Risen Lord, even if we are deeply in disagreement over any one of a number of political ideas. Is one a capitalist and another a socialist? Is one a Democrat and the other a Republican? Is one a strong believer in the separation of church and state, while another is less committed? Does one embrace just war theory? Does another embrace Christian pacifism? Positions on none of these issues—nor a host of others like them—are valid reasons for division in the local church; but even more than that, none of them are a basis for not engaging one another with Christian charity. God is not a respecter of political parties; and while we will most likely belong to one of the many parties available, our partisan commitments must never be allowed to infiltrate the church.

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity. In the course of our discussions, we have looked at each of those phrases and examined them in more detail. We concluded that, as Christians,

we could identify essentials in the realm of theological commitments—being a Christian, after all, means believing some things and not others. At the same time, we concluded that there really is no basis, scripturally or within the broader Christian tradition, for allowing political/ideological commitments to rise to the status of "essentials" within the context of our work together in the church. We probed further into the reasons why we make the mistake of letting partisan commitments infiltrate our work in the church. One that we considered had to do with the impoverished language we tend to use when we speak of only two theopolitical positions—conservatives and liberals. Instead, we offered a more nuanced way of thinking about the various positions we, as Christians, might hold. Finally, we examined the way that the prevalent "sound-bite" mentality fuels partisan divide. Having concluded that there really are no ideological bases for division within the church, we still need to explore some of the reasons why, nevertheless, we live in an age wherein political partisanship is increasingly damaging to the work of the gospel. With this behind us, we are ready to look at the nature of disagreement and to explore how the way in which we form and hold our commitments is contributing to growing partisanship. To that, we now turn.

THE LOGIC OF DISAGREEMENT

I magine you and a good friend are having a discussion—say, on the identity of the sixteenth president of the United States. Imagine that your friend makes the following statement[i]:

> Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States.

You listen to your friend, and, having looked it up recently, you also hold this statement to be true. How is it, though, that a person comes to believe a claim to be true? Well, in the case of the statement above, I believe it to be true because I happened to have looked it up in a source that I take to be trustworthy on such matters. In fact, my believing this particular claim pretty much follows automatically from my having looked it up in such a source. Let us say that I trust *Encyclopedia Britannica* as being authoritative on matters such as the identities of United States presidents. And let's say that I get out my trusty copy of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and looked up a listing of the United States' presidents. When I do, I find the name Abraham Lincoln

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[i.] I ask the readers' indulgence as I make a cursory foray into how we come to know and believe things. Such a discussion is important preparation for our examination of how we have come to the point that our theological and our political commitments have become so entangled. Hopefully, once we get past the first few pages, the reasons why I judge this to be important will be evident.

in the sixteenth spot. Now, do I then make a *decision* to believe that Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president? Or, do I simply find myself believing it? If you think about it, I think it becomes clear pretty quickly that the latter is the case, that is, I merely find myself believing that Lincoln was the sixteenth president.

There are, as always, some complexities. For example, imagine I have two trustworthy sources on a particular matter and that, when researching my sources in an attempt to ascertain the facts, I discover that each source has a different answer. In that case, I might have to make a judgment about which to believe. But such cases need not detain us. At this point, we merely note two facts: (1) to believe some statement is the same as believing it is true and (2) most often, we do not so much *decide* to believe something as we find ourselves drawn to particular beliefs given our sense about who or what speaks authoritatively on the matter.

FORMING OUR BELIEFS

There are a variety of ways in which we come to believe particular statements. In the example above, the person came to believe Lincoln was the sixteenth president because of the testimony of a reliable source. In the case I listed, by consulting *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the testimony was in written form, provided by the authors of the encyclopedia. Of course, one might also come to believe a particular claim based upon oral testimony. Imagine that one has a friend at a local university who is a professor of history, specializing in things presidential. In that case, one might simply consult with that friend and inquire about the identity of the sixteenth president. Given the status as professor of history with his particular specialty, one would reasonably accept the answer given as trustworthy, and thus one would believe it on the basis of oral testimony. So, one way that we come to believe particular statements and claims is by virtue of our trusting the reliability of testimony we hear from persons we consider to be expert. Let's look at some of the other ways in which folks find themselves drawn to particular beliefs as opposed to others.

Some statements are true just by the nature of the meaning of the words used. For example:

All bachelors are unmarried.

Once one realizes that the definition of a bachelor is a person who is unmarried, one immediately finds oneself inclined to believe the above statement; nothing more than the meaning of the words is needed to secure our belief. Statements like these are said to be "self-evidently true"; they are obviously true once we grasp their meaning.

Many statements are reasonable for us to believe just because they express something about our experience of the world around us. Consider the following:

The ball is orange.

What would make this a reasonable statement for us to believe? Well, all that would be required is for us to see an orange ball, or, perhaps more loosely, to believe that we see an orange ball is all that would be required. It is entirely reasonable, the overwhelming majority of the time, to believe something just because one of our sense faculties causes the belief. Thus, many beliefs arise for us from our having seen, smelled, tasted, touched, or heardsomething.

Finally, there are many beliefs that we hold because they are related to other beliefs we hold in some way. For example, let us say that as I am typing, I hear the garage door open. I am immediately drawn to believe:

1. The garage door is opening.

Now, let us say that I know that only my wife, my daughter, and my son-in-law have access to the codes that open my garage. It would be reasonable, then, for me to believe:

2. Probably my wife or my daughter or my son-in-law is opening the garage door.

Let us further say that I know:

    3. My daughter and son-in-law are away on vacation.

From the things I believe, I can quickly draw a conclusion:

    4. Most likely, my wife is opening the garage door.

In this particular case, the different ways in which I form beliefs have fitted together to give me a series of beliefs that allow me to draw a tentative conclusion, namely, that my wife is the one opening the door.[ii] Notice what I did in coming to believe statement 4. I used other beliefs that I held for good reasons (the sound of the garage door opening, knowledge about who knows my security codes, and testimony from my daughter about their vacation) to draw the conclusion that I did.

We could multiply examples and study nuances, but for our purposes, this will suffice. We have identified several different ways that we might reasonably come to hold some particular belief:

- from testimony, written or oral

- from understanding the meanings of the words involved in a statement

- from sense experience, either sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell

- by logically reasoning from certain beliefs to other beliefs.

It would be safe to say, then, that the beliefs we hold on theological or ideological matters would be reasonably held if they came to us in one or more of these ways.

[ii.] We need not wander off into possible scenarios about thieves breaking in and other scenarios like that. For our purposes, I merely wish to show that some beliefs that we hold, we hold because we have seen the implications of a particular set of beliefs that we hold. In the case outlined above, we used our reason to draw beliefs implied by the others to reach the conclusion that we did.

Before we make direct connection between these ideas and the extent to which theological and ideological positions have been conflated, we need a short discussion on the ways in which we might come to hold beliefs that, notwithstanding our believing them to be true, turn out instead to be false. We will walk through them in the same order as our summary in the preceding paragraph.

Let us say we believe some claim based on written testimony, which turns out to be false. How might this happen? The answer is reasonably straightforward. We most likely have come to hold some belief that is false because we have wrongly taken some written source to be credible on the belief at hand. We live in a so-called information age—an age in which we have ready access to any one of a seemingly infinite number of different ideas through the world-wide information network we call the Internet. Many, many of the sources present on the Internet provide a basis for valid and accurate beliefs, but unfortunately, some do not. The same is true for other written sources of information—books, magazines, newspapers, and so on. In short, we can come to hold some belief on the basis of incorrect written testimony. The written testimony may be incorrect due to careless error, due to providing intentionally incorrect information, due to ignorance on the part of the author, or due to our trusting as an expert someone who is not. In any case, one way in which we come to hold as true claims that are false is through reading erroneous materials. The case with oral testimony is very much identical, with the exception, of course, that the testimony is heard rather than read. The outcome is the same in either case—by putting our trust in an unreliable source, we come to hold beliefs as true which are, in fact, false.

In the second case listed above, the case in which we come to believe a claim to be self-evidently true, we may simply be mistaken about the meaning of the terms involved. For example, we might believe the following to be true:

4 + 3 = 1

If we have mistakenly reversed the conventional meanings of a plus sign and a minus sign, this statement would seem to be true to us. Similarly, in our earlier example, if we had confused the meaning of

the term "bachelors," we might believe that statement to be false and some other false statement to be true. At the core, the reason for getting supposedly "self-evident" claims wrong would be due to making errors about the meanings of the terms involved.

One might wonder how we could be wrong about the beliefs that come to us by way of our sense experience, but the answer is straightforward. We can hold some beliefs based on sense experience that is actually false as a result of *malfunctioning* sense faculties. Sadly, I have reached the age at which my hearing is not what it used to be. Consequently, my wife often finds me holding false beliefs because I believe her to have said something different than she actually said. My hearing deficit sometimes leads me astray. Similarly, those who suffer with poor vision may come to believe they see something rather different than what is in front of them. In addition to malfunctioning sense faculties, there are other errors that might arise in relation to beliefs held based on sense experience. Consider the case in which I hear the words correctly, but because of my own different contextual setting, I assign somewhat different meanings to the terms I've heard. In this case, it would be incorrect to say my hearing was malfunctioning, though I have "misheard" what was said to me. It would be more accurate to say that my *understanding of the terms used in the specific context* was different enough for me to misunderstand the intended communication by the speaker.

Finally, and probably the most common reason for holding false beliefs, we can hold a false belief that we have reasoned our way to because our reasoning process itself was faulty. Perhaps we violated one of the fundamental laws of logic, or perhaps, and more likely, we have assigned somewhat different meanings and values to the terms involved in the claim. Or, perhaps even more likely, we have drawn a conclusion from the information that is not warranted. Let us consider a few examples so we can be clearer. Let us say that we reason as follows:

1) Henry supports gun control.

2) Fascists support gun control.

3) Therefore, Henry is a fascist.

In this particular case, we have argued from a specific person and a specific position to a generalization about the person's broader commitments. To see how absurd it is to draw such a conclusion, consider the following argument of the same form:

1) John likes fried chicken.

2) Dogs like fried chicken.

3) Therefore, John is a dog.

In each of these cases, holding the conclusion on the basis of the argument will likely put us in the position of holding a belief that cannot be supported by the argument we provide and, worse, is quite often false. This type of argument often contributes to our confusing our theological and ideological commitments. Consider the following common line of faulty reasoning:

1) Something must be done about terrorism.

2) Locking up all persons of any people group associated with terrorism is something.

3) Therefore, we must lock up all persons of any people group associated with terrorism.

In this case we have used the term "something" to carry different senses in 1 than in 2. It is surprising how often this kind of argumentation is used in political discourse.[1] The goal, of course, is to manipulate our emotions by equivocating on the meaning of key terms in a way that drives us into agreeing with a particular action. Too often, we allow ourselves to be persuaded to hold false beliefs by arguments like this. We will forgo additional examples at this point, but these discussions will be useful later in this chapter when we look at problematic beliefs that cause us to engage in the very kind of conflation of theological commitments and ideological commitments that we have identified throughout as dangerous to healthy church life.

Let us summarize our findings from this brief examination of some of the ways in which we come to hold the different beliefs/positions

that we do. First, obviously, it is necessarily the case that if one believes a particular claim one also believes that the claim is true.[2] Second, while we often talk about *deciding* to believe this or that, in the vast majority of the cases, what we believe is not really volitional. Rather, we are drawn to beliefs that simply seem to us to be true. Third, beliefs seem to us to be true for a variety of reasons: the testimony of others, the inputs of our sense experiences, the relations between beliefs we hold, and because of the meaning of the words involved. Fourth, there are a variety of reasons why we may hold a belief to be true that is, in actuality, false: the testimony of others is mistaken or false in some way, our sense faculties are malfunctioning, an error was made in how a given belief relates to other beliefs we hold, and there are errors in the meanings of key terms involved in the claim. These are all important to developing an understanding of how we conflate our ideologies and our theologies.

CREATING FALSE ESSENTIALS

Let us consider a few examples of beliefs and possible ways in which those beliefs are formed in order to see how we come to elevate our beliefs into essentials on which we can tolerate no disagreement. Consider a person who believes the following to be true:

> God is Trinitarian and exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let us further say that the one who holds this belief has come to it through study of Scripture, particularly the various passages that identify the three distinct persons in one way or another. That study of Scripture, let us say, was not undertaken in isolation, but was done as part of a group at the individual's local church or seminary, with review of a variety of commentaries and their views on the key passages. In addition, she has studied the early creeds and perhaps their development, paying particular attention to the Creed of Constantinople. Perhaps in addition, she has read Gregory of Nyssa's "On Not Three Gods" or perhaps Basil the Great's "On the Holy Spirit." In reading Scripture, perhaps she came across Jesus prescribing

the baptismal triple invocation (baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit). She might have reasoned from the naming of all three in baptizing a person that the three persons should be seen as equally God. Of course, she might also have studied more or different things, but these will do for our purposes. Finally, suppose that in addition to this person's belief in the Trinity, in light of the manner in which the trinitarian doctrine is treated within the broader Christian tradition, she also came to believe:

The doctrine of the Trinity is an essential Christian doctrine.

In light of our discussions in the previous chapter, then, this person would see the doctrine of the Trinity as one in which unity of belief should be expected. So, if a person reasoned in this way, forming beliefs about the Trinity and believing them to be essential, would she be justified in believing such?

In this case, we can see that testimony, both written and spoken, and reasoning were involved in drawing the conclusions.[3] The written testimony we named included Scripture itself, one or more of the great ecumenical creeds, some writings from the early church, and commentaries from experts in biblical interpretation. The spoken testimony came in the form of a study, either in the local church or perhaps even in a seminary setting. Appropriately, our hypothetical believer started with the written source most widely viewed by Christians as authoritative on such matters—the Bible. Notice, also, that this believer did not come to her conclusions merely from reading Scripture in isolation but rather engaged in the examination and hearing/reading of a variety of sources. The participation in a class setting allowed a healthy discussion of the challenges to trinitarian belief and, no doubt, would have provided checkpoints for common errors made in such studies. The appeal to one or more of the great ecumenical creeds assured that she was taking into account the conclusions that were drawn by those in the early church. By selecting the Creed of Constantinople, she exposed herself to the most mature thinking of the period on the trinitarian nature of God, and by reading Basil or Gregory, she was open to influence by two of the ones most responsible for the final form of the church's trinitarian language. The reason-

ing our believer engaged in seemed likely to have followed something
like this:

1) Our best interpretation of Scripture implies that God is
trinitarian, existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2) The doctrine of the Trinity has behind it the full weight
of church teaching as evidenced in the various creeds.

