

"Ed Stetzer is a cultural navigator helping us walk faithfully in
the midst of this cultural storm."

MATT CHANDLER

Christians *in the* Age of Outrage

HOW TO BRING OUR BEST
WHEN THE WORLD IS AT ITS WORST

ED STETZER



Ed Stetzer is a cultural navigator helping us walk faithfully in the midst of this cultural storm.

MATT CHANDLER

Lead pastor, The Village Church; author of *The Explicit Gospel*

Once again, Ed has analyzed a troublesome trend in our culture and given us solid advice on how to respond to it in a Christlike manner. If you've ever wondered how we can share the love of Jesus in the midst of all the shouting and division, you need to read this book immediately.

RICK WARREN

Senior pastor, Saddleback Church; author of *The Purpose Driven Life*

From political campaigns to nightly news, from clickbait headlines to social media, we exist in such a perpetual state of outrage that escape seems impossible. But with thorough research, compelling anecdotes, and clarity of both vision and communication, Ed Stetzer offers a way out that is not only possible but—for the Christian—imperative.

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

Author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* and *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

Sometimes it seems that everyone is angry today. Division and strife are everywhere. In *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, Ed Stetzer lays out the problems in the culture and in the church, but then gives us a God-honoring path to bring our best even when the world is at its worst.

BRYAN LORITTS

Author of *Insider Outsider: My Journey as a Stranger in White Evangelicalism* and *My Hope for Us All*

It's an angry world right now, and we need a grace-filled and gospel-driven response. My friend Ed Stetzer shows us how to walk through the minefields of disagreement in winsome and God-honoring ways.

SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ

President of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

CHRISTIANS IN THE AGE OF OUTRAGE

Christians *in the* Age *of* Outrage

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WHEN THE WORLD IS AT ITS WORST

ED STETZER



*The nonfiction imprint of
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*

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Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst

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Published in association with the literary agency of Mark Sweeney and Associates, Naples, FL 34115.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stetzer, Ed, author.

Title: Christians in the age of outrage : how to bring our best when the world is at its worst / Ed Stetzer.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018024370 | ISBN 9781496435619 (hc) | ISBN 9781496435626 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity and culture. | Anger—Religious aspects—Christianity. |

Violence—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR115.C8 S734 2018 | DDC 261.0975—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018024370>

Printed in the United States of America

24 23 22 21 20 19 18
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Age of Outrage

“YOU’RE A LIAR.”

“No, *you* are.”

Billy is a jerk. Billy and I grew up on the same street in Levittown, New York, and I remember this thought flying through my head just before he and I got into another one of our countless fights. I’ve edited out the expletives—it was New York, after all—but every fight always ended the same: with each of us yelling at the other and storming off. We were friends because we were neighbors, but mostly we fought. As kids, that’s how most arguments go. Yelling. Fighting. Insults. Running away.

Eventually I lost touch with Billy. If I saw him today, we might still fight, but I imagine there would be fewer expletives and tears. After all, we’ve both grown up. But when I look around at the way our world deals with conflict today, I realize culture has not.

Suddenly the go-to move of politicians and journalists has become “You’re a liar,” followed by the rejoinder “No, *you* are.” We’re bombarded with this level of discourse every day.

And it’s filtered down (or maybe it filtered up) throughout the culture. Facebook is a cesspool of conspiracy theories, straw-man arguments, and schoolyard bullying. We have reached the point where the comment sections of major newspapers are a greater testament to the depravity of man than all the theology of the

Reformers put together. Many publishers have removed comments from below their online articles so the vitriol will end.

These arguments have a cumulative effect, with each successive interaction ratcheting up the outrage. Even those rare instances of well-intentioned and reasonable discussion eventually fall victim to misunderstanding and offense. In these cases, I often remember Godwin's Law: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches one."¹ In other words, people eventually start comparing others to Hitler. And just like that, we are off to the races of anger, insults, and division.

Outrage from Christians

Lest we get on our high horses about all those bad, angry people out there, we need to recognize that outrage often comes from Christians. During his fifteen minutes of fame, Joshua Feuerstein started the 2015 Starbucks Red Cup controversy. Soon people were saying that Christians were upset, though I saw only one person—Joshua Feuerstein—truly outraged. He posted a Facebook message saying, "Starbucks REMOVED CHRISTMAS from their cups because they hate Jesus."² He also tagged media to attract attention. Without fail, the outrage cycle began.

Of course, Starbucks denied the accusation, assured worried Christians everywhere they were welcome to say "Merry Christmas" to their hearts' content, and insisted that the company did not hate Christmas. Can you imagine the conversation in the Starbucks boardroom? Did they say, "Those Christians are fair-minded, gracious, and thoughtful"? I am guessing not.

The reality was that Feuerstein tried to use Christian outrage to raise his platform. The news and opinion website Vox explained,

Feuerstein's new Starbucks outrage video might be the biggest of his social media career. It's a rant stemming from a conservative Christian belief that there is a "war

on Christmas,” and that each year during the holidays, Christians are persecuted by companies.⁵

Of course, it would be interesting (and maybe even outrageous) if it were true. But Vox goes on to say,

Feuerstein’s most blatant untruth, and the reason for all the current furor about the 2015 red cup, is the implication that Starbucks at one time printed the word “Christmas” on its holiday cups and is now being stifled or stifling itself from doing so. In the past six years, Starbucks, which doesn’t identify itself as a Christian company, has *never* put the words “Merry Christmas” on its holiday cups—instead, it’s used wintry and vaguely holiday-esque imagery and language, including ornaments that say things like “joy” or “hope,” snowmen, and holly.⁴

So literally we can show that what Feuerstein said is not true. But outrage overwhelms truth. I saw some people defending Feuerstein by pointing out that there were other things that Starbucks did, or that there were bigger issues at play. (I’d ground my daughters for responding to facts with such misdirection.) But the outrage of the culture overwhelms the truth of the moment. And when it does, it hurts our witness.

You’d think that someone had broken into churches and desecrated the altars if you looked at some Facebook feeds. And of course, the news reports said everyone was outraged, but I think it was Feuerstein and a few friends. And that’s really all it was. Starbucks never put *Jesus* or *Christmas* on their cups. They once had snowmen and some trees before going to plain red. So Starbucks hates Jesus because they now have cups without snowflakes?

These kinds of controversies are so frustrating! This was a foolish fight on a nonsensical issue. When outraged Christians feed media outlets with stories that make Christians look foolish, that hurts the gospel. It adds to the perception that Christians

are rage-addicted snowflakes and, more important, distracts Christians from their mission. That's what fake controversies and unwarranted anger do.

