

After Trump, Should Evangelical Christians Part Ways?

The 2016 election has revealed afresh a deep fissure—and a great opportunity.

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Donald Trump is now the president-elect. This fact is deeply discouraging for some evangelical Christians. Many fear that Trump's ascendancy will only encourage racism and misogyny. Others see his election as a blow to immigration reform. Those concerned about religious liberty for all worry about the future of Muslims in our land. But Clinton's loss, and by extension, Trump's win, brings deep relief to other evangelical Christians. Many feared an acceleration of President Obama's progressive policies, including the use of their tax dollars to make abortion even more accessible. They are weary of being labeled bigots for their views on human sexuality, and being increasingly subject to social and legal penalties for such views.

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Initial reports suggest that four out of five white evangelical Christians voted for Trump, continuing their pattern of support for the Republican candidate in US presidential elections since the 1980s. Not all did so with enthusiasm, and for that matter, Trump received a higher percentage of black and Hispanic votes than did his predecessors, Republican candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain. Still, what makes this election different is how many prominent evangelical leaders—from the Southern Baptist Convention's Russell Moore to *World* magazine to *Christianity Today*, among others—made clear our [serious reservations](#) about the Republican candidate. White evangelical Christians voted for him anyway.

This points to a significant divide among evangelical Christians of all colors and stripes. From hallway conversations to Facebook and Twitter exchanges, we look at one another and ask, “How could you, as an evangelical, possibly support your candidate?”

In times like these, we tend to imagine the worst in one another. The left imagines that Trump supporters, since they seemed to give a pass to his racist and misogynistic comments, must not care about Hispanics or women. The right assumes the left has simply gone soft on abortion and religious freedom, not to mention human sexuality. Each think the other is blind to how their candidate had little respect for the rule of law. (And of course, third-party advocates placed a pox on both houses!)

Part of what’s going on here is our understandable desire to be a good witness for Jesus in the public square: We want the unbelieving world to think well of the church. Unfortunately, we are tempted to let the culture decide what constitutes a good witness. So those on the left are anxious that the culture sees us as championing political causes on the left, and the right is similarly anxious about championing social conservatism. We want the unbelieving world—at least that part of it we care most about—to see that evangelicals really are on the righteous side, so that they just may entertain Christian faith themselves.

But one wonders if the truly impressive witness would be a movement that, despite its serious political differences (as well as racial and ethnic divides), still worships and prays together, and warmly calls each other brothers and sisters in Christ.

To justify ourselves and our difference from the other, we tend to frame our opponents’ concerns in abstract terms and ours in the most personal ones. So those who voted for Clinton say, “You care more about the balance on the Supreme Court than black men getting shot by police.” And those who voted for Trump say, “The left gets more upset about careless rhetoric than the thousands of babies murdered every day.” And we walk away, satisfied that

we are not like those other evangelicals.

One would think that in this election season especially, we might have been more aware of the doctrine of original sin, but I suppose it is our sinfulness that blinds us at just such times. So those who castigate the right for downplaying Trump's demeaning comments end up saying demeaning things about the right. And those who condemn the left for being blind to the strategic importance of the Supreme Court seem blind to how deeply Trump's comments have troubled minorities and women.

Like a husband and wife after two decades and with the kids now out the door, we think, "We don't share much anymore." Thus: "We've grown apart. Maybe divorce is the best option." We wonder how we can go on sharing the same name—evangelical.

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We're most tempted to divorce—or as one apparently former evangelical put it, to "resign from evangelicalism"—when we believe that our particular political concerns are so woven into the fabric of the gospel they cannot be separated from it. So a vote for or against Trump—and all the associated aspersions we cast on our opponents for their vote—becomes the test by which we decide whether to fellowship together as evangelicals.

To be sure, there are those on the right who really don't care about racial justice, and those on the left who really are soft on abortion, but for the most part, evangelical Christians on the left and right are simply trying to navigate the very complex relationship of faith and politics, and where they end up doesn't always look pretty. Perhaps we can make space for those with whom we disagree, while continuing to champion the causes we believe further justice.

And perhaps we can remind ourselves of some of the great distinctives of evangelical Christianity when we're at our best.

We are Christians, for example, who believe that the evangel—the good news of the gospel—triumphs over any news the media might lament or celebrate.

We believe the most important political statement we make each week is not announcing to whom we've given our support but proclaiming the King who has given us his very life.

We are a people who love Jesus first, whose Bible is their ultimate rule of faith and practice, who believe spreading the good news of Jesus' lordship and salvation in word and deed is our most important contribution to the common good.

We are Christians who treasure both our British-American heritage *and* our current global diversity, who are grateful recipients of a tradition shaped by the likes of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, William Wilberforce and William Booth, Lottie Moon and Amy Carmichael, Richard Allen and Sojourner Truth, Billy Graham and Bob Pierce, Watchman Nee and Kwame Bediako—who believe that the evangelical tradition is, despite its many flaws, a gift of God to the world precisely because it gives priority to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Christianity, especially the American version, is a messy, contrarian, and often conflicted part of the body of Christ. We are guilty of many sins and poor judgment. We embarrass ourselves and our Lord more times than we care to remember. Hanging together to spread the good news of Jesus Christ is not easy. It's uncomfortable sometimes to be in one another's presence when our political differences are substantial. Sometimes we speak frankly and prophetically to one another, as well we should. But some days, we don't even want to speak to each other at all.

And yet that's the way it is with genuine community, and especially with a

movement as dynamic and passionate as evangelical Christianity. Anyone who expects to find a group of like-minded Christians with whom they will have no significant differences is yearning for utopia, not Christian community. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in his book *Life Together*:

“Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly.”

We may want to build what seems to us the ideal evangelical Christian movement—one that perfectly aligns with our theological, missional, and political commitments, but that is a deadly temptation. Bonhoeffer reminds us that Another is responsible for building the Christian community:

“It is not we who build. Christ builds the church. Whoever is mindful to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it, for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess he builds. We must proclaim, he builds. We must pray to him, and he will build.”

As Bonhoeffer notes, often “we cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are the times of collapse are for him the great times of construction. It may be that the times which from a human point are great times for the church are times when it's pulled down.” In the meantime, “do what is given to you, and do it well, and you will have done enough. ... Live together in the forgiveness of your sins. Forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.”

This has been a tense season for evangelical Christians. We have begun to

wonder if the other is worthy of the name evangelical, or whether we want that name associated with us. We've sometimes even wondered if the other is worthy of the name Christian. Times like these do make one wonder if Jesus is building or sifting our community.

But maybe we're not called to fathom the mind of God and instead to double down on what it means to be an evangelical Christian: to confess the faith and pray together, to proclaim Jesus in word and deed as we each feel called, and to live together in the forgiveness of sins.

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