3) The experts on biblical interpretation and theology over-
whelmingly affirm the trinitarian doctrine.

4) Therefore, I conclude that Christians ought to believe the
doctrine of the Trinity.

This line of reasoning seems to make it reasonable for the person to
have formed her personal belief in the Trinity, but what about her
belief that the doctrine is a Christian essential? Well, our hypotheti-
cal believer might have noted that Jesus called for the invocation of
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at a person's baptism, or perhaps she
noted that the creeds often contained the threat of excommunication
to those who did not affirm the trinitarian doctrine, or perhaps she
noted that oaths of membership in particular denominations and
churches require its affirmation. So, is our hypothetical believer rea-
sonable to believe that the Trinity is an essential doctrine in light of
all this?

The short answer is it seems she is. First, as we noted above, she has
consulted the written source most widely accepted as authoritative on
these matters—the Bible. Of course, individual interpretations vary, as
we noted earlier, but this is the key written testimony to consult on
God's nature. Second, to avoid the possible errors of personal inter-
pretive differences, our hypothetical believer participated in several
healthy practices. She participated in a group, in which verbal discus-
sion with other believers could occur, and she read other sources
aimed at finding the consensus of the broader Christian tradition.
Third, she looked for, and found, authoritative pronouncements by
the church as a whole. While the church has not chosen to speak so
strongly on a large number of issues, affirmation in various historical

creeds shows that the doctrine of the Trinity is one on which the church has so spoken. Finally, the reasoning process by which her personal belief was reached is without error. Again, when you consider that strength with which the trinitarian doctrine has been held in the church, reasoning to its status as an essential is not hard. In summary, then, our hypothetical believer is reasonable to hold both beliefs.

Okay, let's consider a second example. Let's say another hypothetical believer studies Scripture. He focuses on passages such as, say, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' arrest in the garden. In addition, he considers how Jesus takes on the role of the suffering servant from Isaiah and lives out that role throughout his life, even to the point of nonresistance as he is taken to the cross to die. He studies how the early church was overwhelmingly pacifist before the year 200, and he carries out his studies of several books by Christian pacifists and Scripture with a community of Mennonites. As a consequence of his study, he finds himself drawn to believe:

> Followers of Jesus must be pacifist in their outlook on war and peace.

From his study of the writings of selected authorities in the early church, he further concludes:

> Christian pacifism is an essential Christian position.

So, we now come to the same question as in the last example. If a person reasoned in this way and came to these conclusions, would he be justified in holding those beliefs?

In many ways, we can affirm much of what we did about the last example. The premier source for Christians was identified and consulted—the Bible. Our hypothetical believer does not do his thinking in isolation, but rather he surrounded himself with a number of discussion partners—in written form through documents of the early church as well as through the writing of contemporary experts on Christian pacifism. In addition, he participated in "face-to-face" discussions with a community of believers, which allowed for the same

give and take, aimed at correction of error, as we noted in the earlier example. So, in short, we have the use of written and spoken testimony, consultation with the broader tradition, and the use of the reasoning process to assess the information and draw the conclusion. So, it seems this person ought also to be justified in his belief in pacifism and that it is an essential Christian position, right? No doubt, this person is working from what seems to him to be the clear teaching of Scripture; so, how could he go wrong? Well, as it turns out, neither of those beliefs can reasonably be held by our hypothetical believer. Let's see why.

First, we have to make a very important distinction between two claims that folk make that are too often taken as interchangeable:

Scripture says x about y.

And:

I interpret Scripture to say x about y.

In saying "Scripture says x about y," I am making a claim about what Scripture actually means—it is not just *my interpretation* about which I am speaking. In the second, I am making a much more nuanced claim—namely, I am recognizing that my own way of interpreting can affect the rightness or wrongness of what I think Scripture says. This raises immediately the question: can I ever make a claim about Scripture that is more than my own interpretation? Well, yes, we can give interpretations that are more than our own interpretation, and we do so anytime we consult other testimony, whether written or oral. For example, our hypothetical believer who holds pacifism as an essential position has given more than *just his interpretation*; he has given the interpretation of a particular community. *But* we have to recognize that we can never, even with participation in various interpreting communities, get beyond the fact that we are speaking in terms of interpretations of what Scripture says, not simply what Scripture says.

In many cases, the distinction is not terribly important, as in the aforementioned case of the Trinity, because the church has spoken very

strongly on a number of issues and has put its weight behind particular interpretations. So, yes, the hypothetical believer in both cases is speaking from *interpretation* and not from simply *what Scripture says* on the Trinity or on pacifism. But while neither believer can rise above the level of speaking of an *interpretation of Scripture*, in the former case, the church has decided to use its authority to establish one belief as essential Christian doctrine, and it has not with regard to the other. The church has chosen to speak authoritatively on the doctrine of the Trinity, but it has allowed a variety of positions on the issue of the Christian response to war to stand side by side without making any one of them normative. From this alone, then, we can see that pacifism cannot be affirmed as an essential, because the broader Christian tradition has allowed these differing positions to be held by believers without insisting that one or the other be taken as official church teaching. We cannot reasonably conclude, then, that the affirmation of Christian pacifism (or just war theory or any of the other popular positions) is *an essential aspect of Christian faith*. As we learned in our previous chapter, when a thing falls into the category of non-essential, we are to allow others the liberty to believe in accord with their own conscience.

Also notice that in the second example, our hypothetical believer engaged in discussion with other believers in their attempt to draw correct conclusions about the stance toward war and peace that Christians ought to believe. However, that consultation occurred only with another group of Christians who had already become committed to Christian pacifism. Particularly on issues that are in areas we must consider "non-essentials," it is critical that out study engage readings and person on both sides of the issue. Often the positions we hold look very different after we have heard both sides give their best arguments. In this case, our hypothetical believer should have consulted with the Mennonites, but also with a group committed to, say, just war theory. Similarly, reading books on both sides of the issue would have been critically important to getting the best grasp on the issue. With those problems assessed, let us probe a bit deeper into this example because it is often a disputed area amongst followers of Jesus.

Let us assume that our hypothetical believer reworded his belief as follows:

> Followers of Jesus *should be* pacifist in their outlook on war and peace.

Now, if we assume that the person holding this belief has taken the steps we discussed above (interactive study of a wide range of Christian sources on the topic, this time including discussions and readings with those also holding other positions), can one reasonably conclude the above statement? The subtle difference, changing from *must be* to *should be*, is critically important. As long as the testimony and other factors that our hypothetical believer consulted in the course of studying the issue were sound (and included a broader diversity of opinion, particularly being sure to hear the other side's best arguments), it is reasonable for one to conclude from that research the somewhat weaker statement, "should." At the same time, however, a person who followed the same methodology might reasonably conclude the following:

> Followers of Jesus *should be* just war theorists in their outlook on war and peace.

This example gets at the core of what we discussed in chapter 3— namely, that in non-essentials, liberty to believe in accord with one's own conscience is always to be affirmed. Each of our hypothetical believers has come to his belief on war and peace in sound ways consistent with honoring the collective wisdom of the tradition on these matters, consulting Scripture, and examination of the testimony of divergent voices. The follower of Jesus who believes in pacifism must interact with the believer in just war theory with the mutual love and respect that a believer has the right to expect from a fellow believer. And vice versa. They must both treat each other with mutual Christian love and respect. It does not follow, however, that either believer need be *ambivalent* about the belief each holds, and herein lies one of the great problems with our living into the calling to love and respect those who hold non-essential beliefs different from our own.

In cases in which we conflate our theology and our political ideology, the distinction between Scripture and our interpretation of Scripture is often of critical importance, as one side or the other seeks

to make *its particular interpretation* normative for everyone in such a way that we move from the Bible to our interpretation of the Bible to some particular, contemporary political position. From there, it is a small step to arguing that the *political position* at hand is one "taught by Scripture." We miss the fact that we have moved through several steps that could contain error; and even more important, we overly simplify the process whereby we draw ideological conclusions from scriptural teaching.

RESPECTFUL DISAGREEMENT

Let us look a little deeper into what it means to allow liberty in non-essentials while not becoming ambivalent about the beliefs we hold. First, it is generally true that the strength with which one believes that a given statement is true will be directly related to the strength of the evidence one believe one has for it. Second, if I believe one statement to be true, it follows necessarily that I believe its opposite to be false (i.e., if I believe that Christians *should be* pacifists, I believe Christians *should not* be advocates of just war theory). Further, the stronger I believe my evidence for my belief, the more strongly I will believe that its opposite is false.

Too often, we seem to imply that to affirm the liberty of all to believe in accord with their own consciences on non-essentials is to embrace a sort of relativistic "all beliefs are equal" mentality. And the more strongly we believe a particular claim to be true, the more strongly we feel a sense of betraying the truth when we respect and honor those who have very different perspectives from our own. Quite simply, this tendency is a demon that we Christians have to exorcise from the lives and relationships we share with one another. I can be a firm believer in either pacifism or just war theory (or some other position on war and peace; these two positions do not exhaust the options), and I can firmly believe that the one who believes the one different from me is wrong. In other words, to allow liberty in non-essentials does not preclude my believing that my opponent is wrong in the belief he holds. However, this does not allow me to demean my fellow believers, to treat them with disrespect, or to fail to live up to the high standards that Christian love and charity call us to. One of

the biggest obstacles to our inability to allow, and even to rejoice in, the liberty of others to believe differently than us is the fact that we too often fail to realize that respecting and honoring another's liberty in non-essentials does not imply either ambivalence or relativism on our part with regard to the belief in question. I can be completely committed to my belief but still work closely with a brother or sister who believes something different. In fact, given that most all of us disagree at one point or another on important and complicated matters, if we do not learn to do this better, we will ever continue to splinter and exclude the very ones who should be laboring alongside us. And, more sadly, the testimony that Jesus enjoined upon us ("they will know my followers by their love") will continue to be eroded and become even more unpersuasive in a world in which it has already become too unpersuasive.

Closely related to this is the fact that we Christians are terrible at passionate but mutually respectful debate that ends with the disputants still able to respect and love one another. On the one hand, we seem to believe that passionate disagreement is itself an indicator of our sinfulness. When we see things this way, we have a strong tendency to do anything we can to avoid disagreement, even to the point of covering over our disagreements in an attempt to create an artificial and false unity. Let me say this clearly: disagreement between Christians, even passionate disagreement, is not a sin. Those passionate disagreements might become heated disputes at times, but again, this is not, in itself, sinful. *It is sinful* when we allow our disagreements, passionate or not, to become obstacles to working together, impediments to cooperation in areas in which we do agree, reasons for treating one another with disrespect, and an excuse to fall short of the biblical injunction to love one another as we love ourselves.[iii] On the other hand, the opposite and equally unhealthy response is to treat every belief we hold as if it is unequivocally true and that all who disagree with us are to be shunned, avoided, or, minimally, treated as if they are somehow "less Christian" for not holding the same beliefs we do.

[iii.] And, of course, to love another as we wish to be loved is implicitly to grant to them and the positions they hold the same respect and honor that we wish to receive for our own.

Sometimes, those who take this position rationalize it by asking, "Am I really loving my brother or sister if I allow them to continue in error?" This reasoning is highly problematic for a number of reasons. First, it assumes a level of certainty that is simply not available to us. Put quite simply, even though we might be very confident in what we believe, it still may turn out that what we believe is false; and to insist a sister or brother come to hold the same belief as us could, in fact, be to encourage them in error. It is always important to keep in mind our own fallibility. Second, one has to ask just how treating the one who disagrees with us as if she were stupid or, worse, how excluding her from fellowship and dialog with us is going to help her "see the error of her ways." In other words, let us assume that we believe in pacifism very strongly and that we fall into the category of those who think they cannot let ones who disagree with them continue in error. Do we really think that if we treat those who disagree as if they were stupid or perverse or if we exclude them from respectful dialog that is going to somehow force them to "see the truth"? Is it not more likely that they are going to be inclined to see us as partisan ideologues with whom reasonable and mutually respectful debate is simply not possible? Third, in my own experience, folk often tend to defend most strongly things they *want* to be true but *are afraid* are not. When we feel such a strong need to correct another on her perceived errant beliefs, we would do well to carefully examine our own motivations. The bottom line is this: if we Christians, on the one hand, are going to resist appearing noncommittal on our beliefs to avoid division or, on the other hand, are going to resist appearing willing to divide at any hint of strong disagreement amongst us, we *must get much better at being able to have passionate disagreements without losing love and respect for one another in the process*.

As suggested above, many of us hold the beliefs we have with more certainty than is justified by the reasons we have for holding the belief in question. In addition, we often give them broader application than is justified. This, in turn, contributes to the tendency to conflate and confuse the relationships between what we believe theologically and what we believe politically. This often happens without our explicitly noticing it. However, we must be more intentional about this, making sure that we do not allow ourselves either to elevate non-essentials to

the status of essentials or to allow political matters to become taken as theological essentials. As we increasingly recognize that political issues cannot become theological essentials and that we must respect liberty to believe as one feels led on non-essentials, we will likewise become less likely to confuse our theology and our politics.

Consider persons who, through study of Scripture—particularly the injunctions against killing and the affirmations of the intrinsic value of children—and other sources (along the lines we noted earlier and with the appropriate attention to those with divergent views), come to believe the following:

Abortion should be criminalized.

Imagine that, given their research and their own passions on the matter, they further come to believe:

True followers of Jesus must support the criminalization of abortion.

I personally know a number of Christians who believe both of those statements to be true. However, I also personally know a number of Christians who hold the following:

Abortion should not be criminalized.