No, Starbucks did not hate Jesus, but some folks sure seem to enjoy embarrassing his followers. And by the way, Starbucks employees were never told they could not say Merry Christmas. But that's not their job anyway—that's our job. It's the Christian's job to tell people about Jesus, not the barista who may be Jewish, secular, or whatever.

Don't get outraged at things that don't matter.

Outrage toward Christians

Yet outrage can just as easily be directed toward Christians by a hostile world intent on shaming and attacking rather than engaging.

In early 2018, the online publication *Pitchfork* turned out this clickbaiting headline: “Coachella Co-Owner’s Latest Charitable Filing Shows Deep Anti-LGBTQ Ties.”⁵ Coachella is a music festival that is connected to AEG, an entertainment company owned by Philip Anschutz, who is an evangelical Christian. The story listed five of the “deep anti-LGBTQ” organizations: The Navigators, Dare 2 Share Ministries, the Center for Urban Renewal and Education, Movieguide Awards, and Young Life. The biggest gift among these was to Young Life (\$185,000; June 21 and November 15, 2016), which was pilloried for their policy that “anyone ‘sexually active outside of a heterosexual marriage relationship’ shouldn’t work or volunteer for the organization.”⁶

In other words, Young Life holds the traditional view of marriage that has been a foundational component of Christian theology for centuries and is held today by most evangelical (as well as Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other) organizations. Even so, the publication made no attempts at dialogue, gave no empathy or consideration as to why these views are important or nuanced. Just blanket insults aimed at provoking division.

Outrage has no time for dialogue, and it won't be distracted by nuance or even truth.

Get the pitchforks, *Pitchfork*.

Why This Outrageous Book?

This is a book about outrage. It's an acknowledgment that our world, or at least our part of it, seems awash in anger, division, and hostility. Outrage is all around, so we have to decide how to walk through this. We are living in a day—and this is indeed our moment—when we need to live like Christ, as gospel Christians in the midst of shouting, anger, and hatred. And it's going to get worse.

To be sure, there is a lot in this world that is outrage inducing. Terrorism, sex trafficking and exploitation, systemic racism, illegal immigration, child poverty, opioid addiction . . . and the list goes on. These issues deserve a measure of outrage, don't they? They certainly deserve our anger.

And this is part of the problem. What do we do when the anger becomes too much? When our righteous indignation at injustice morphs into something completely different? How do we know when righteous anger has made the turn into unbridled outrage? These questions do not have easy answers, but they deserve our consideration if we want to be faithful disciples of Christ.

This book is roughly composed of three sections. In the first, I outline what I think are the two primary catalysts for our outrage. It is crucial to grasp the *what* and *why* of our indignation if we Christians are going to have victory over it in our own lives and are to engage effectively in this world. In this respect, we need to understand not only what causes outrage in this culture but how Christians have contributed to, if not led the way in, perpetuating it.

The first cause of our outrage stems from the increasing polarization of American society, in terms of both religion and politics. The second cause lies in the unprecedented advance of technology that has completely altered almost every facet of our daily lives in less than a generation. (Nobody had an iPhone on June 28,

2007, but the world was inalterably changed the next day, when the iPhone was unveiled. Now, no one—my daughters tell me, *no one*—can live without a smartphone.)

After examining the causes of outrage, this book considers four lies that reinforce and deepen our world’s anger. These include not only lies that this world tells us, but more important, the lies that we as believers tell ourselves. As we’ll see, some believers react to cultural shifts with intense fury, but for too long, the majority of Christians have shrunk back. Either out of fear or shame at the way some Christians engage poorly with their opponents, these believers have adopted silence and retreat as their default state.

In the book’s third section, I propose ways that Christians can counteract the outrage in their lives and this world by being intentional about developing a Christ-centered worldview, living as God’s ambassadors, loving others in a winsome way, and engaging thoughtfully with others, both online and face-to-face. In other words, your online life needs to be submitted to Christ just as your IRL experience should be. (For those who don’t know, IRL is what the cool kids say when they mean “in real life.”) But the fact is, online life is real life as well—just with better-looking versions of ourselves as our profile pics. We will talk about how to live for Christ in all contexts.

Christians in the Age of Outrage was written in consultation with a national survey of evangelicals and non-evangelicals by the Billy Graham Center Institute, in partnership with LifeWay Research. Relevant findings from the survey appear at the beginning of each chapter to help give context to the issues and challenges I address. For transparency and clarity, I have included the relevant questions and data for each chapter’s opening points in the appendix that begins on page 285.

For the study, LifeWay Research surveyed approximately three thousand Americans in three groupings: Americans with evangelical beliefs, Americans who self-identify as evangelical, and non-evangelical Americans.⁷ Unless specified otherwise, references to evangelicals in this study include only those individuals who are

evangelical by belief. To determine if a respondent fit the profile of an evangelical by belief, LifeWay Research asked about their level of agreement with four separate statements:

1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
2. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
3. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
4. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

Respondents had to cite strong agreement with all four statements to be categorized as being evangelical by belief.

Instead of Outrage, Engage

This book is intended to help Christians move from contributing to the age of outrage to effectively engaging it with the gospel. I'm convinced that this is, indeed, one of the greatest challenges of our day. Now to be fair, our challenges are a lot less threatening than those faced in previous centuries—there are no stakes upon which we might be impaled. But the stakes are still high. They impact how and if we can engage this moment well for the cause of Christ and his Kingdom.

I don't hold any punches in calling Christians to think critically on how we have contributed to the problem. At the same time, Christians are not defined by the crazy and caustic representatives we see on cable news. All over the world, the majority of Christians are already bringing their best in building the Kingdom of God. While we need to face head-on the areas where we need to grow, we must also reject the self-loathing all too common among American Christians.

This book is not just a complaint about outrage (being outraged about outrage seems ironic, eh?). It's not just a description

of the outrage we face today. It's also a prescription for how then we might live in a way that advances Christ's message by listening respectfully as well as speaking out.

We see the importance of this give-and-take in the story of Caleb Kaltenbach.

Kaltenbach found himself in the spotlight when his tweet about finding a Bible in Costco's fiction section went viral. Leading with the headline "Costco—The Bible Is Fiction," Fox News promoted the idea that Kaltenbach had uncovered a conspiracy against Christians and the Bible. Kaltenbach was even quoted as characterizing the store's decision to group the Bible with fiction as "bizarre."⁸

Within minutes, the story was picked up by the *Drudge Report*, and Christians quickly worked themselves into an outraged lather over the perceived insult.

How dare Costco!

This is a slap in the face to all Christians!

Boycott!

Suddenly a labeling error that listed Bibles as fiction had become a covert theological statement on the very nature of Scripture. What likely happens hundreds of times in bookstores every day had become an insidious spark that unleashed Christian outrage against Costco.

This despite the fact that a company spokesman insisted the CEO of Costco was a devout Catholic.

This despite attempts to quell the outrage with *reasonable* explanations of a simple mistake.

This despite Christian leaders reminding followers to exercise discernment and grace.

When the "Christian outrage machine" kicks into full gear, it becomes a runaway train. It seems the world has nothing on those who profess Christ when it comes to outrage.

When I noticed that Caleb Kaltenbach follows me on Twitter, I reached out to him about what had happened. It turned out that he is one of those reasonable, levelheaded Christians trying to fight

against the outrage. As I learned more about his story, I realized Kaltenbach is actually a picture of the non-outraged Christian.

But hey, don't let that slow down the outrage train.

As he recounted the events that led to his tweet, Kaltenbach insisted that he thought the label was an interesting if not amusing mistake. He posted a photo of the Costco Bible, never imagining that he would be approached by the press for an interview or that it would balloon into a full-scale onslaught of Christian outrage. He wasn't angry, offended, stunned, shocked, upset, or concerned for the faith of impressionable Christian children everywhere. In the news interview, Kaltenbach tried to convey this mentality as best he could while at the same time taking the opportunity to point people to Jesus. He even said, "I do not think that Costco did this intentionally. I don't believe there's an evil mastermind genius working at Costco to undermine the authority of Scripture."⁹

Unfortunately, a narrative of outrage is too tempting to pass up, and the story quickly got away from Kaltenbach. In the wake of the story, he tried to make his intentions clear:

It was never my intention to crusade against Costco or their CEO (who is a devout Catholic). I'm not on the cultural warfare path by any means. I believe that if this story gets summed up by label stickers then the opportunity was missed and a shadow has been cast over the Gospel. If however, we can have good conversation and get some people thinking about God, then there just might be a party in heaven soon (Lk. 15:7).¹⁰

Kaltenbach did his best to seize the opportunity to engage both sides of the outrage with the gospel and to challenge their assumptions about others. Some people listened, but others merely shouted him down. Costco apologized for the clerical error, but few if any Christians reciprocated by expressing regret for their reaction or even perceived they'd done anything wrong. To them, outrage worked.

But the story doesn't end here. Kaltenbach navigated the fields of outrage effectively, in part, because he had experience faithfully confronting a wave of hostility. He was raised by a same-sex couple, the two lesbian women he knew as his mothers. Then he met Jesus, and his entire worldview changed. After he sorted through what his new faith meant for his view of human sexuality, his parents eventually disowned him. In his book *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others without Sacrificing Conviction*, Kaltenbach winsomely outlines why Christians have struggled to demonstrate grace to the LGBTQ community even as we hold fast to orthodox teachings on homosexuality.

Kaltenbach has faced some outrage for his views, as you might imagine. So I asked him why he is on a mission to promote dialogue between the two sides. He explained, "I've read the end of the story. The last chapter of Revelation says, *God wins*. Because God is in control and will redeem all things, I can be calm, bold, and gracious as I share the gospel."

Kaltenbach has seen the outrage from both Christians and non-Christians. He's been shot at from both sides of the outrage battle . . . but he's walked the field in the middle, between the mainstream cultural highway and the increasingly distant side road where we live. He's sought to show and share the love of Jesus.

And both women who raised him now follow Jesus. I imagine Kaltenbach, those two women, and Jesus would want us to be winsome as we walk out our faith as well.

That's where we are going from here: We will look at the moment we are in and the mission we are on in the age of outrage.

Let's jump in.

PART 1

Why the Age of Outrage?



Everyone can be destructive and negative. It's easy to stand on the sidelines and shout out what's wrong with a situation and why everyone and everything is bad or wrong.

And pithy words are easy to come up with. I saw someone's post on Facebook after a school shooting. It was a cartoonlike graphic with these captions:

"Dear God, why do you allow such violence in school?"

—A concerned student

"Dear concerned student, I'm not allowed in school."—God

Actually, for the record, God is everywhere. And so are stupid T-shirts. But it is easier to be angry and pithy than to be Christlike and on mission. Such outraged approaches are self-destructive. Some of them are even contrary to what God calls us to as leaders of his church. We need to be constructive, offering Christians a vision for how to navigate outrage and be more effective in showing and sharing the love of Christ.

And speaking of schools, God is indeed at work in some surprising ways there. For example, Katie Beiler is a literacy liaison for Pequea Valley School District in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She visits families in their homes to encourage parents to read aloud and develop other habits to build their preschoolers' vocabulary and social skills. Beiler's aim is to ready young children for kindergarten—something that has been a problem in her district. Pequea Valley has been experiencing a rise in poverty, and in 2017 only 64.8 percent of third graders passed Pennsylvania's standardized English language arts test.¹ Beiler plays an essential role in ensuring that Pequea Valley preschoolers are exposed to books and language before they enter the school system.

What is unique about Katie Beiler's role is that she is employed by Grace Point Church, not Pequea Valley School District. In order

to keep the balance of separation between church and state, Beiler uses a nonreligious curriculum, reports to a district official, and has a Pequea Valley identification tag. However, she also gives monthly updates to Grace Point's pastor. Currently, Pequea Valley has a \$45,000 grant that applies to Beiler's position, which helps offset the cost to Grace Point Church, but when the grant ends the church will shoulder the entire \$70,000 annual cost. This program is so important to Beiler and to the entire church community because they want to be, in the words of lead pastor Tim Rogers, "a transforming presence in the town square."²

Yet that's just not how it's done in most places. Far too often we make snarky references on Facebook rather than engage in Christlike ways, as Grace Point Church has done. But before we get to where we want to be, we have to acknowledge where we are now.

Good thinking requires good diagnosis. It requires a discussion of what is wrong, how we got here, and what blind spots and behavior are feeding the problem. So part 1 of this book is necessary to lay the groundwork for the rest of the book.

Let's get out the stethoscope before we start prescribing the treatment. *But* let's not confuse diagnosis with the cure.

CHAPTER 1

Outrage Cause #1: A Cultural Forking

- Of evangelicals with an opinion, 82 percent believe that since the 2016 presidential election, groups within the Christian church have become increasingly polarized on issues of politics.
- Of evangelicals with an opinion, 73 percent believe the 2016 presidential election revealed political divides within the Christian church that have existed for a long time.