And:

True followers of Jesus are not required to support the criminalization of abortion.

So, is either group justified in holding the set of beliefs that they do? Given the framework we have established for determining what is an essential belief—one that all Christians may reasonably be expected to believe—we would have to reject as unjustified the belief that all true Christians must support the criminalization of abortion. The church as a whole has not used its power to speak authoritatively on this issue, even though individuals and some individual Christian groups express very strong feelings on both sides of the issue.

Consequently, we cannot treat the criminalization of abortion as an essential that requires unity of belief. There are serious followers of Jesus on both sides of the debate, and both sides can provide reasonable evidences and arguments to supplement their positions. Consequently, we would be enjoined to conclude that followers of Jesus can be justified to hold either position on the criminalization of abortion. What do we do in cases like that? As we have seen, we must treat the issue as one that qualifies as a non-essential, or an opinion, and we are expected to allow the liberty of individual Christians drawing their own conclusions according to the dictates of their own conscience. And while we should engage in passionate debate on the issue and while each side may, and in fact should, feel strongly about defending their conclusion, we should not allow our differences on the issue to become divisive within our churches. Instead, we should look for common ground. Are there mid-positions that both sides can come together on? For example, if we cannot agree on the criminalization of abortion, can we agree that the need for abortion should be minimized? If so, what steps might we agree aim at that joint goal? As Christians who love one another and love God, we are obliged to look for these common-ground positions. However, even if we cannot find the desired common ground, we must resist allowing the partisanship that permeates our culture on this issue to penetrate and divide our congregations.

We have intentionally selected these two issues—the Christian response to issues of war and peace and the Christian response to abortion—precisely because they are two issues that have become divisive in the church. The partisanship that permeates the culture on these issues has permeated the church and has resulted in deep divisions amongst individual believers as well as within and between denominations. Charges of "not really being Christian" are often hurled at each side by the other over the fact that they cannot come to agreement on the issue. Before we finish our examination in this chapter, however, we need to dig deeper to better understand the process by which our theological positions become conflated with our political positions.

CONFLATING THEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

Quite often, the first step involved with a partisan ideological position becoming intertwined with a theological or faith commitment is the belief by one political party or the other[iv] that such a combination can be exploited for partisan political gain. In other words, generally speaking, the engagement of the issue *is not for the sake of the issue itself*, but rather the perception that the issue can be aligned with faith in a way that encourages Christians to support that party because of the perceived conflation of the partisan issue with a particular faith commitment. We all are familiar with the term "wedge issue"—an issue that can be given enough priority that it will create a "wedge" to divide the voting patterns of a particular group in order to gain political support for our own group. Certain kinds of issues tend to lend themselves naturally to conflation between ideology and theology, and the best chance of using such a "wedge" strategy comes when one of these issues is in play.

For the strategy to work, however, the issue has to cease to be just an ideological issue and must, rather, come to be seen as a matter of faith—that is, religious faith and ideological commitment must become conflated. Ideally, this has to happen so thoroughly in the minds of the Christian group being targeted that *they no longer take time to reflect on the matter*. It simply is taken for granted that Christians must necessarily believe in this particular way on this particular issue. The ones wishing to exploit the issue have to provide a rationale for why Christian believers "must" believe in this way. In making the conflation of theology and political ideology this complete, the process will involve a number of steps, largely along the lines we have outlined here. Consider the following steps:

First, as noted above, some issue (let's call it X), is identified as a wedge issue that is perceived as being exploitable for the benefit of one party.

Second, in order to have the desired influence in religious circles, one has to provide a plausible argument for why X is a matter of faith commitment, not primarily a matter of political ideology. Here, the conflation of political

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iv. And whatever we think about which party does it most or best, we need make no mistake that both are quite willing to utilize this tactic when possible.

ideology and theology is obscured by attempting to withdraw the hints of political ideology.

Third, as X becomes increasingly seen as a matter of faith, the next move is to create the perception that "real Christians" must believe X to be correct and true.

Fourth, as the argument continues to unfold, the next step is to argue that since "real Christians" must believe X, they must oppose those who do not support X.

Fifth, therefore, if they must oppose those who do not support X, they must support those who support X.

Sixth, since "this" particular political party believe and supports X, "real Christians" must vote for "this" political party.

Seventh, therefore, supporting "that" political party is a sin.

Now, it is clear that in the course of the argument as laid out above, if it is to have the desired effect, at some point X has to move from being a matter of opinion, or a non-essential, to being seen as an essential. How does that happen? Well, in one of the ways we identified above. It could be a case of "proof texting" Scripture, making it seem to say something it does not. This would be to err with regard to reading and interpreting written testimony. Our errors in interpretation could come from trusting as expert those who are not. Or it could arise from equivocating on the meaning of key terms. Or, of course, we could simply follow faulty reasoning—either drawing an unwarranted level of certainty on a given issue or drawing a false conclusion. Such an error can occur at several different points in the process laid out above. Wherever the error occurs, however, the conclusion is the same: some group of Christians comes to hold as an essential a position that has arisen as a consequence of confusing theological commitments with political ideological commitments. In the process, unwarranted presuppositions get put into place, presuppositions that we are no longer willing seriously to challenge. As we noted, these kinds of errors happen on both sides of the political aisle. Let's take a look at a single issue that gets treated in this way by each side, in attempting to gain partisan advantage for itself.

Let's take a look at the issue of homosexuality and how it is deployed by each side, within Christian circles, as an issue to be exploited for partisan advantage.[v] We will start with the argument as it might be developed from the left and its attempt to show that Christians have to be in favor of affirming homosexual marriage.

First, those who argue that homosexual practice is an acceptable Christian lifestyle choice have to deal with the fact that when mentioned in Scripture, the references to homosexuality are negative. This fact is often dealt with by focusing on perceived differences between the biblical references to homosexuality and the monogamous homosexuality the defenders have in mind. Sometimes, the negative references are dismissed as "human error," by comparing passages about homosexuality to those about slavery, which most modern Christians have accepted as culturally bound. In the end, though, one has to develop a means of working around the negative biblical references.

Second, the argument is often shifted to experiential grounds. The goal is to argue that homosexual practice is a normal experience, a normal aspect of human nature. The question is often framed as "how can such love between two persons be viewed as wrong?"

Third, once moved to experiential grounds, the move is made to the defense of "whole persons." Are we not sexual beings? If, for some, the normal experience of sexual attraction happens to be toward persons of the same sex, should we not affirm that? Should we not want the "full human experience" for gays and lesbians as well?

Fourth, the next step is to frame objection to homosexual practice as a matter of "prejudice." The readings of Scripture that lead one to draw negative conclusions about homosexual practice are seen as "prejudiced readings." Prejudice is a bad thing, right, A thing to be avoided by all Christians?

[v.] Let me be crystal clear once more. The presentation here is aimed at showing how different sides deploy arguments in attempt to exploit a particular issue for partisan advantage. Here we stay focused on this, and we resist entering the debate about homosexual marriage. The authors accept that there is a right and a wrong to the question "does God approve of homosexual practice?" But our point here is not to adjudicate that matter. The fact that the authors are not unanimous on the answer is a testimony to the fact that Christians who disagree on one issue, need not allow that issue to preclude working together on other matters.

Fifth, the last move locates the debate now as a "justice issue." We are not treating persons justly if we are prejudiced against their chosen form of sexual expression. God is always on the side of justice, being no respecter of persons. So, the argument goes, can we not see how God must be on the side of those treated with prejudice? So, God must be on the side of homosexuals on this matter.

Sixth, so "real Christians" must affirm homosexual practice and homosexual marriage.

Seventh, therefore, "real Christians" must oppose those who oppose homosexual practice and homosexual marriage.

Eighth, therefore, "real Christians" must support "this" party because they are strongest on this important justice issue.

And so we begin with some problematic passages of Scripture and by the end, we have drawn the conclusion that the affirmation of homosexual practice and homosexual marriage are essential expressions of our Christian faith. Of course, those who disagree are equally adroit in making their argument.

The argument advanced by the political right is very similar in its form and structure, though, of course, it draws the opposite conclusion. Let's take a look.

First, those who wish to deny that homosexual practice and homosexual marriage are acceptable Christian lifestyle choices have the advantage that all references to homosexuality in Scripture are negative—that is, they present it as an unacceptable Christian lifestyle choice. So, rather than needing to find a reason why those verses do not mean what they seem to, we can simply state that "Scripture is clear" on the matter.

Second, just as in the case above, those in this camp can agree that experience is important and that it matters. However, they will resist the move that allows experience to trump what is seen as the plain meaning of Scripture. In addition, an argument is often brought forward that connects the role of the family and marriage to human procreation—thus providing a counterargument from experience.

Third, wholeness and sexual expression as a vital part of that wholeness are affirmed here as well, just as we noted above. However, the argument will be shifted to claim that God has created us so that our sexual expression is to be worked out within particular boundaries, and those boundaries are heterosexual expression. Sometimes the argument is again made connecting this point to procreation.

Fourth, we can even agree that God sides with those who are exploited and discriminated against as a general rule. However, we will reject that this idea applies here because of the clear teaching of Scripture that homosexual practice is sinful. We are for justice, but being for justice does not demand that we treat what Scripture says is sin as if it were not sin.

Fifth, now that we have situated homosexual practice within the realm of sinfulness, we can deploy God's righteousness and holiness as divine attributes that we must affirm in our denying of any particular sinful practice. So, while we do not wish to be harsh to homosexual persons, it is still the case that homosexual practice is sinful and must be denounced.

Sixth, so "real Christians" must deny the acceptability of homosexual practice and homosexual marriage.

Seventh, therefore "real Christians" must oppose those who affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice and homosexual marriage.

Eighth, therefore "real Christians" must support "this" political party because it opposes those who affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice and homosexual marriage.

Of course, one could offer many examples, but we have selected a particularly thorny one to show how each side is capable of taking the evidences that each finds persuasive and ends up concluding that only those who agree with "us" are the "real Christians." Further, we then use these distinctions to warrant our own divisiveness. And what becomes even more problematic is that issues such as this one (though one could call to mind others that generate a great deal of passion) come to be treated as the "final test" of whether someone is really voting "in a Christian way." By elevating a few hot-button issues, we sweep under the rug numerous issues as relatively unimportant. This is

the value of a "wedge issue" and the arguments we deploy that effectively conflate our theology and our political ideology. Other important issues get ignored, or worse; because we come to find "our party" right on our "hot-button" issue, we too easily become seduced to supporting their other issues as well—sometimes openly, sometimes more as a consequence of lack of reflection.

We have spent a lot of time in this chapter exploring the ways that our theology and our political ideology get intermixed and confused. In other chapters, we have laid out the reasons why this trend is so unhealthy for the church in the longer term. Now, it is time to turn attention to corrective steps. What might we do to exorcise the demon of political partisanship from our churches? And how might we learn to have passionate, informed discussions on matters on which we hold very different views without letting those differences divide us?

ESCAPING THE IDEOLOGICAL BUBBLE

We have spent the bulk of our discussion so far laying out the case that partisanship in our culture has increasingly infiltrated our churches. We have argued that this is an unfortunate trend with sad consequences for the church—in fact, for both the church and the culture. We have examined the problem at the local church level as well as at the more global level, and we have identified factors that have contributed to this trend. The problem is becoming so deeply concerning, however, that we cannot stop after naming and assessing the challenges partisanship presents for the church. So, in this chapter we move from description to prescription—from naming the problem to trying to identify ways in which the problem can be resisted and corrected. Some of these corrections will need to happen at the personal level, changing some of our own personal habits, for example, while others will have to be taken on in concert. If we are to prevent further erosion of our ability to collaborate across ideological lines and if we to elevate our theological commitments above our ideological ones, we will have to regain a broader focus, with primary attention to faithful service to those concerns most consistently voiced by Scripture and the Christian tradition. And we will have to focus much less attention on whether or not "our party" is going to win the next election and much more on what the tradition has called "the common good." Let's have a look at some correction measures we might take.

BE AWARE

Recognition comes before corrective action. In other words, we cannot, or perhaps will not, correct something that we do not recognize as a problem. There can hardly be sadder words one can hear from a physician than, "If we'd only caught it sooner." If the problem had been caught sooner, corrective actions could have been taken, and healing would have been possible. As long as we are unaware of the damage being caused, we tend to maintain our current course, continue future actions along the same lines as past ones. And, while we do so, the problem deepens and the effort it will take to change the course will steadily increase until we pass a point at which correction is no longer possible. When we are at that point, we say we have a terminal disease. Are the trends we have discussed beyond repair? Are we suffering from terminal partisanship in the church? Well, at this point, none of us thinks so, but we are confident that the course we are on is a perilous one—one that requires us to recognize it, to acknowledge it for the harm it creates, and to begin serious attempts at correction.

Partisanship enters our faith communities often quite innocently, initially arising from legitimate concerns over the ministry of the church in the world. These concerns, as we argued, are often then exploited for partisan gain when the lines between theology and ideology are blurred, with the outcome that folks become more motivated by ideology than by faith commitment. As soon as our ideology trumps our theology, we lose our distinctive Christian voice and begin to sound more like a political party than like the church. Of course, all the rancor and lack of civility that characterizes much of our political discourse, then, gets imported into our interactions in the church. Can any honestly deny the trend or the havoc it creates?

For the sake of clarity, though, let us repeat again. The problem we are identifying, the concern that we are addressing *is not* Christian participation in the political process. In fact, on that issue, we would argue that Christians should be (or, perhaps better, must be) involved in the political process. Without Christian participation, we surrender the important field of policy making to those who do not have the Christian's unique take on these issues—critical issues that affect how our common life together is shaped and structured. Should Christians

vote? Yes, emphatically, yes! Should Christians weigh in on the public debate on matters that affect our shared, common life? Most definitely yes. Does that mean that Christians, on a particular issue, may hold similar or the same positions as one or the other of the political parties? Well, it is hard to see how this would not be the case. No, none of these things represent the sort of infiltration of ideological partisanship within the church that has been the primary concern of this book. No, that concern arises when we our first priority is to our political commitments. It arises when political commitments become our lens for interpreting Scripture and the Christian tradition rather than the other way around. This concern arises when our agreement with a party on a particular issue gets translated into wholesale support of that party on practically all issues. And, this concern arises most when partisan politics begins to create rifts among Christian brothers and sisters such that our ability to work together on shared concerns begins to break down and our ability to engage in fruitful and passionate debate is destroyed. Most acutely and most descriptively, we feel the problem when the testimony of Christians as a people of whom it can be said, "they are characterized by their love," is replaced with, "they are people who are characterized by the political party they support." (More on this in the next chapter.) Sadly, in some circles, the latter statement is one of the most common responses given to the inquiry about what the word *Christian* brought to mind.