WHEN I CAME TO WHEATON COLLEGE, I began to serve as the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair. (The chair is distinguished, not the chair holder, I assure you.)

That role, and the role at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton, came with a key responsibility. Eventually, I was given a card that I was told I needed to carry on my person. On campus, traveling to conferences, and even on family vacation, I needed to make sure this card was always on me.

This was all part of something called “The Washington Project,” a secret phrase we would use to refer to what we would do after Mr. Graham passed. (Hint: I’m not good at keeping secrets.)

But this was a serious responsibility, and I took it as such. It got to the point that I was thinking about having the card tattooed to the back of my hand.

Printed on the card were step-by-step directions to follow when Billy Graham died: the people I needed to call, the e-mails I needed to write, and the flights I needed to book. We knew that when this news finally broke, there would be a frenzy of activity. Arrangements would need to be made, interviews given, and articles published. This wasn’t hype; we understood that the

opportunity to celebrate the life of Billy Graham was going to be a major platform to continue the work to which he devoted his life: preaching the gospel to the world. As it turned out, his funeral was, in a sense, his last crusade, and millions tuned in.

But why? Why such an ordered procedure? Why such intensity to make sure the process happened immediately? Why such a big deal?

Because it was Billy Graham.

Non-Christians and even younger Christians today may have difficulty understanding the impact and importance of Billy Graham. After all, thousands of preachers today have their own followings, YouTube videos, and podcasts. Ask ten Christians who their favorite Christian preacher or leader is, and you will likely get ten different answers. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, the vast majority of Christians gave the same answer: Billy Graham.

When obituary after obituary called Graham “America’s pastor,” it wasn’t an exaggeration. To many Americans, including presidents, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, and award-winning actors, Graham *was* their only connection to Christianity. He *was* their pastor.

Graham seemingly walked effortlessly across the cultural divisions that proved insurmountable to so many other leaders. From Karl Barth to Carl Henry, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Richard Nixon, from Johnny Cash to Queen Elizabeth, Graham won friends among communities and traditions, and in doing so, he proved to be one of the most unifying forces in American life.

To grasp the scale, consider that in Gallup’s yearly poll listing the ten most admired men, Graham appeared sixty-one times between 1948 and 2017. For comparison, among other men the one who came closest was Ronald Reagan, who appeared thirty-one times. Queen Elizabeth came closest overall; she has appeared forty-nine times in the list of the ten most admired women. Among people who are not national leaders, Oprah Winfrey has appeared thirty times and Bill Gates has been on the list eighteen times. Consider how staggering that is. As much as the world loves Oprah

or Bill Gates today, Graham had more than double the appearances of Oprah and was on the list three times as often as Gates.¹

Consider also that in a recent research project we conducted at the Billy Graham Center, we asked evangelical pastors, “What two nationally known pastors have been most influential in the way you do ministry at your church?” Though Graham had been out of the spotlight for nearly two decades, he was still ninth among all pastors. He jumped to second when we asked the same pastors who the most influential pastor on their ministry in the 1990s was. More than just shaping the public perception of Christianity, Graham was (and continues to be) considered by many Christians as an example to follow, not only in their evangelistic projects but in their entire ministries.²

For almost seventy years, Graham had been the living embodiment of the West’s religious openness. Even those who did not believe recognized in Graham a model of Christian virtue and ethics. He won begrudging respect from those we might classify as his cultural or theological opponents—a situation that seems almost impossible today.

One of the major causes for the age of outrage is that this religious and cultural consensus has evaporated. Graham’s death in February 2018 was not the beginning of this change but serves as an appropriate bookend to a past age. Out of the spotlight for many years, Graham’s declining presence in American life parallels the decline of the consensus he forged throughout his life. Thus, the incessant need of many Christians to find “the next Billy Graham” speaks to a recognition that we have lost a unifying force within a culture that was already splintering.

When Nominals Become Nones

Baseball great Yogi Berra used to say, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

America did. So did Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The majority of people in these nations were once vaguely Christian,

but for years, those with loosely held religious beliefs have been dropping them, and as a result, the entire English-speaking Western world is becoming more secular.

Focusing on the United States for a moment may help, though similar trends are taking place across the English-speaking Western world. Most Americans, who identify as loosely Christian, are becoming less so—they are more frequently choosing “none of the above” rather than “Christian” when surveyed about their beliefs. In fact, each year about an additional one percent of Americans no longer identify as Christian.⁵

Put another way, the nominals are becoming the nones. And as they become nones, their mind-set is more aligned with secular-minded people and they have less affinity with the avowedly religious. At the same time, the percentage of the devout has remained relatively stable.⁴

The effect of this trend is that American culture is incrementally polarizing along religious lines. People are either becoming more secular or staying devout, though the biggest group is becoming more secular. This is where we meet the fork in the road: How do we engage with our faith in a culture now polarized along faith lines rather than being at least nominally Christian?

It is useful to think about culture as a river, flowing in the direction of our collective beliefs and values. Within this river, there were once three primary streams, each of which included about a quarter of the population (the other quarter being self-identified non-Christians). These three groups are

Cultural Christians: People who self-identify as Christian because they are not something else and were born in a historically Christian country. They are Christians, in their minds, because that is part of their heritage.

Congregational Christians: People at church on Christmas Eve, and maybe for the occasional wedding or funeral. Although they may not have a vibrant faith, they retain some connection to a

local congregation, probably going back on Easter, for example. As a result, over the last few decades, most churches have tried to reach these people.

Convictional Christians: People who identify as Christians and are decidedly more religious. They more likely go to church regularly, live values that align with Christianity, and choose their spouses based on their faith. (According to the General Social Survey⁵ and some analysis I have explained more thoroughly in *USA Today*,⁶ the percentage of people in this group has remained relatively steady for the last few decades.)

While historically there have been divergences and reunions in our cultural river, the overall consensus among Americans (like most of the West) was shaped by a common Judeo-Christian belief system. Even though there was significant disparity when it came to the importance they attached to religion, all three streams shared an underlying commitment to (sometimes vaguely held) Christian beliefs and values. In essence, each group moved in the same direction. While there was a fourth stream defined by other religious traditions and/or secularism, those beliefs were outside the mainstream.

Today we are witnessing a shift in this model. About 25 percent of Americans (higher in other English-speaking countries) identify as non-Christians, either because they are another religion (Jewish, Hindu, etc.) or because they are secular (atheist, agnostic, or just “none of the above”—we call that last category the “nones.”) That stream continues to expand.

At the same time, the percentage of Convictional Christians in the US population has remained generally stable. What *have* changed are the number and beliefs of Cultural and Congregational Christians. As a result of the collapse of mainline Protestantism and the growth of secularism, Convictional Christianity has incrementally moved outside the American cultural mainstream. In fact, as I explained in the *Washington Post*,⁷ as the numbers of Cultural and

Congregational Christians decrease, the worldview and values of these Americans have shifted toward the secular stream and away from that of Convictional Christians.

However, the percentage who say they regularly attend church has remained relatively steady, and regular church attendance is often a marker of Convictional Christians. The graph on the following page shows regular church attendance for Protestants, which include mainline Protestant, evangelical, and historically African American churches. As you can see, attendance actually went up in 2016. (I know, I know, that's not what the doomsday stat books say, but it still is true.) And yes, some people exaggerate their church attendance. But the numbers tell us that the percentage of religious people who call themselves Christians has remained relatively steady.

So Convictional Christianity and regular church participation by its members have not substantially declined. That fact was confirmed by the release of a recent Pew Research report, which led to the Religion News Service article “Pew Study: More Americans Reject Religion, but Believers Firm in Faith”⁸ and the *Christianity Today* article “Pew: Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America.”⁹ That's not to say all is well, but clearly a substantial number of people still live out their self-identified Christian faith in the United States.¹⁰

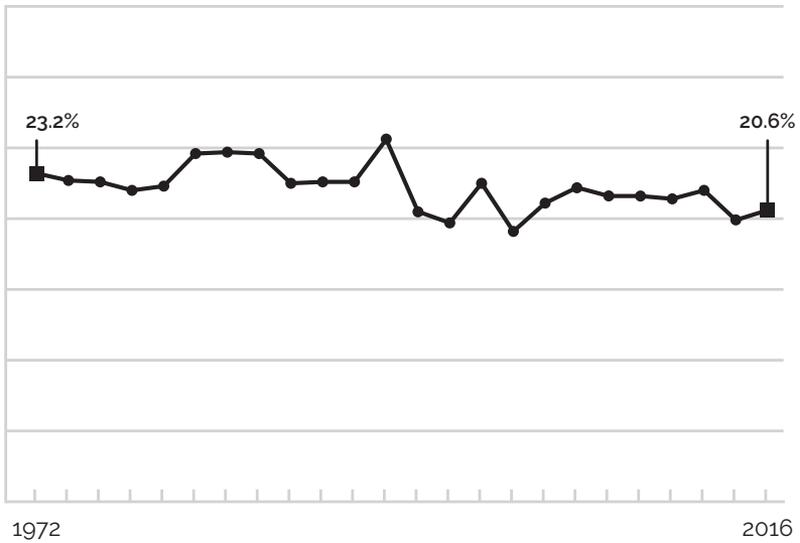
However—and this is key—Convictional Christianity has incrementally split from the mainstream of Western culture. This has provoked anger among some Christians. Since their values and practices shaped culture for so long, they had the impression that they owned the culture in some sense. These Christians want their country back, and by that they mean they want their cultural power back. This anger can lead to hostility against those they believe have taken it, fear that this trend will continue and lead to their marginalization, and confusion as to what to do about it.

President Trump's election is a reminder that cultural Christianity remains a potent force in American politics, as he rallied many self-identified Christians who felt marginalized in this new cultural moment. Even so, those now swimming in the stream

of secular thought are tempted to flex their new cultural power, though they do not yet have a clear-cut leader. In other words, people are divided and motivated to pick fights, and they consistently talk past one another. This is what happens when a culture comes to a fork in the road.

Outrage.

Among Americans: All Protestants and non-denominationalists who regularly attend church



Daniel Price / Ed Stetzer (Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College) based on data within GSS materials.

Smith, Tom W, Peter Marsden, Michael Hout, and Jibum Kim. *General Social Surveys, 1972–2016* [machine-readable data file] / Principal Investigator, Tom W. Smith; Co-Principal Investigator, Peter V. Marsden; Co-Principal Investigator, Michael Hout; Sponsored by National Science Foundation. --NORC ed.-- Chicago: NORC at the University of Chicago [producer]; Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut [distributor], 2015.

1 data file (57,061 logical records) + 1 codebook (3,567p.). -- (National Data Program for the Social Sciences, No. 22).

Consider how this cultural forking has fueled the age of outrage. At its core, cultural division breeds anger by polarizing communities and teaching us to yell past one another rather than engage. There is always the temptation to view cultural power as a zero-sum game in which the only way to engage is to fight and the only outcome is a win-lose situation. In these cases, Christians have traditionally struggled with reducing their spiritual identity to merely one among many. Worse still, Christians can allow political and cultural identities, rather than Kingdom mission, to drive their engagement.

The Dark Side of Teams

A few decades ago, my wife, Donna, and I arrived in Buffalo, New York, to plant a church, our very first pastorate. Filled with the optimism and confidence of youth, we dug into the community and were greeted with open arms. There was one problem: I am not nor have I ever been a football fan. I'd be hard pressed to explain the difference between an offside and a touchdown. (I'm kidding. A touchdown is when you score from the foul line, right?) If you know anything about Buffalo, you understand that cheering for the Bills is a way of life. Once a member of the Bills mafia, always a member (just promise not to tell my new Chicago Bears neighbors about it).

One thing that sticks in my mind these many years later is how this common identity around a football team was so powerful for a young couple starting out in ministry. Football was part of how the community embraced us and how Donna and I bonded with them. We quickly learned the language (I can talk the "K-Gun" offense with the best of them) and became active members of this weird fan base that seems to transcend the political and cultural divisions raging throughout the country.

The experience reinforces just how powerful teams and group identity can be in creating community and fostering productivity and innovation. Through working on teams, individuals learn how their sacrifice and cooperation make great achievement possible.

There is something powerfully alluring about teamwork,

particularly the sense of belonging and the confidence around a goal that stems from shared convictions. We all have an innate desire to belong to a team that will give us both identity and purpose. In many ways, this is positive, providing us with support and encouragement.

Yet lost in our idolization of teams and teamwork is the recognition that the drive to belong and to forge community has a dark side as well. There is an inherent danger that the bonds created by a shared belonging and identity can often compel individuals to behavior and attitudes that would otherwise be unthinkable.