Action follows recognition. Hopefully, the problem is evident. Now, what concrete steps might we take to avoid it, to heal it, to move beyond it?

SELECT NEWS SOURCES WITH CARE

There was a time when information was not readily accessible to the public. In fact, it has only been with the last century (with a remarkable surge in the last twenty-five years) that the so-called person on the street has had access to a significant amount of information about what is going on beyond their local community (and, in some cases, even within it). Under the earlier conditions, the person on the street, unless that person happened to be located in one of the few major cultural hubs, was not particularly aware of what was happening

politically. Certainly, any nuanced grasp of what was happening at the federal, or even state, level was virtually impossible due to lack of access to information. Those days are gone. While one might also argue today that "any *nuanced* grasp of what [is] happening at the federal, or even state, level [is] virtually impossible," it is not likely to be due to *lack of access* to information. No, if we lack a grasp or a nuanced grasp of political matters today, it is more likely to be for different reasons, more related to information overload than information scarcity.

Today's news consumer is bombarded by a virtual nonstop stream of news bits. There are television news sources that run the gamut from local to state to national to global news information. Likewise, their "news slant" runs all across the political spectrum, from the far right to the far left, with none likely to pass a test of "pure objectivity." While radio seems less and less a news source, there continue to be brief snippets of news information provided on virtually all stations. Even if explicit news reporting is minimal, news information inevitably works its way implicitly into the various discussions that happen on radio due to the level of awareness and/or political commitments of the speakers and hosts. I dare say it would be practically impossible to name the number of news sources that exist on the Internet. After all, what counts as an Internet news source? Given that anyone can start a "blog" and provide their take on the news, can we ever get more than a snapshot of news sources available at a given time? There are some 2 billion Internet users worldwide, all of them have an opinion, and all are just minutes away from starting a "news site" that expresses their own unique perspective. Facebook and other social networking sites provide forums for newsy discussions. And, beyond the Internet, we are all engaged daily by numerous folk in informal, unofficial speculations about the implications of the latest political news. No, if the person of today does not have a nuanced position regarding the host of political issues up in the air at any given moment, it is hardly from a *lack of access* to information.

With all this access to information comes great possibility. Virtually everyone has the ability to get a glimpse of major happenings (and, oft, not-so-major happenings) around the world. If you are a musician, finding the lyrics or tablature to just about any song imaginable has

never been easier. Have a taste in something rather exotic? A vendor for it is as close as your computer and any one of a number of Internet search engines. Yet, with all the information available, a uniquely twenty-first century misuse of news is possible. With the breadth of information online and with the plethora of perspectives offered, any person with any set of ideological commitments could easily select a collection of news source links that would allow them to live major portions of their lives within the reassuring confines of an ideological bubble. If you hold some really bizarre ideological commitments, you might not be able to find the full range of resources—television, radio, and print news media in addition to the Internet. However, if you hold any one of several of the major political ideologies, you will have no trouble constructing and living within your own ideological bubble. In fact, when it comes to Internet usage, the tendency to get routed into an ideological bubble is becoming an increasingly serious problem. Google, Facebook, and other popular Web site engines and social media are more and more using your past selections to "learn what you like" and then to use that information to funnel you into areas that match.[i] So-called "personalization technology" discerns our preferences for, say, conservative or progressive political perspectives and then creates for us a world that will greet us with comforting affirmations of our preferred perspectives. Being aware of this hidden filtering is key to our being able to avoid it.

It can feel safe and secure inside the bubble. We can choose to be fed a steady diet of information and "data"[i] that never challenges the things we hold dear. We can select political commentators who we know will stroke our beliefs, affirming us in holding them and assuring us that those on "the other side" are not nearly as bright as we are. Take this television news outlet, that print news source, this radio station, and these carefully selected Internet Web sites, and voila, there we have it—a nice and neat little ideological bubble of our own construction. If we are really selective, we can pick news sources that *appear* to be more evenhanded—you know, the ones that make sure persons representing both sides of an issue are involved in the dialog.

[i.] I put data in scare quotes to indicate that what is chosen for purely ideological reasons is, at least, incomplete and, at worst, mistaken.

Since they are concluding what you have already concluded, you never question the fact that the "opponent" always seems weaker. Maybe, just maybe, this particular "opponent" was chosen just because she is not particularly articulate and persuasive. Before you know it, we become convinced that "our team" really is the smarter, and we never quite catch on to how the deck is being stacked. Why would we? No reason to feel challenged when our news sources are just affirming the obvious rightness of what we believe.

While it may feel safe there, it is not safe. Socrates once said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." What he meant, of course, was that we are humans prone to error, and it requires constant vigilance on our parts to make sure that our beliefs are being examined, critiqued, and changed where appropriate. We humans can rest assured that all of us hold incorrect beliefs. What we cannot rest assured of is that we will easily find where those errors are. After all, if we knew which beliefs were mistaken, our love for truth would urge us to correct them, right? If we borrow Socrates' claim and apply it here, what we observe is that, if we are to avoid error, often significant ones, we are going to have to leave the safety of our ideological bubbles.

One of the most important ways to avoid an overly partisan position is taking time to hear from all across the ideological spectrum. It takes more time to hear from a variety of experts from across the spectrum; it is sometimes uncomfortable to have our pet ideas challenged; and perhaps no one likes to admit error and revise positions. We are going to have to build a collection of news sources that assure that our already-held beliefs are being appropriately challenged, assure that we are hearing the best arguments that the "other side" has to offer, and that place a premium on getting key facts right.

The tendency to fall into an ideological bubble is seductive, for obvious reasons, and avoiding it requires intentionality. It might not be easy, but it will be a significant step to moving beyond partisanship and embracing, in the long run, stronger positions. And an important side consequence will be not only a deeper grasp of complicated positions but also a better understanding of the strengths of the positions you end

up not holding.[ii] All in all, it's a fine step toward disconnecting ourselves from ideological commitments that unnecessarily divide us.

DON'T BE SEDUCED BY SOUND BITES

In our "never pause for a moment" culture, time is very much at a premium, or so it seems. When we feel constantly under the gun, the pressure is to squeeze ever more information into shorter and shorter communications. I recall a time when a senior executive in a Fortune 500 company said to me, "I don't care if you want to spend $25 million, if you cannot describe the proposal in one page, don't bother." As greater and greater amounts of information become available and the desire to be, on the one hand, short and to the point and, on the other, attention grabbing, it is hard to see the popularity of the "sound bite" declining. Of course, there is more to the popularity of the sound bite than just the pressure for increasing brevity. Many of the challenges that we face as a culture are remarkably complex. It takes a good deal of time and research to study the issues and to get one's arms around the nuances in sufficient detail so that one can understand and speak intelligently on them. It often seems to be the case that sound bites are constructed with the intent of obscuring the complexities for partisan gain. Sound bites can be powerful for at least two reasons: they are short, memorable statements, and they make things seem simpler than they are. And therein lies the problem.

All of the significant problems that face our culture today are complex, and some are beyond our ability readily to imagine. Issues include whether or not our society should allow the construction of more nuclear power plants, how we should make sure that our brothers and sisters are not left to suffer in poverty and ill health in their later years, how we should balance the protection of civil liberties with societal protections from those who would engage in terrorist activities, and what obligations we have to those in other nations and

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[ii.] We resist offering an example of a list of news sources that span the spectrum. This is partly because the field is generally in flux, partly because new sources are ever emerging, and partly because part of the healing from partisanship is the process of identifying the right set of sources.

cultures. Every one of these issues, and many more like them, are complicated and require thoughtful, nuanced assessment in order to determine a reasonable and correct course of action. Yet, when the dialog on these issues is reduced to a popular sound bite, critical complexity is ignored. One can easily understand the appeal. We face a mind-numbing set of challenges in our contemporary culture, and we would love to find that they are much easier to resolve than they seem. Unfortunately, the more popular and simplistic the sound bite, the more difficult it becomes to engage the issue adequately. We allow the simple solution to seduce us, and we are too easily manipulated to support those who promise their overly simplistic proposal will actually resolve the problem at hand. And here we see the partisan advantage of powerful sound bites.

Now, before proceeding any further, we have to note that not all sound bites are bad. Some enduring sound bites have effectively and efficiently communicated important points and made those points easy to recall. For example, Reagan's popular call to Gorbachev, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," has stood the test of time as an example of a sound bite that attempted to speed a particular historical development. When Roosevelt said, "All we have to fear is fear itself," he aimed to remind a frightened and concerned nation that the course forward had to be undertaken by naming our fear and setting it aside. No, these sound bites were not harmful but helped communicate a particular message and tone at a key point in history. However, too often, sound bites get tossed out *for the purpose of obscuring the complexity of issues*. For example, when we call the estate tax a "death tax," we do so in attempt to set aside the seriously needed discussion about how we protect society from the ills that increasingly arise as wealth is concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer. When we say that those opposed to abortion on demand are "anti-choice," we intend to trump the set of complex issues that surround the topic of abortion in order to give the appearance that the "real issue" is our freedom.

We could list additional examples, but the point we want to make here is just this: we live in a society that has allowed itself to be driven too much by short, clever sound bites than by careful reflection. As

a consequence, we often feel ourselves driven to accept proposals from our politicians that, if we more thoughtfully examined them, we would see are inadequate. While there will always be constructive and useful sound bites, particularly ones like we noted above, ones aiming to call us or others to the better angels of our nature, we should be wary of those that obscure complex issues with simplistic answers. Even if we like the clever sound of a given sound bite of information, we should not be guided by it. Instead, we have to be willing to use the resources available to us (hopefully freshly formulated ones that arise from our last suggestion that persons create a list of news sources and resources that force us to engage both sides of a given debate) in order to get past the simplistic solution to one that has the nuance necessary to address the complexities involved. Aristotle reminded us that, while simplicity is a virtue, it is not virtuous to assign to a thing more simplicity than it allows.

Another step forward beyond the divisive partisanship we have been examining is an increasing resistance to the seductive power of "sound bite" solutions in favor of a more thorough examination of the underlying complexities to the cultural problems we face. Let these examinations, then, guide you to the conclusions you should hold on a particular issue. If the sound bites agree, so be it; but make careful evaluation the first, not the last, criteria for agreeing with and supporting a particular position.

DO NOT ALLOW LOUDNESS OF PRESENTATION TO TRUMP SOUNDNESS OF ARGUMENT

Have you ever been in a situation where you find yourself moved to embrace a particular position by a powerful presenter, and then, after later reflection come to see that you had been drawn to conclusions unwarranted by the presentation itself? It would be entirely unsurprising if you had. All of us are moved by powerful speakers. That's what makes them powerful speakers, in fact. However, just as the simplicity of certain sound bites can seduce us to embrace bad proposals, so a charismatic and engaging presenter can seduce us with his or her passion. I have never listened to a speech from Hitler, but I have been told that he was remarkable in his ability to draw persons into

supporting and collaborating with him. He could make the outrageous sound rational and persuade folks to embrace the plans he put forward.

There is nothing inherently wrong with having speakers who are able so to move us. In fact, there are many situations where a person with these skills is needed to rally us together under particularly trying and difficult times. However, those of us who listen to these powerfully motivating speakers have to learn to distinguish between a speech that rallies us around common goals aimed to serve the common good and one that attempts to manipulate us to serve a personal or ideological set of goals. When we allow the passion of a given speaker/ presenter to overwhelm our ability to assess their proposals rationally, we have allowed bombast to trump rationality—i.e., we have allowed the passions of the speaker to seduce us. Of course, the ideal solution is to find passionate speakers who unite the call to action with a careful analysis of the problem and the proposed solution. We live in a time when we seem often to reward our politicians more for being loud than for being thoughtful and reflective. We need to reverse that.

Of course, since what we are speaking of here is another version of being seduced by language (in the sound bite, with brevity, simplicity, and cleverness; here with passion and loudness), the solutions are very similar to that for moving away from the "sound bite mentality." We must insist upon sound, rational argument along with passionate presentation and not allow passionate presentation to replace rational argument. And, we must carefully and reflectively secure the information needed to be able to make a rational assessment of the proposals on the table. We undercut ideological partisanship anytime we more deeply engage the questions at hand and the less we allow ourselves to be driven to certain conclusions without the requisite assessment.

DO NOT ALLOW ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE TO OUTWEIGH STATISTICAL ASSESSMENT

We live in a country of some 300 million and in a world now populated with in excess of six billion persons. We dare say that with that number of individuals, one can "prove" just about anything by way of

anecdote. It has become popular, amongst politicians and laypersons alike, to raise our attention to a particular, single example of a problem or solution to a problem. If we want to argue that welfare is a bad thing, we find an example of a welfare recipient driving the proverbial "welfare Cadillac." We point to this individual and draw the conclusion, from this one case, that all welfare recipients are out to abuse the system. Similarly, if we want to show that care for mothers' with dependent children is a bad program, we locate a mother who has several children, perhaps by different fathers, who lives off the public dole and makes no attempt to find work. Are there such cases? No doubt. If, of course, you want to make the opposite point, you find a welfare recipient who used the access to public support to get through a difficult period until she was "back on their feet." You cite this example and crow about how well the system works. Or, to appeal to our second example, we find a mother whose husband left and pays no child support, who survived her child's earliest period by wisely using public assistance to make a better future for herself and her child. Are there such cases? Equally, no doubt.