Herein lies the danger: Teams have a tendency to cultivate devotion to both their collective objective and to one another at the expense of other teams. In other words, our sense of “sameness” or solidarity around a common identity and mission inevitably conflicts with other groups. In something trivial like sports, this is obvious: In order for your team to win, the other team needs to lose.

MIT professor Harold Isaacs was one of the first who explored this mentality of group identity in politics, arguing that underlying almost all political change was the engagement between competing group identities.¹¹

More than even demonizing other people, the creation of groups can lead us to excuse the behavior of those in our own camp. In one study out of the United Kingdom, researchers observed how university students responded to smelling sweaty T-shirts, some of which displayed their university’s logo and others which carried the logo of a different university. In two studies that measured both self-reported disgust and observable metrics of disgust, the researchers noticed that the students were noticeably less put off by the smell of those T-shirts they thought had been worn by students from their own university.¹² Students showed a willingness to put up with their sweaty classmates because they were on their team, yet those students showed reluctance to extend the same grace toward outsiders. In other words, whether we view people as being on our team has a direct bearing on how we perceive and interact with them, regardless of whether their behavior is the same as those in other groups.

From teamwork to tribalism

This issue of *polarization* (when communities sharply disagree about values, beliefs, and opinions) has recently jumped into hyperdrive—particularly along partisan lines. A 2017 Pew Research study said tribalism has increased significantly in the United States since 1994. In a survey of American attitudes across ten measures, Pew tracked responses according to political metrics, along with other divisive indicators such as race, education, age, and gender. What it found was that where other indicators stayed the same, the average gap between the views of Republicans and Democrats on fundamental issues increased from 15 to 36 percentage points between 1994 and 2017. For instance, in 1994, 32 percent of Democrats and 30 percent of Republicans said that immigrants’ hard work and talents strengthen our country. By 2017, the share of people from both parties who agreed with that statement had increased. However, the share of Democrats holding that view had jumped to 84 percent, while only 42 percent of Republicans now said that immigrants strengthen, rather than burden, our country.¹⁵ A parallel 2017 study at Pew revealed that not only is society becoming more polarized, but that an “overwhelming majority (86%) of Americans say conflicts between Democrats and Republicans are either strong or very strong.”¹⁴ The level of polarization/tribalism in America, specifically around political identification, has reached such a point that we have begun to tangibly feel these divisions.

Sadly, Christians of varying religious traditions, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds have often followed their non-Christian friends deep into these political divisions. Thus, even as the country slowly entrenches itself along political, cultural, and economic lines, professing Christians are often on the front lines of these divisions.

This is not being countercultural with the message of Jesus; rather, this form of tribalism conforms to the pattern of this world and does not fight for the basic truth that should unite all Christians. These secondary issues have conflated the spiritual

and the natural in a way that weakens our witness and embroils us in deep conflict that distracts from and distorts the gospel of Jesus.

Unflinching devotion to a tribe not only pushes us to fight against issues that are not connected to the gospel and don't advance the mission of God, but it also affects how we view others who disagree with us. They become opponents we have to beat rather than lost people made in the image of God whom we are to love and extend God's grace to. Our true fight is not against those who are hurting in the world; it is against the sinful and demonic forces of darkness.

When we become primarily identified with any tribe outside the body of Christ, especially when we are identified to the point where others are repelled by us, we've traded our Kingdom-based identity for a world-based identity. It's burning a bridge. It's building a wall. The most damaging example of Christians at their worst is when someone claims a Kingdom-based identity but pursues some world-based end. Trying to use Christianity to achieve political, economic, or social objectives only increases the outrage directed toward us.

Fighting for a place at the cultural table

Yale Law professor Amy Chua warns that the combination of polarization and insularity is increasingly defining American political and cultural interaction: "Whites and blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, straight people and gay people, liberals and conservatives—all feel their groups are being attacked, bullied, persecuted, discriminated against."¹⁵ I think that Chua puts her finger on the problem: While each group may act in different ways, their friction and conflict with other groups is motivated by an underlying fear. Even though groups may scoff at the idea that others feel persecuted, there is little doubt that in their own way and for their own reasons, each has a significant fear of the other.

While some camps may be fearful because they have a long history of being persecuted, others are afraid because they see

culture changing rapidly and are concerned where they will be when the music stops. There is a reordering of society right now as the dynamics between groups are changing.

Think about some of the hot-button issues that dominated recent elections.

Manufacturing. In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump won, in part, by flipping three Rust Belt states—Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—that had not gone Republican since Reagan. In the wake of the election, countless articles have chronicled how manufacturing changes—increased automation, factory relocation, and declining wages—pushed working-class voters to change parties.¹⁶ They saw in Trump someone who recognized their cultural and economic anxieties. That was a massive shift. For most of the twentieth century, American manufacturing built the middle class, and suddenly a large portion of this demographic was afraid about their future.

Immigration. Americans have always been very welcoming to immigrants—except when they’re afraid because of the economic or national security implications. Fear drives a lot of this. Many Christians are angry because they feel as if they’ve lost Christian America and their home field advantage.

Sexuality. When we consider the history of civil rights in America, the rate at which attitudes toward LGBTQ issues have changed is astounding. The percentage of Americans who favor same-sex marriage grew from 35 percent in 2001 to 62 percent in 2017.¹⁷ At the same time, the rapid acceptance of same-sex relationships means that most defenders of LGBTQ rights have fresh memories of times when they were denied basic liberties and protections.

Every group begins from a posture of losing *their* rights, *their* voice, and *their* cultural influence, whether they have had it for generations, have recently attained it, or still aspire to it. The uncertainty

inevitably breeds fear, distrust, and anger as each group vies for a seat at the cultural table. Even though Christianity has largely occupied a position of cultural dominance in America, major cultural shifts have provoked a similar fear that it, too, may be left behind. Thus, much of the outrage over the cultural shift from a Judeo-Christian worldview has been a product of our anxieties at the sheer pace of the change.

Talking Past One Another

If you're looking for more evidence of how polarization is dividing the United States and other Western nations, consider how people of differing religious or political outlooks gather information and evaluate the motives and actions of those outside their own groups.

Echo chambers: getting stuck in a bubble

During the 2012 presidential election, pollsters made clear that the outcome in Ohio was going to come down to the wire and that winning the state was crucial to Obama's reelection. Yet I saw far too many confident assertions from conservative media sources that Obama was going to lose Ohio in a landslide. Late in the campaign, I knew from a broad survey of polls (not to mention the historical precedent that sitting presidents rarely lose swing states by a large percentage) that Obama would almost certainly carry the state. The day after the election, I tweeted: "Obama reelected. For those shocked this wasn't a Romney landslide, I'd broaden your news viewing beyond @foxnews." I wasn't making a political statement; it was simply obvious that the polls were going for Barack Obama—except on Fox News.

Let me say, when the first major media outlet announced late on election night that Obama had carried Ohio, many people who followed Fox and other conservative outlets were angry.

I saw this as further evidence that nowhere is America's polarization more apparent than in the ways we consume and engage media—in other words, in how we get our news and express our

opinions about the news online. As Americans have been able to customize their news, we have witnessed the creation of “media silos.” In today’s world of catchy phrases, sociologists and political theorists have countless ways to describe the effect: bias bubbles, belief filters, echo chambers, and dampening dungeons (okay, I made that last one up). The net effect is the same: Whenever we allow our political identity to shape the way we engage the world and others, we invariably close off outside sources that we do not consider part of *our team*. It is an “us versus them” mentality that can spiral out of control.

Researchers from Italy’s IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca and the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University studied online users’ consumption of social media and its potency to shape their worldviews and beliefs. They found that not only are online users attracted to forming information silos,¹⁸ but that these sources can quickly breed division between people who previously had similar perspectives. Despite fervent hopes among defenders of the Internet that its openness to every viewpoint would broaden people’s minds, researchers have actually found the opposite. Far from expanding the conversation, people are constructing their own silos by seeking out information that simply reinforces their existing views and bias. As a result, the moderates are becoming extreme rather than the extremes becoming moderate.¹⁹

The effect of obtaining our information from these information silos is the sense that we are living in different worlds from those with opposing beliefs, completely cutting ourselves off from those who do not think, look, and talk like us. Tribalism not only divides people, it also impacts how they translate data and research into their lives. As a result, our world becomes an echo chamber of ideas that leaves us dangerously entrenched in beliefs, habits, and perspectives that are often caricatures of reality.

Yet there is good news: When we understand that many Western nations are incrementally moving toward greater political polarization, we recognize a significant opportunity for Christians. As

the world divides along strict party lines, the church can overcome and transcend these inferior identifiers. After all, the insular group identities of the left and right will not prove as captivating or appealing as a community built around faith.

Navigating the promise—and pitfalls—of compromise

In her biography of her late husband, Keith Green, a legend in Christian contemporary music, Melody Green chose one of his most iconic songs for the title: *No Compromise*. The song embodied much of Green's life story and driving spiritual devotion. As Melody wrote of her immediate reflection upon the song, "It seemed to capture the heart of what Keith wanted to say—how important it is that believers quit compromising with the world and start living radically committed lives."²⁰ Frustrated by Christians who he believed diminished the gospel by making allowances for sin, Keith Green called us to a faith that was radical in singular devotion to Christ and that brokered no compromise with this world.

Even today, the passion and intensity in Green's stand against compromise resonate with believers. Yet it's one thing to avoid compromise when it comes to upholding orthodox Christianity; it's quite another to view compromise, dialogue, and moderation as weaknesses, moral failure, and grounds for exclusion in the political realm.

This is one reason the 2016 election was so agonizing for Christians who believed they faced a no-win situation. On one side, many thought the Republican candidate's moral character should have disqualified him from public office; on the other side, a number of Christian voters were dismayed by a Democrat who advocated one of the most radical positions on abortion rights in American history. If you were a believer who cared deeply for the unborn yet refused to support a candidate of dubious moral quality, where could you go? Some Christians begged Democrats to make some compromise on abortion to signal that there was a place within their party for pro-lifers.

Nothing.

Then, in the wake of their loss to Donald Trump, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi assured us that there was room in the Democratic Party for pro-lifers; Bernie Sanders even went so far as to endorse a pro-life candidate in Nebraska. Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards promptly chastised both politicians for even this minor sign of accommodation.²¹

In a *New York Times* editorial, David Brooks outlined how this all-or-nothing mentality was damaging not only the Democratic Party, but the country.²² This column was greeted by such ferocity of outrage that you would think Brooks had called for the execution of the Democratic Party in Times Square. Fond of chastising Christians for their support of Republicans simply because of their pro-life position, the left has proven equally unable to compromise its own dogma to provide a place for them within the Democratic Party. Even the mention of moderation is enough to bring out the pitchforks and torches.

While refusing to compromise in politics can lead to further polarization, Christians cannot afford to concede when it comes to issues of righteousness and justice. The #MeToo movement is an illustration of a time when all sectors of society must band together. This movement has been a tidal wave picking up momentum, and this reckoning has been a long time in the making and sorely needed. Unfortunately, it also highlights how Christians have sometimes seemed to value our institutions and communities above the gospel. We are still grappling with the consequences of #MeToo and how to properly channel the movement's concerns and objectives. But one truth it has laid bare is how often the right decision is sacrificed for the easy one in an effort to protect the organization over the individual.

Churches in particular are just now awakening to the reality that we have been deficient in handling cases of abuse. Too often elder boards, pastoral staff, and denominational leaders have minimized or discredited instances of sexual abuse and misconduct.

When we allow thoughts of *What will this do to our business/*

school/church if it gets out? to restrict our pursuit of righteousness, we have compromised. When the church protects the powerful at the expense of the victim, we have compromised. And in the end, these compromises add up and convince the world that the church is not a community for the broken in search of healing but just another human institution that puts expediency above righteousness and justice.

Valuing expediency over expertise

One evening a few years ago, I had an experience that every pastor dreads. I had just finished preaching when I noticed an older gentleman waiting patiently to talk with me. Now 99 percent of these interactions are harmless if not actually encouraging. People often want to tell the preacher they appreciated some point, connect on some mutual friend, or say the preacher is in their prayers.

It's that one percent of the time when things go off the rails, and preachers have a sixth sense for when it's about to happen. Let me tell you, alarm bells were ringing as this man approached. With a determined stride and unblinking eyes, he was clearly bent on speaking his piece even if the Rapture tried to interrupt. With little preamble, he jumped right in to tell me why some research I had cited in my sermon was wrong. I listened intently as he explained that through his own observations and what he'd pieced together on the Internet, I had made a grievous error he needed to set straight. After he finished, I patiently explained to him that I had overseen the study in question as the head of LifeWay Research.

Undeterred, the man doubled down. He may not have had any studies to cite—and his research was limited to a few blogs and Wikipedia—but that in no way diminished his confidence. In the end, I thanked him, and we parted ways. But I was struck by the contrast. How could someone I knew to be completely wrong be so irrationally confident? The man not only was self-assured in his wrongness, he actually *initiated* the conversation!