One can understand the rationale for appealing to such cases. When we involve real cases involving real persons, we give the issue a degree of concreteness that can be invaluable in discussion. It removes the issue from being an abstract policy discussion to making it about the lives of real persons. However, if we are going to take this route, appealing to anecdotal evidence, we have to be careful to pick examples, not because they yield partisan gain or because they "prove" what we want to be true. No, we have to pick them based on their being an accurate representation of the policy and programs in question, according to legitimate research statistics on the subject. At the end of the day, the question is not whether we can identify particular cases involving particular persons that make the point we wish to make. The more important questions are: What is happening overall with these programs? How are they functioning most frequently over an extended period of time? From there, we might ask how we can make them even better. But to use anecdotal arguments to blindly defend or to radically curtail given public policies is both irresponsible and dangerous.

The much desirable alternative is to take the time and do the hard work of digging into the available data to end up with a more nuanced and accurate picture of what is happening. A good deal of the information one needs to make informed decisions on these matters is available from a host of governmental agencies—particularly where it relates to existing programs. For the most part, assessments are provided by departments that are supposed to be nonpartisan. Are they? Perhaps not perfectly so, but surely closer than the data we would get from partisan sources. In addition, there are numerous sources of information, through think tanks, nonprofit advocacy groups, and so on, through which such data can be located and assessed. The more we hear the different sides of each issue (partisan right, partisan left, and nonpartisan), the more likely we will be able to formulate our presentations in ways that allow us to use anecdotes properly—as an adjunct to a fair and accurate analysis of the overall analytical data. We should always resist the quick anecdote that too easily makes an ideological point, and when faced with such an anecdote, we ought always to ask the presenter, "Yes, but what do the statistics say?"

DO NOT LET NONEXPERTS CONVINCE YOU THEY ARE THE EXPERTS

We live in a day in which expertise is frequently viewed with suspicion. If a person has expertise in a particular field and, thus, expects to have more credibility on a given subject than the non-expert, that person is often criticized as an "elitist." However, when we need medical attention, we make every effort to assure that the doctor we see has the right credentials. Perhaps the reasons for this boil down to the fact that we have a *desire* that the troubles we face be simple—easily understood, with straightforwardly simple solutions that any layperson can understand. That desire often manifests itself in our willingness to give our support to overly simplistic proposals. Unfortunately, the most significant challenges we face are deeply complex and will require our best experts to resolve.

In chapter 4, when we discussed the ways in which persons come to hold positions that are inadequate or incorrect, one of the problems we identified was treating as expert on a particular subject, those who

are not, in fact, expert. As we noted there, much of what we believe, we believe as a consequence of testimony—sometimes written, sometimes oral. Nevertheless, our holding correct positions will depend, to a large degree, on our trusting to be expert those who really are—those who have the requisite training and experiences to speak authoritatively on the question at hand. Unfortunately, when it comes to complicated policy positions, everyone has an opinion, but few have the requisite knowledge base for being able to understand and articulate the complexities. As we have already noted, partisan ideologues are quite willing to exploit our desire to find simple answers to our complex problems. One wonders, for example, how often the so-called talking heads on television news shows are selected not for their expertise on the subject but rather because they are willing to articulate a particular ideological position as a solution to one of more of our challenges. More often, than not, I imagine.

The remedy for this problem is straightforward: check the credentials of the speaker. Does the speaker have the requisite training to speak authoritatively on the issue at hand? If the debate is about economics, does he or she have training in the field? Is he or she a Nobel Prize winner on the subject? Has he or she taught in the field? Of course, one might have the requisite knowledge to speak with authority on a given topic but still be heavily partisan in one's take on the topic. This problem we handle with our earlier admonition to gain voices from across the political spectrum, from both right-leaning and left-leaning sources. If we make sure we are recognizing as expert folks who *are expert* and if we are intentional about listening to diverse voices and opinions, then we will have progressed a long way toward moving past the facile partisanship that characterizes so much of the debate.

CONSIDER THE BROADER, HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Here, we can be relatively short and to the point. As Christians, our first goal is to hold positions consistent with our faith commitments and our belief that God calls us as a society to great wholeness and flourishing. Consequently, we do not seek primarily to formulate our

positions based upon non-Christian voices, but rather first and foremost upon the basis of what Christians have held on the topic at hand. And those Christian voices we seek to hear have to be from across the centuries, not just from our contemporary setting. Too often, we Christians read materials from the last twenty years (or, in extreme cases, from the last seventy-five or so years) and think we have captured the collective wisdom of the tradition. Little could be further from the truth.

To see this, one only need consult the writings of the early church, perhaps most particularly, the sermons that were preached in the early church. Most Christians would find themselves shocked to hear for themselves what the early church had to say about, for example, riches and war. I often point out that when it comes to politics, we Christians tend to be much more driven by the political liberalism of John Locke than by Scripture on what the life together that pleases God looks like. The sort of mutual interdependence characterized by Scripture or by the sermons of the early preachers often sounds strange to folks used to a steady diet of thought that comes from only the last few years. The correction here is a simple one: we Christians need to spend more time immersed in the sources of the faith that come from a wide variety of times and circumstances over the course of the history of the Christian faith. We would recommend beginning with some of the sermons from the earliest periods, with someone like St. John Chrysostum at the top of the list.

Now, lest we be misunderstood, we are not suggesting that simply being a Christian replaces the need to have expertise in the field at hand. Rather, we are suggesting that hearing from a wide variety of Christian voices across the centuries will enrich in ways immeasurable our grasp of what it genuinely means to "embrace a Christian way of doing things."

CONCLUSION

Perhaps one of the most significant steps we Christians can take in helping to improve the quality of dialog and to help reduce the threats of increasing partisanship is to make a commitment to escape our own

ideological bubbles. Maybe initially, we only take short walks outside our bubbles; but over time, as we come to see that any reasonable way forward requires gaining more and more a willingness to be driven first by our theological rather than by ideological commitments, then we will spend more and more time outside our bubbles. The steps that help us escape those bubbles of safe ideology have been laid out above, and in virtually all cases, they boil down to this: recognizing that "they" are not always wrong, that "we" are not always right, and that "we" and "they" are both needed if we are to find permanent solutions to the political/economic/theological challenges we face today. We encourage the reader to start today, pick one of the prescriptions from this chapter and begin work on it. The problem of rancorous political ideologies infiltrating the church did not reach its current state over night, nor should we expect it to go away so quickly. One step at a time, with consistent commitment over an extended period, these are the way forward. May God grant us wisdom, courage, and the requisite persistence to see genuine healing of partisanship within our churches.

Part III

The Way Forward

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

In my thirty-two years of ministry at Ginghamsburg, I had never asked anyone about their political affiliations, but I was ready to take the bold leap of faith and do so right in the middle of one of my sermons. Ginghamsburg's main campus sits in the middle of Miami County, Ohio, where the majority of voters support the Republican ticket with exuberant passion. Miami County lies in the heart of the congressional district of the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, John Boehner. Passion for conservative politics, as with much of the rest of the country, is often intertwined with conservative theology. I have found that some of the good and influential people at Ginghamsburg assume that others in the church hold the same conservative political ideologies based on sharing common theological views. But in fact this is not always the case.

So I posed the question: "How many of you would identify yourself as voting primarily for issues and candidates on the Democrat ticket?" About 25 to 30 percent of the people in the five o'clock Saturday evening worship celebration raised their hands. I had reserved about ten seats in the front row, and I asked one of the people who raised their hands to come and sit in the first seat. "Now, who votes consistently Republican?" About 35 to 40 percent of those gathered responded by raising their hands. I asked one of the people who identified with the Republican platform to come forward and sit next to

the Democrat. There were some underlying chuckles and comments heard in the congregation, but people were beginning to get the point as I went on to ask Tea Party folk, Libertarians, and Independents the same question and then chose one from each group to come forward and sit next to the others. Point made: Christian unity is not the same as political uniformity! There were more than a few couples in the room in which the spouses didn't share the same political ideologies. When we become members of a local church, no one asks about our political affiliations. Allegiance to Christ is the only allegiance that is required to be a member of Christ's Body.

GROWING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

I was in Orlando, Florida, for a speaking engagement shortly after Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center opened in October 1982. A cardboard pyramid advertising the opening of the new area of the park was strategically positioned on the motel table right next to the TV in my room: "Visit EPCOT—The Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." I remember thinking at the time that God's real intention is for the church to be the true experimental prototype community of tomorrow. This is what we mean as Jesus' followers when we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus' primary message wasn't about getting people saved for a disembodied heaven but redeeming people for the purpose of getting heaven's resources and God's saving purpose into the earth.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches." He went on to say, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough" (Matt. 13:31-33). The people of God's kingdom are meant to be the visible demonstration of heaven's redemptive purpose on earth. Through this community of faith, God is creating a Kingdom culture that is markedly different from the political alliances of earthly kingdoms.

Jesus' selection of the original twelve apostles would have appeared to be an unlikely group for the cohesive start of a Kingdom movement. How many pastors have bemoaned a church administrative counsel with a similar makeup of volatile and unreliable people? It was truly a unifying work of the Holy Spirit that brought to fruition the missional work of unity in the midst of such diverse political persuasions.

- Matthew was a tax collector in the employment of the oppressive Roman political system when Jesus called him to follow. Tax collectors were very much in league with Rome.

- Simon the Zealot represented the opposite extreme of the political spectrum. The Zealots saw the Romans as pagans who occupied the Promised Land. They brought with them false gods and unacceptable ways of thinking and living. The Zealots favored armed rebellion against Rome and were not hesitant to resort to terrorist tactics when deemed necessary. It seems strange that Jesus would choose Simon, considering the fact that Jesus taught nonviolence. There were probably no two groups of Jews in Palestine that hated each other more than the tax collectors and the Zealots.

- Peter, also named Simon, was one of the most impulsive in the group and subject to fits of rage. Let's just say he wasn't reluctant to swing a sword on occasion (Luke 22:49-50).

- Judas the betrayer. Why did he do it? When we try to guess someone's motive, we are on shaky ground. But I would dare to go out on a limb and say it wasn't about the blood money that he received for his act of treachery. Many people were looking for a political messiah that would overthrow the controlling Roman administration and usher in a new political order of Israelite prosperity (restoration of the Davidic Kingdom). Judas couldn't accept what appeared to be Jesus' subservience and apparent defeat at the hands of oppressive Roman dominance. Judas made the same mistake that many in the church do today. Judas allowed his political ideology to become the determiner of his biblical theology.

What was Jesus thinking when he assembled such a mismatched team? I don't know about you, but I find the same tensions exist among the folk in my church, and they existed in the early church after Jesus' ascension into heaven as well.

On the day of Pentecost, all of the believers were gathered together in the same place (read the account in Acts 2). The gift of the Spirit is given in the midst of community and in the context of diversity. Our connection to God cannot be separated from our connection and commitment to others, especially those coming from a different cultural context that may conflict with our own tribal ideologies. Our unity is based in our connection to Jesus Christ. Protestant or Catholic, Reformed or Arminian, liberal or conservative, there is only one body! Why else would God have chosen such a diverse gathering of people for the inauguration of Christ's church? The list of those named in the crowd reads like the who's who of the 2010 United States Census report.

Notice how the author of the book of Acts specifically notes the presence of Jews, Cretans, and Arabs included in the group on the day of Pentecost. Can the Spirit of God create unity in the midst warring tensions that have existed among these ethnic groups for thousands of years? Middle East and North African tensions continue to be a modern-day threat to global stability. Conflicts are escalating, igniting protests and violence like flash fires spreading throughout the populace in Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Iran, Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen, and Morocco. Repressive regimes are being contested and in some cases overthrown. Oil prices began to escalate again in 2011, based on the fear of supply disruptions. Iran heightened tensions by sending warships through the Suez Canal, putting Israel on the alert. As of this writing, there seems no end in sight for the escalating Palestine-Israel tension. The current Israeli position is to continue to sanction the expansion of settlements in the West Bank. Hostility, war, terrorism, and genocide threaten the well-being of millions of God's children throughout the Middle Eastern region.

Oliver Thomas, author of *10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You (But He Can't Because He Needs His Job)*, notes that the issues that most threaten humanity's common future are: global terrorism, cli-

mate change, overpopulation, and the political and social unrest caused by economic disparity. He asserts that these problems are global in nature and that political leaders have been unwilling or inept in finding solutions. Thomas asserts that the church has the obligation to "step up to the pulpit" and be "the goad or conscience of society."[1] In a 2011 article written for *USA Today*, Thomas stated: "From the ancient Hebrew prophets to Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., we count on our spiritual leaders and communities for moral guidance. Conversely, people have been known to engage in horrendously immoral behavior if their religious leaders tell them it's okay. Witness the shameful role religion has played in propping up the Confederacy, Nazi Germany, or global terrorism."[2]

Thomas borrows a term coined by historian John Lee Eighmy to describe the politicalization of the church: "Churches in Cultural Captivity." Herein lies the rub. When we subjugate the gospel mandate to the political platforms of Caesar, we negate the true message and mission of Jesus for the redemption and recreation of the world.

An analysis of lawmakers' voting patterns done in 2011 found that the most recent Congress was one of the most polarized in decades.[3] This cancerous spirit of polarization and division has found its way into the church. The kingdom of Jesus is neither red nor blue, left nor right, tea nor coffee. As followers of Jesus, we represent an alternative party, the party of the kingdom of God. As Jesus' disciples we must be moving forward in the Spirit of Pentecost, tearing down the demeaning barriers that divide and destroy. How can we find our way forward in demonstrating unity without the expectation of uniformity?

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Jesus told his disciples that the litmus test of true faith is the demonstration of selfless love: "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35).

Love transcends political and doctrinal ideologies. So we must put that love into practice in the church, demonstrating to the world that

differences do not have to bring contention or division. If we can't love our brothers and sisters in Christ, how can we show love to the rest of God's hurting world? God's redemptive mission through Jesus is restoring all relationships that have been broken due to the barriers that our nationalistic, tribal, political, and religious systems have created that divide us. The gospel of grace breaks down the dividing walls.

> Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create on new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. (Eph. 2:14-18)

The whole context of this passage affirms the reality of unity based on our connection to the restorative work of Jesus Christ. Christian identity is not centered in our political affiliations, national interests, or denominational doctrinal distinctives, but in Jesus.

It was in response to a divisive controversy in the Anglican church that Samuel Stone penned the words of the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" in 1866:[4]

> The Church's one foundation
> is Jesus Christ her Lord;
> she is his new creation
> by water and the Word.
> From heaven 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 every 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 every grace endued.

No matter what controversies rage, the church can display unity by focusing on their common identity in Jesus Christ. The first Christian communities were threatened by religious and political persecutions on a fairly regular basis until the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. It is really quite amazing that the community of Jesus survived the persecutions under Nero in A.D. 64. Yet the church experienced exponential growth in large part because of the unity of faith centered in the affirmation surrounding the event of Jesus' resurrection, in spite of the rather entrenched traditions and ideologies that were carried forward from peoples' past. These traditions brought tensions and created various splinter groups that had the potential to derail the embryonic movement. But the church found ways in the earliest decades to agree to disagree on the non-essentials yet to find unity in the essentials. Take for example the Jerusalem Council that was assembled to deal with the divisive issue of whether or not one had first to become a Jew and continue to practice all of the Law of Moses, including circumcision, to be a Christian (Acts 15). The outcome was really a great compromise, which allowed for two different "denominational practices" that respected differences while continuing as one in Christian witness.

A loving community is attractive to others. Note the relationship between Christian unity and witness: "All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone" (Acts 2:44-47). What happens when believers demonstrate relational unity that is not based on uniformity of political ideology: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47)?

Jesus prayed for the demonstration of unity in the church: "I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I

am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (John 17:20-21). What is the evidence of Christ's redeeming work in the world? Our unity. By it, everyone will know we are his disciples.

TEACH, TEACH, TEACH

But how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? (Rom. 10:14 NLT)

In my thirty-three-plus years of ministry at Ginghamsburg Church, I never miss an opportunity to teach the biblical mandate that provides the missional expectation for the community of Jesus' followers. Over and over and over, I have repeated the gospel message that finds its center in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and finds its expression in Christian unity and the demonstration of sacrificial love. We must not underestimate the power of our leaders to guide the church as a witness for love in a contentious culture.

I sometimes wonder if those of us who profess Jesus' name will ever become the people that Jesus needs us to be. Was this not the cause for the frustration that Jesus expressed when he quoted the prophet Isaiah; "Although they see, they don't really see; and although they hear, they don't really hear or understand" (Matt. 13:13). We learn best through repetition. The pastor-leader must repeatedly answer the question "why," as followers of Jesus we live, spend our energies and resources, and behave the way we do. Biblical teaching for the sake of orthopraxis (right practice) is essential for both the health of the faith community and our missional engagement as Christ's transforming agents in the world.

I find that it is absolutely essential for the leaders in my church to be able to distinguish the radical nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ from American civil religion and the tribalism of partisan politics. Politics matter and Christians need to be involved. God holds nations accountable for the assurance of justice for the alien, orphan, and widow. Why was God's judgment spoken against Israel through the

prophet Amos: "They crush the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way" (Amos 2:7)? We must learn how to participate in the political process while refusing to participate in demeaning, divisive partisanship.

We must not allow Christianity to be co-opted by those who would use it to gain political power for themselves. In the movie *The Book of Eli*, Denzel Washington plays the character Eli, who has been wandering westward for thirty years in a violent postapocalyptic society, scavenging for survival by hunting small animals and trading whatever he can find for water and supplies. He carries and guards closely in his possession a unique book, which we later discover is a King James Bible—the last one in existence. When he reaches a village ruled by the powerful mobster, Carnegie, Eli realizes that Carnegie also wants this book and is willing to do any thing to get it including murder.

Carnegie gave the order to his henchman Redridge:

> Carnegie: Put a crew together, we're going after 'em.
> Redridge: For a f****** book?
> Carnegie: It's not a f****** book! It's a weapon. A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them. If we want to rule more than one small, f****' town, we have to have it. People will come from all over; they'll do exactly what I tell 'em if the words are from the book. It's happened before and it'll happen again. All we need is that book.

Yes, it has happened before. When we submit the gospel to worldly political ideologies, the gospel becomes a corrupted tool to support the demonic influences of slavery, holocausts, expressions of nationalistic superiority, war, and gender and racial discrimination of all varieties. Constantine used the symbol of Christ's cross as the expression and excuse for war and world dominance. Hitler, a professed Catholic, used the Bible as a means to manipulate the minds of the German people for an evil consequence.

One of the first important studies that I did with my Leadership Board when I first came to Ginghamsburg Church was to biblically

demonstrate why the church must not be partisan or subservient to any earthly government. "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here," Jesus said (John 18:36). The church stands in prophetic tension with all earthly political systems and becomes corrupted when used in a supportive role for political ideologies of any flag or color.

For this reason, I am intentional about teaching the people why the American flag doesn't belong in the sanctuary. The church doesn't represent the United States or any other nation in the world. The church represents the kingdom of God. There is not an American church or a Liberian Church or Russian church: "In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other" (Rom. 12:5). There is only one body! A body cannot be divided and still survive. We must not have only one flag representing one nation in the sanctuary unless the flag of every nation is represented. Christians have reaffirmed the global, universal nature of our faith throughout the centuries by reciting these words in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the holy catholic Church (one universal church) and the communion of saints." We are one in Jesus, no matter what our national citizenship.

PURSUING THE MIND OF CHRIST

These are the things we are talking about—not with words taught by human wisdom but with words taught by the Spirit—we are interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people. Spiritual people comprehend everything, but they themselves aren't understood by anyone. " (1 Cor. 2:13, 15).

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging in April 1945 at Flossenberg concentration camp as a consequence of his involvement in the German resistance movement against Nazism. Bonhoeffer said: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."[5] Bonhoeffer was teaching through his life example of sacrifice what Jesus is calling his followers to do: "All who want to come after

me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives because of me will save tem" (Luke 9:23-24). What is Jesus calling us to lose and die to?

The community of Christ is called to pursue an alternative path from the political power structures of the world. The crowd that cheered Jesus upon his arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was interpreting his mission through a particular political lens. "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (John 12:13). They had convoluted Jesus' kingdom mission with a political one. The crowd sought a political messiah (king of Israel) who would fulfill their partisan expectations concerning the overthrow of the Roman political system. What we see as the events of Passion Week unfold is the contrast of radically divergent ways—the agenda of Jesus' kingdom versus the political agendas of the world. In the twenty-third verse of this chapter, Jesus states: "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified." Jesus' ministry on earth occurred during the period referred to as "the glory of Rome." The expression represented wealth, prestige, and political power. Jesus is exposing the chasm between the way of worldly wealth and political power and the way of the cross. The way of the cross is incomprehensible for the majority of folk: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved" (1 Cor. 1:18).

This book is being published at a time when our nation is suffering from deep wounds of cultural-political division in which Christians have participated. Members of Christ's Body have been guilty of demeaning and demonizing those with whom they disagree. We have allowed worldly political ideologies to become determining factors for our theology rather than grounding ourselves in a sound biblical theology for determining our politic. Some well-meaning believers have become more passionate about engaging in the heat of partisan political debate than they have been in sharing the good news about Jesus. Left and right, blue and red are but imperfect worldly systems that are passing away. These systems, by their very nature, create barriers of division. The way of the cross is eternal and tears down the dividing walls that stand between us: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is

neither slave or free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). We must not allow this polarization of extremes to pollute the message and mission of Jesus.

The political environment surrounding the events of Easter week quickly deteriorated. Jesus went from hero leading the parade on Sunday to the object of murderous ridicule and slander by Thursday. I would bet you a 1926 silver dollar that many of those in the crowd didn't mean for their shouts of "crucify him!" to be taken literally. I remember hearing shouts of "kill the umpire!" as a young boy, when my father took me to watch the Cincinnati Reds play at old Crosley Field. No one needed to tell me that it wasn't meant to be taken literally. But such talk begets violence nonetheless. Why should we be surprised when someone who has had a few beers too many hurls a beer bottle toward an official on the field? The words that we speak matter! We need to realize that our words have creative power.

People become and act upon what they repeatedly hear. In many cases, we adopt the political ideologies, beliefs, and language of our parents. Why should this be a surprise? We begin to hear our parents' words in the uterus, and their influence shapes who we become, for better or for worse. As we get older, voices in the media have influence as well, and we can become trapped in our own ideological bubble, as explored in the previous chapter. As Jesus' followers, we must not allow ourselves to get caught up in the carefully crafted inflammatory sound bites of the radio and TV pundits who demean and demonize. This is why the Epistle of James warns us about the power of the tongue:

> In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly. Think about this: a small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell. . . . With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, t just shouldn't be this way! (James 3:5-6, 9-10)

The way of the cross is the way of reconciliation. If our words and actions do not promote healing and reconciliation, then it doesn't matter what church business we are about—it's not the gospel.

In their book *Untamed*, Alan and Debra Hirsch write of the necessity of being intentional in our willingness to listen and understand the life perspectives of others:

> We believe that an incarnational stance is an extremely important aspect of missional lifestyle. As God identified with us, so ought we to identify with others. This will mean taking a given culture or people group seriously and deeply investing in them. We will need to take significant time to understand their history, their stories, their heroes, their books, and so on, in order to get their take on things. It is about immersing ourselves into their lives. When we identify with a people, we take their culture and concerns to heart.[6]

Although the Hirschs are applying this incarnational stance to a culture that is outside their own, I firmly believe it applies to all of us as Jesus' followers just as strongly both inside and outside the household of faith. Whether speaking with a Muslim colleague or the neighbor in the next pew, we are to embody the mind and attitude of Christ and take others' "concerns to heart."

Let's take a very practical example from a recent page of political history. When you disagree with a neighbor about our nation's health-care policies, how should you respond? How can you practice active listening? How could you begin to understand your neighbor's position through the eyes of his or her life experience without necessarily agreeing? Are you open to change and growth in your own outlook?

I have been fortunate to have had uninterrupted employment with great health-care benefits during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Many of the folks in my church have lost their jobs and benefits. What does it look like to walk in their shoes? How do we address these issues from a biblical perspective, and how does the word of God inform our political responsibility? These are questions that we must address as Christ's followers, working together in unity without the expectation of uniformity.

Miroslav Volf, a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, grew up in Yugoslavia, a country that was torn by religious and political violence. In a recent interview for *Christianity Today*, the interviewer pointed out that "the American Civil War, one of the bloodiest wars ever, was one in which people actually did believe in the same God and the same scriptures. This did not encourage peacemaking." Volf responded:

> That's true. Some of the worst violence in the world today between estranged religious and ethnic groups happens not on the battlefields. It happens smack in the middle of living rooms and between people who share a lot, who have a lot in common. So my argument is not that having common values will prevent violence. My argument is that having common values will make it possible to negotiate differences. In the absence of those common values, we either have to live sequestered in our own spaces (which I think is impossible in the modern world) or resort to violence to settle disputes.[7]

Unity in Christ will not mean an end to differences. The Democrats and Republicans in our pews will still disagree over the issues and people governing our nation. But if our common mission as disciples takes precedence over our partisan political views, we can live and work for good peaceably together in Jesus' name.

The people who were campaigning for Jesus on Sunday were on Friday voting for Barabbas, the political Zealot offering a militant solution for the defeat of the Roman administration. We dare not make the same fatal error of allowing partisan political ideology to become the determining factor of our Christian practice. As Christ's followers, we will never experience the power of God or fully realize God's kingdom purpose as long as we default to worldly solutions. The prophet Zechariah reminds us that we must not operate " by power, nor by strength, bur by my spirit, says the Lord of heavenly forces" (Zech. 4:6).

As Jesus' disciples, we must daily submit to the way of the cross in our attitudes, words, and actions. Jesus taught that social transformation occurs when his followers seek the common good. The people

who make up Jesus' new community are to be the leaven that permeates and transforms the world (Matt. 13:33).

In our final chapter I will introduce you to a couple of faithful Jesus followers who are engaged in the political process but sit on different sides of the political aisle. These two men of faith demonstrate unity in diversity and are being transforming leaven in a partisan world.

DEMONSTRATING THE WAY FORWARD

Followers of Jesus are called to live with a proactive biblical world-view that seeks the common good of all God's children and care for all of God's creation. To do so, Christians must be engaged in the political process without becoming entangled in the partisan divide. Jesus calls us as his followers actively to participate in the redemptive work of God in the world without becoming enmeshed in the world's ideologies and values. The British theologian N. T. Wright has rightly stated:

> Part of the task of the church must be to take up that sense of injustice, to bring it to speech, to help people both articulate it and turn it into prayer. And the task then continues with the church's work with the whole local community, to foster programs for better housing, schools, and community facilities, to encourage new job opportunities, to campaign and cajole and work with local government and councils, and, in short, to foster hope at any and every level.[1]

The gospel is good news for the poor and oppressed. God is a God of justice: "The Lord is famous for the justice he had done" (Ps. 9:16); "Pursue righteousness so that you live long and take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut. 16:20). "[God] has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

I recently had the opportunity to interview two Christian men who have been successfully involved in the political process without succumbing to the partisan divide. The wisdom they shared is a demonstration of how we, too, can be faithful Christians and conscientious citizens who are guided by Jesus Christ and not the ideology of our political parties.

AMBASSADOR TONY HALL: CHRISTIAN FIRST, DEMOCRAT SECOND

Former Democratic congressman and U.S. ambassador to Rome, Tony Hall is one of the leading advocates for hunger-relief programs and for improving international human-rights conditions in the world. In February 2002, President George W. Bush asked him to serve as the United States ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture. In 1997 and 2000, Mr. Hall introduced legislation calling on Congress to apologize for slavery. He has also worked at promoting reconciliation among diverse peoples. In 2009, at Tony's invitation, I had the privilege to participate in a delegation of Muslims, Jews, and Christians who met together in Jerusalem to discuss ways in which to seek the common good. Three times the former congressman and U.S. ambassador has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1993, Congressman Hall fasted for twenty-two days in response to budget cuts that would have a devastating effect on poor people in the United States and abroad. Nearly twenty years later, Tony committed to fast again, provoked by similar budget cuts that were being considered by Congress in the spring of 2011. Tony explained on his Web site: "I stopped eating and started fasting, calling people of faith and conscience to do the same." He went on to quote the prophet Isaiah: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing quickly appear" (Isa. 58).[2]

I spoke with Tony on the tenth day of his fast.

(Mike) Tony, tell me, how did you become a follower of Jesus?

(Tony) I became successful and I thought ambition and success were everything in my early life and I got success fairly quickly. When I was thirty-seven, I was a member of Congress, had a great wife, two children, and money in my pocket. Most people would have thought I was on top of the world, but I was really hurting and thinking that there had to be more in life than this. I had this very vague feeling that I was walking around in nothingness and that there had to be more in life than success and material things and that something was wrong. So I went on a search. I felt that it had to do with God, but I did not know what. A colleague in Congress befriended me and asked me over to his house one night. When this man started to speak about Jesus, I knew right then that is what I wanted and that is what I needed and that was for me.

I know that while you were in Congress you were involved in a nonpartisan Bible study prayer group.

I was. And as a matter of fact, I still meet today with two members of Congress, one of whom I have been meeting with for twenty-five years. Congressman Frank Wolf is a conservative Republican, and I am a Democrat. Frank and I have been meeting every Tuesday at 4 P.M. at a little chapel in the Capital. When Congress is in session, we meet every week for an hour.

Have you found, especially in your early years in Washington, that among Christian politicians, there was a spirit of bipartisanship related to faith and that faith was really the driving motive behind your friendships?

No question about it, that faith and our love of God was the only thing that brought us together. We found that if we got together because of politics and issues we would have never gotten together, because most likely on most issues we would have been apart. But we found that when we prayed together, read scriptures together, and really spent time with and got to know each other, we began to trust each other. When you begin to trust each other in politics, that is when you

can really start to do things together. Frank and I to this day are still very, very good friends. He runs for office, I support him, I donate to his campaign, and my wife works in his campaign,

Wow—a Democrat supporting a Republican! So has your faith influenced your political involvement?

God talks so much about the poor, the sick, the hurting, the orphans, and the widows. You can't pick up the Scriptures without reading about what God has to say about the most vulnerable. I have never counted them, but somebody told me once that there are over 2500 verses in the Bible that deal with the issues of the poor, the sick, the hurting, the vulnerable, and the hungry orphans and widows. I take that very seriously; God does not say, "I think it would be a good idea if you think about them." He is very clear that we are to be involved; it is one of the ways that I bring God into the workplace without having to speak a sermon. I can show a sermon by doing the kind of work that I think pleases God. That is one of the ways it works for me.

Tony, I really appreciated being with you in the past. You are the only write-in candidate that I have ever put on my ballot for President. How has your faith created tension with your party's platform?

One of the issues that has caused a lot of trouble with the party and me is my position on abortion. I am very much pro-life. It has created problems in that the leadership of my party is very pro-choice and I have opposed them. I used to oppose them when I was in Congress on all legislation that came up before the House and I also oppose same-sex marriage. [Promoting same-sex marriage] is at the heart of some of the major thinking, especially of the leaders of the Democratic Party. I have said to the leadership that there are a lot of Democrats who don't think this way. I think that the leadership sometimes is way too far to the political left and that spending too much time on these fringe issues really hurts them. Of course, my position has caused me some problems; it has caused me some problems when I ran for office. A lot of people in the Democratic Party would not support me; I felt that I could never run for a higher office, like Senator because I would always have trouble in the primary election because of who votes in primaries (very hard-core Democrats and Republicans). I would prob-

ably do very well in general election but would have a tough time in the primary election because of that. It has caused me those kinds of problems, but I have always felt very secure, and I felt it very important to stick to my guns on those issues.

Have you seen the political partisan spirit infecting the church?

Yes, I have seen it all along for a number of years. When the Moral Majority was young and vibrant they used to publish the voting records. They would have ten votes every year, and if you did not vote eight out of ten votes with the Moral Majority they would say you were not a Christian. Some of the votes were absolutely crazy; one of them had to do with corporation franchise taxes. I said to the Moral Majority, "I looked for that issue of corporation franchise taxes in the Bible and I can't find it." In my votes with the Moral Majority in those days, out of ten votes I might have four right and six wrong. But because I did not have a passing grade, I could not be a Christian. They would go to all the churches in my district during election years and put flyers on the windows of cars after various services, saying Tony Hall can't be a Christian because he votes against the Moral Majority most of the time. I consistently saw that for a number of years, and I don't think much is different since that has started.

That is why I had you speak in our church in 1984, because the people putting the pro-life voter guides together would not include your name, because you were liberal on other issues. I wouldn't let them put flyers on cars. So I had you come to let our people hear a solid Christian who was also a Democrat.

Well, God love you. I can't tell you in those days how many people came up to me who were Democrats or more liberal in their thinking who said that we know that you are a Christian but if those are the kind of people that are part of your faith we do not want any part of this stuff. In other words, they were really hurting the cause of Christ. They were getting so involved in politics that they were really hurting the cause of what God was all about.

Tony, how can the church have a positive influence in the current political environment?

I think that they need to be, of course nonpartisan, but the church needs to speak out more; they can speak out more on issues, and I think they can give more. Let me tell you a statistic that is rather shocking. If you put all the money that is given to relieve domestic hunger in the United States, from government, churches, faith groups, and individuals, and put it all together, the government gives 93 percent and everybody else [gives] 7%. percent. That is pretty staggering; it ought to be. You asked what the churches can do. Well, every conservative I know tells me that this issue of hunger and poverty belongs to church. Fine, great, then give more and be more involved. I get this constantly from conservatives; Glenn Beck is attacking my fast because he says the church is feeding hungry people. Everybody seems to believe him. Well the government is paying for 93 percent, and it should not be that way. The churches and people of faith and conscience ought to be more involved; the fact is they are not.

DR. TED WYMYSLO: CHRISTIAN FIRST, REPUBLICAN SECOND

Dr. Theodore "Ted" Wymyslo has been an active member of Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church for more than twenty years. It was only recently that I discovered Ted's political affiliation when Ohio Republican governor John Kasich appointed Ted to serve as the Director of the Ohio Department of Health on January 13, 2011. Ted's commitment to Christ has led him to be a tireless advocate for health-care services for the poor and health-care reform. After starting out in private practice, he served as medical director of the East Dayton Health Center, an inner-city health center for the poor. Ted understands firsthand the importance behind the services provided by state and local health departments. Growing up in Toledo, Ohio, he remembers his mother taking her children to the local health department so they could receive dental and medical care. Dr. Wymyslo is one of seven children and proudly calls himself a product of the inner city. "I grew up with not a lot of money and our family learned how to live with limited resources," he said.

I spoke to Ted recently about his faith and his public service.

(Mike) Ted, I have been your pastor for many years. One of the things that has always impressed me about you is your relentless advocacy for the poor. Were you the founder of the free clinic in Dayton?

(Ted) I was one of three people who first put together Reach Out of Montgomery County down in the Dayton area that started in 1995. It is a free clinic mostly for uninsured or underinsured individuals who cannot afford health care. They come in and receive free medical services, and we also have medications and a pharmacy there, too.

Before that I ran the East Dayton Health Center for three years, and I had an opportunity in a mostly Appalachian community to provide health care to many people who were limited in their resources.

What has motivated you to this life calling?

I am originally from that environment; I grew up in the inner city. I was very familiar with trying to get along with limited resources. One of my earliest memories was riding the bus with my seven brothers and sisters. We would ride the bus to the Toledo Public Health Department to get our dental care, our health care, and our immunizations. One of my earliest memories was going for care at a resource that was set up for people who didn't have much. From that time on, I have kept reconnecting with the importance of public health.

Has your faith impacted your commitment for working with the poor?

Very much so. I think I understand where the opportunities are as far as my interface with health care. I could work in a number of different areas, but I keep being drawn back to the poor because of the feeling of [providing] a service that I would really like to stay committed to. Also, I see the opportunity that I have to be a good steward with a few resources. I am reasonably good at effecting change and providing help to people without having to have a fancy office and a highly funded practice. We can always get into the community and mobilize other resources. I am not afraid of doing that, and I am reasonably good at getting other people involved and connecting with communities that I work in.

I find it very rewarding, and my faith keeps me directed because sometimes you want to quit. Mike, you work at this and you know that you can't possibly accomplish the mission in the limited strength of your own resources. Repeatedly, when I turn to prayer and the Bible for direction, I have gotten back on track again and have been able to accomplish things that I never thought were possible. Reach Out of Montgomery County is a free clinic that I thought would be around for a couple of years; my hope was that President Clinton's health-care reform would replace that and everyone would have insurance and I wouldn't have a need any more for a free clinic. Well, here we are, with more people than ever that are uninsured. So it was good that we put that care system in place and that we did not give up on trying to overcome the many barriers that came in our way to keep that operation going. It started with funding that I got for a three-year grant, but the powers that be made it very clear that after three years, I had to find my own resources, and fortunately, I was able to do that.

In recent years you have been working at creating health-care reform by sponsoring bills through the state legislature in Columbus, Ohio.

Yes, I was involved in trying to move forward a bill; it is called House Bill 198. It is about the patient-centered medical home model. The PCMH is the country's best idea on how to transform health-care delivery from our current fragmented system. My focus is trying to see if we can perhaps use the resources that we have to provide health care more efficiently and effectively than we have in past. It's a very common-sense approach to health care, in which basically we said if we coordinate decision-making and coordinate care for people we can actually get more done with less resources.

Did you write that bill?

I cowrote it with a state representative. She and I wrote it about two years ago. We started the process, and it took us a year and a half to get it through both the House and Senate. But when we persisted forward, we got unanimous support from every individual, both Republican and Democrat, in both the House and the Senate in Ohio, which I don't think that happens too often. The bill was started by a

Republican member of the House, but we actually had a very strong Democratic leader in the House who cosponsored. So we were able from the beginning to start with bipartisan support and moved it through both the House and the Senate.

So you see bipartisan work as very important?

Well, I think I am blessed to be in health care. Everyone understands the importance of health, and there is nothing that people relate to more than the importance of how they maintain good health, whether they are wealthy or poor, with or without influence. Health becomes a universally important concept. I always like to start with what we all have in common.

Ted, how did you become a Jesus follower?

In childhood we grew up Catholic; our whole family went to church. I was a server in the Catholic Church and have always been aligned toward religion and Catholicism, but I don't think I really knew it the way that we have seen it and known it here at Ginghamsburg. I did-n't live the way we get to live it here, because I never really turned my total trust toward God.

This last experience of mine, as I had to discern my career direction during the past year, I found that by repeatedly trusting and praying to God, he moved me in the direction to do something I never would have envisioned a year ago. Six months ago, I would never have envisioned myself being the Director of the Ohio Department of Health. I am now the state physician basically. I am the person who is expected to exemplify what a physician should be and do in the state of Ohio. I never saw myself in that role, but God moved me in that direction, and he made a series of things happen in my life where doors closed for other opportunities and kept opening toward this opportunity. I couldn't deny God's activity in my life, his influence in my life, and where God was directing me. I could have and wanted to say no a lot of times to this opportunity because for me this is more than a 50 per-cent decrease in my income. So it had an impact financially on me and of course we had to move to Columbus. It has really thrown me into an arena that I feel ill suited for because I really have not been a

political person most of my life. I have actually spent more of my time in one-on-one situations with a patients or teaching small groups. I have not been in the more public/political arena really ever except for when I was working on Bill 198 that I walked through the legislative process. I would have never envisioned myself going in this direction if God had not continually moved me toward this. Every time I tried to quit in my pursuit, God made very clear statements to me about my need to persist in this direction. You would not believe how everything I read in the Bible and every time I prayed, I would get messages back that I needed to go in this direction. So what I had to do was decide if I am going to trust God or trust in myself to put direction in my life. I ultimately said I would trust God and will do what God has in mind for me. I will do his will and not try to figure myself what the right response is. And I'm still his, and he's still leading me.

How have you seen the political partisan spirit affecting the church?

I have felt it, yes. You can tell in conversations with Christians that many times that spirit polarizes groups, and I am somewhat surprised because I thought our guide was the Bible. I find that politics is where our conversations break down and groups split. Christians sometimes fail to get past their core political beliefs to the core biblical beliefs that address real-life issues. Too often, people have already closed their minds based on the political party that they belong to. I have to tell you this; one of the things that led me to accept my current appointment is the fact that I was never asked what political party I was part of.

Do you ever find that your faith or worldview creates tension with your political party's views?

Yes, I have had plenty of opportunity to have tension within my own workplace. Remember, we have just had the Democratic administration leaving and the Republican administration coming on. I had to make an important decision coming in. Would I get rid of all the Democratic people who preceded me and totally replace everyone in a leadership position in my organization with Republicans? I chose not do that. There was pressure to do that, but I did not. What I did

instead was look at individuals based on their values, their track record of performance, and on how they wanted to approach their responsibilities going into the future. I have surrounded myself with a very mixed group of individuals in my own office who have core values that we all share. I would really rather focus on the core values and character and not focus so much on their political party.

What possibilities do you see for the church having a positive influence in the current political environment?

Well, I think at this point it is going to be important for us as leaders to repeatedly go back to core values as we make decisions. I think the Bible is a great place to find those values. There are plenty of opportunities every day for me to get distracted by lobbyists who have a lot of different priorities and lots of different masters they are serving. We have to get them back to what we believe are the real reasons that we should make decisions. Those are basic beliefs that are found in the Bible, like honesty, integrity, being transparent, and putting all our information forward; do to others as you would have others do to you. These basic values have worked for eons. Why not continually go back to probably the best direction that we can receive in our lives instead of taking these other avenues we get steered into by various political-interest groups?

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

My friends Tony and Ted are demonstrating the gospel in both word and deed even though they are working for the common good through two distinct political affiliations. How can we benefit from their example? I can identify four guiding faith practices for Christian engagement in the political process.

Faith in Christ Is the Foundation.

Christian unity is based on our commitment and relationship with Jesus. Left or right, red or blue, ideologies are human systems that operate quite comfortably without any sense of accountability or dependence upon God. The church has always struggled with the temptation to assimilate secular ideologies, patriotic loyalties, religious

traditions, and cultural values with a biblical, kingdom of God world-view. The apostle Paul referred to this as "quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ to follow another gospel. It's not really another gospel" (Gal. 1:6-7). As we explored in the previous chapter, Christ is the basis for our unity. I'll repeat again what Paul told the Church at Ephesus: "Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit" (Eph. 2:14-18). Tony Hall, a Democrat, and his conservative Republican friend, Congressman Frank Wolf, are demonstrating Jesus Christ as the unity factor in spite of their political differences as they study the Bible together weekly.

Faith Calls Us to Address Social Issues

Tony Hall and Ted Wymyslo understand Christ's mandate to "bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners . . . to comfort all who mourn" (Isa. 61:1-2). Both of these Jesus followers have committed their life missions to bring God's justice, healing power, and redemptive love to the least and the lost: "I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Biblical Faith Stands in Prophetic Tension with All Earthly Systems

Both men referred to areas in which their Christian faith came into conflict with their political party's platform or expectations. Tony feels that positions that he advocates related to his faith have kept him from advancing to positions of higher influence within his party ranks. Ted refused to fire the Democratic appointees under his authority from the previous administration. Jesus warned his followers of the consequences of standing in prophetic tension with the powers that be:

"They will expel you from the synagogue. The time is coming when those who kill you will think that they are doing a service to God" (John 16:2). Avoiding partisan extremes will likely mean tension on both sides.

Biblical Faith Informs Our Politic

We must make biblical faith the determining guide for our political ideology rather than partisan political ideology the determining factor for our theology. Neither Tony nor Ted is willing to compromise his core biblical values for political expediency. They have each taken career and economic risks that are faith based. As Jesus said: "I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them" (John 13:16). We must never forget that we exist for the sole purpose of advancing God's agenda for the common good of the world. Jesus refused to accommodate the gospel to the political demands of Caesar, the right-wing militant response of the Zealots, the liberal agenda of the Sadducees, the status quo politic of the Herodians, or the graceless theology of the Pharisees. He calls us to follow in obedience to God's kingdom mission.By following these four guiding principles, we can engage the political system—even to the point of making a career in politics!—without sacrificing our Christian faith on the altar of partisanship. We can accept the tension that we will inevitably experience between our political and theological commitments while always striving to fulfill the biblical mandate to care for the poor and bring about God's kingdom on earth.

COMMITTING OUR WAY FORWARD

Conflict is by no means new to the church and is not easily overcome. Recently I (Mike) participated in a small group of United Methodist leaders who met together for the purpose of finding proactive solutions for moving our denomination forward in the midst of some rather divisive differences. Our intention as church leaders for coming together in "holy conferencing" has more often than not become political conferencing that mirrors the partisan political caucuses of the world. In their summary article about the group's conclusions, Bishop Sally Dyck and Pastor Annie Arnoldy remind us that we must learn holy conferencing versus political conferencing because we are called to be set apart and different from the rest of the culture in our speech and behavior, most evident in the way we handle disputes.[1]

As we seek to steer conversations toward a deeper level of meaning-hopefully- resolution, we can utilize principles of holy conferencing to do so. Holy conferencing starts from our own stories—it is more about who we are together than who is right. Conversations that intentionally use principles of holy conferencing have an emphasis on listening over talking. And, something challenging even to the most levelheaded person: all parties must be willing to consider they may be wrong about an issue that is important to them."

We have discussed repeatedly the mantra, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." How different would the world's view of the church be if in all things we demonstrated Jesus' relentless, sacrificial love (charity)? This is by no means an easy task. Some church leaders advocate dismissing biblical doctrine for the sake of unity. Biblical doctrine matters; we dare not throw out the baby with the bath water. However, others in the church emphasize orthodoxy (right doctrine) at the expense of orthopraxy (right practice). We need the whole church to help us navigate the truth of God's word through the guidance of the present Holy Spirit for the accomplishment of Jesus' mission in the postmodern world.

All of us have the tendency to read and interpret the Bible through our own self-serving, prejudiced worldviews. We rationalize away the call to follow Jesus in sacrificial discipleship and bend or ignore the biblical demands for social justice for the poor for the sake of serving our own economic privilege. A prime example of this tendency can be seen in how American Southerners used the Bible to justify slavery in the years before the Civil War. In the classic anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the character Marie Saint Clare is the wife of the slave owner Augustine Saint Clare. Marie is an active, church-going, "professed" Christian who prays for Augustine's conversion and persists in her attempts to get him to attend Sunday worship services. After returning from worship on one occasion, she reviews the pastor's sermon with her husband:

> O, Dr. G— preached a splendid sermon. It was such a sermon as you ought to hear; it expressed all my views exactly. Well, I mean all my views about society, and such things. The text was, "He hath made everything beautiful in its season;" and he showed how all the orders and distinctions in society came from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful, that some should be high and some low, and that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know; and he applied it so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly. I only wished you'd heard him.

Marie's husband, Augustine, responds in a prophetic voice that all of us need to take with repentant heart:

> Religion! Is what you hear at Church, religion? Is that which can bend and turn, and descend and ascend, to fit every crooked phase of selfish, worldly society, religion? Is that religion which is less scrupulous, less generous, less just, less considerate for man, than even my own ungodly, worldly, blinded nature? No! When I look for religion, I must look for something above me, and not something beneath.

How damning that we should make the word of God subservient to all our self-serving "institutions." Is it any wonder why so much of contemporary Christian witness is falling on deaf ears?

The church will need to develop a deeper theological understanding of the Holy Spirit as it relates to determining God's will in today's global context. Jesus spoke of the importance of the Spirit's future role in helping us determine God's direction: "The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you" (John 14:26); "I have much more to say to you, but you can't handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truths. He won't speak on his own, but will say whatever he hears and will proclaim to you what is to come" (John 16:12-13). I believe that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired words of God spoken through prophets and are authoritative for faith and practice. However, all of God's truth cannot be contained in the 1,153 pages of my Bible. We need the church universal to help discern and test "what is to come" and to hold us accountable for right practice.

There are 613 commandments in the ancient Torah. Jesus simplified the 613 by combining them into just two: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). Then Jesus brought clarity to the two by saying, "I give you a new commandment; Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my

disciples, when you love each other" (John 13:34-35). If there is one passage of scripture that should guide the way we as Christians engage one another politically, it would be this. This, before any passage we read as supporting one political view or another, must be our guide. This is how we live in the way of Jesus, and this is how we show the rest of our culture what it means to value people above partisanship.

In a very important sense, the task and challenge the church is faced with has always been the same: to model an alternative way of being in the world, to offer a different vision for life together than those outside the church embody. As followers of Jesus, we believe that God has revealed to us important details about how we are to live and that way of life is to be characterized by love of the other—even to the point of loving those who are enemy to us. This "love of other" is not some abstract ideal over which we engage in academic debate, but rather a "flesh and blood" reality that is to be normative for all our actions. This takes on different forms at different times, but it is always to be central to how we conduct ourselves in every aspect of our lives. What this means is just this: the greatest good the church can do for the culture at large is to remind it, by the life it models, that the "normal way of doing business" is not the life to which God calls his human creatures.

Throughout the life of the church, it has had both great successes and great failures in its responsibility to show the world a different way of being. There have been times when the church has taken its role so seriously that it has succeeded in turning completely upside down the culture within which it moves and has its being. Sadly, however, there have also been times when the church has allowed itself more to mirror its culture than to transform it. A wise man once said that a culture in decline is often evidence of a church that has already failed in its job of bearing witness to that alternative way of life—no longer serving as "salt and light." When this happens, the church becomes too much like the culture for those outside to tell any relevant difference between itself and the church. Why bother heeding our words when we have been co-opted? It is hard to resist the trends that surround us. They are often subtle, and they often infiltrate the church without our so much as even being aware of it. It is easy to see, then,

how the church can be co-opted into imitating the culture and its way of doing business, rather than challenging and undermining its unhealthy tendencies. In fact, what can often happen is, even when we think our values are different, we demonstrate how little they are actually different when we utilize the same methods.

In the course of this book, we have explored one area in which the church has allowed the methods of the culture to influence it more than the other way around. Partisanship in the culture, as we have argued, has increasingly become a reality in our churches, too frequently giving the appearance that we are little more than an extension of that political partisanship. Evidences show that members of the culture at large perceive much of the church in this way, and cultural trends we can track show us already the long-term harm of allowing these trends to continue. However, we need not let that happen. As we outlined, there are a number of steps we can take to move back in the other direction, such as refusing to allow partisanship a home in the church and once again taking on the role of modeling a different reality to the culture. Rather than imitating the unhealthiness of our culture, the church can once again become what God calls it to be—a community that embodies the movement away from destructive trends. We hope that this book will help both to elevate awareness of the problems inherent in continuing to allow political partisanship to infiltrate our churches and, then, to offer constructive ways to move beyond it. May God grant us the courage to grasp this opportunity once again to be the power that transforms culture.

NOTES

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1. THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

1. American National Election Study, 1964. All citations of political identification in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from the American National Election Study.

2. Merle Black and Earl Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicanism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

3. American National Election Study, 1972. All citations of political ideology in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from the American National Election Study.

4. The logistic regression models were conducted among white evangelical Protestants in the American National Election Study from 1980 to 2008. The regression models included the following independent variables: sex, age, education, and Republican identification. The dependent variable was opposition to legalized abortion.

5. David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*.

6. General Social Survey, 1990–2010. Original analysis by the author and Daniel Cox.

7. Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, October 2010. Available at http://www.publicreligion.org/research/published/?id=386.

8. Pew Research Center. Millennials Report.

9. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

10. Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, "Doing Justice and Doing Church: A Portrait of Millennials at Middle Church," Public Religion Research Institute, 2011. Available at http://www.publicreligion.org/research/published/?id=583.

11. "The Manhattan Declaration" is available at http://manhattandeclaration.org/home.aspx.

12. Jonathan Merritt, "Manhattan Declaration Unlikely to Inspire a New Generation," *The Washington Post*, On Faith section, November 24, 2009. Available at http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2009/11/manhattan_declaration_unlikely_to_inspire_young_christians.html.

13. Ibid.

14. Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 9.

17. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

18. See http://www.orgnet.com/divided.html, cited in Sunstein, Going to Extremes, 34.

19. Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey.

2. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH?

1. Lynn Arave, "Mormons, Other Christians Decry Glenn Beck Comments on Social Justice," *Deseret News*, March 13, 2010.

2. Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy: You Can Make a Difference in Tomorrow's Troubled World*, 47.

3. John Perkins, Beyond Charity: *The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1993), 16.

4. Ibid., 14.

5. Jim Wallis, *The Post American*, June-July 1974, 3.

6. Jim Wallis, "The Bible Is Neither Conservative or Liberal," *Sojourners*, June 16, 2008.

7. "Philip Yancey: Grace at the Edges," *Outreach Magazine*, March /April 2011, 84.

8. Peter Wehner, Among Evangelicals, a Transformation, *National Review Online*, December 31, 2007.

9. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed.

10. Neela Banerjee, "Rev. D. James Kennedy, Broadcaster, Dies at 76," *New York Times*, September 6, 2007.

11. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 32.

12. Ibid., 48

13. Published by Reuters on Thursday 11/1/2007. Article: 47 Americans Lack Health Insurance.

3. UNITY, LIBERTY, CHARITY

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*.

2. I use the term "theopolitical" position in recognition of the fact that most of us hold positions that are informed and guided by both our theological commitments and our political commitments. Such a position, connected to both, can be called a theopolitical position. The term is comparable to, say, such terms as socioeconomic and sociopolitical.

3. That this "hypothetical" believer is not entirely hypothetical is evident from several of the latest polls. Research by the Public Religion Research Institute reported in June 2011 reveals that young adults are now less likely than the average person to support legal abortion, but more likely than the average person to support same-sex marriage. See http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=579 and http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=615.

4. THE LOGIC OF DISAGREEMENT

1. So much so that some simply call it the "politician's syllogism." For a very helpful list of common fallacies, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies.

2. Of course, the passion with which one holds a particular belief will vary based upon the subjective degree of certainty she feels about that particular belief. In cases in which the subjectivity degree of certainty is relatively low, one's belief in the truthfulness of the belief will not be as strong. In short, the degree of strength with which one holds a belief is directly proportional to her confidence in its truth.

3. Within the history of the Christian tradition, there have been those who claim a religious experience that seemed to them to be an experience of the Triune God. Religious experiences of that nature extend beyond the common "sense experiences" we discussed above. So, even if our hypothetical person who came to believe in the Trinity did so also by means of a religious experience of this sort, we merely note it as a possibility and will not explore it further. For the reader who wishes to explore this in more detail, we recommend William Alston's book, *Perceiving God*.

5. ESCAPING THE IDEOLOGICAL BUBBLE

1. Natasha Singer, "The Trouble with the Echo Chamber Online," http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/technology/29stream.html?_r=3.

6. THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

1. Oliver Thomas, "America's Churches Can Help Change the World," USA Today, March 14, 2011, p. 9A.

2. Ibid.

3. Michael A. Memoli, "Analysis Says Congress Most Polarized in Decades," *Chicago Tribune- Dayton Daily News*, February 26, 2011.

4. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), no. 545.

5. Cost of Discipleship.

6. Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (City: Baker Books, 2010), 236.

7. Mark Galli, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?" *Christianity Today*, April 2011, p. 29.

7. DEMONSTRATING THE WAY FORWARD

1. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 231.

2. hungerfast.org/ blog April 15, 2011.

CONCLUSION: COMMITTING OUR WAY FORWARD

1. Sally Dyck and Annie Arnoldy, "Holy Conferencing: Unity amid Diversity," *Circuit Rider,* February 2011, pp. 10-11.