This, however, is hardly unique. Every week, preachers around the United States, who have spent hours poring over God’s Word, invariably field an assortment of individuals armed with little more than the confidence of their convictions. This highlights something important in our culture: Many people are willing to create their own reality to affirm their rightness, ignoring facts, logic, and others’ objections. One distinctive of today’s outrage is how we often value confidence and aggression more than truth in our public interactions. During a time of 24/7 cable news and social media, it is the controversial but confident shouting personalities who garner followings, even if what they say is demonstrably false. We live in a time when one can often be wrong but seldom, if ever, in doubt. Over time, this attitude devalues truth, erects barriers to substantive engagement with others, and ratchets up the volume of disagreement.

An underlying problem that gives rise to this behavior is how cultural attitudes toward expertise and authority have shifted. The very democratic spirit that ensures every person has equal value in the political process can, when applied to the issue of authority and expertise, be destructive. In some cases, like the one I encountered after my sermon, it is frustrating but mostly harmless.

Now, I am not saying that I am always right. And people can, do, and should question my stats. Neither am I suggesting that experts are always right. (For example, I believe the impossible—a Savior was born of a virgin at the edges of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago—and that contradicts the conclusions of scholars like Bart Ehrman and Richard Dawkins.) But something is happening in our culture, and we need to understand it, lest we fall prey to it.

In his book *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols argues that the underlying problem isn’t so much a rejection of knowledge as a visceral or angry reaction to any claims to expertise. Regardless of the qualifications of experts, such as a lifetime of study or experience in a field, people are increasingly antagonistic to them but often willing to trust what they find on conspiracy websites. Nichols writes, “Americans now believe that having equal rights in a political

system also means that each person's opinion about anything must be accepted as equal to anyone else's. This is the credo of a fair number of people despite being obvious nonsense. It is a flat assertion of actual equality that is always illogical, sometimes funny, and often dangerous."²⁵ Armed with no experience and some sketchy information culled from the corners of the Internet, more and more individuals are brash, confident, demanding, and frequently dead wrong. This predictably produces conflict and outrage in a world in which self-reflection is a sign of weakness and confidence is truth-making. There is little incentive for patient and nuanced discussion. For that reason, I think we need to discipline—yes, to disciple—our minds (and the minds of our friends) to think more critically.

Christians have a well-documented poor track record in this area. Now, this is not new. Christians have, for a long time, had an anti-intellectual streak. I'm not the first person to think that; Mark Noll, a professor at Notre Dame, has long cautioned evangelicals against a virulent strain of anti-intellectualism that emboldens the worst tendencies of our movement. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Noll famously warned, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."²⁴ Even as Noll applauded evangelicals for our virtues of charity, evangelistic zeal, and community building, he warned of significant long-term risk for damage when we neglect our intellectual life.

It hurts our witness by making us, at times, look stupid. And few people want to be part of a faith that they see as a group of easily fooled, angry people.

Demanding silence in the face of disagreement

In 2017, Princeton Seminary awarded the Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life to Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and a bestselling author. Princeton was once a bastion of orthodox Protestantism whose lecturers included Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, and the Kuyper Award was one of the few remaining vestiges of this heritage. A Dutch

statesman and theologian, Kuyper had given his famous “Lectures on Calvinism” at Princeton in 1898, and that work continues to be one of the most influential pieces of public theology today.

Although Keller won the award in recognition for his work as both a well-respected theologian and an urban pastor, controversy erupted immediately after the announcement. No one would question Keller’s influence—in 2018 *Forbes* included him on its list of the world’s top fifty leaders.²⁵ Yet some students and faculty objected to Keller on the basis that he did not support the ordination of women or LGBTQ causes. The university abruptly changed course and revoked the honor. In an example of Christ’s humility and graciousness, Keller suggested Princeton not give him the award but still hold his lecture to foster dialogue, discussion, and greater intellectual exploration. The university agreed, and Keller’s lecture was a huge success.

The event reinforces an emerging problem in our culture where the mere existence of disagreement is likely to spark outrage with the predictable effect of silencing dialogue. Suddenly everyone begins to respond as if stepping on eggshells. When disagreement is equated with persecution or hatred, the intensity of our divisions ratchets up, and moderate voices are cowed into silence out of fear of being similarly branded. Labels such as *homophobic*, *sexist*, *racist*, and *anti-Christian* are thrown around in an attempt to shut down any engagement before it even begins. There can be no actual exchange of ideas or dialogue in this environment.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Christians who hold to historic orthodoxy are no longer welcome in certain circles. In her article “The Wrong Kind of Christian,” Tish Warren recounted how she had mistakenly believed that she had earned a place at the wider cultural table.

The subtitle of the article explained, “I thought a winsome faith would win Christians a place at Vanderbilt’s table. I was wrong.” Her orthodox views and work with InterVarsity’s student chapter on campus became sticking points with her classmates. She wrote,

I thought I was an acceptable kind of evangelical.

I'm not a fundamentalist. My friends and I enjoy art, alcohol, and cultural engagement.

We avoid spiritual clichés and buzzwords. We value authenticity, study, racial reconciliation, and social and environmental justice.

Being a Christian made me somewhat weird in my urban, progressive context, but despite some clear differences, I held a lot in common with unbelieving friends. We could disagree about truth, spirituality, and morality, and remain on the best of terms. The failures of the church often made me more uncomfortable than those in the broader culture.

Then, two years ago, the student organization I worked for at Vanderbilt University got kicked off campus for being the wrong kind of Christians.²⁶

There are some situations you can't winsome your way through. Eventually the group was deregistered by the university, which essentially killed any access the campus ministry had to minister to the student body. Even as Warren and others tried to fight back, the reality was that their version of (orthodox) Christianity was no longer welcome.

You see, the lanes are moving apart. And people who are moving in a more secular direction are now part of the mainstream. As Warren explained, they see the Christian belief system as discriminatory. And who likes discriminators? They are akin to racists. So the cycle continues and the outrage grows—but Warren took a different path. Rather than complaining or criticizing the university, Warren wrote blog posts and articles to help clarify why InterVarsity asked its student leaders to affirm its doctrinal statements. Even as she urged Vanderbilt to live up to its stated claim of welcoming pluralism, she expressed the group's love of the university and desire to remain a voice on campus.

Like Warren, Keller defended Christians' right to hold fast to

their beliefs and explained the danger in trying to silence them. In his lecture at Princeton, Keller noted the importance of transcending insular group mentalities that breed fear and suspicion. “You can’t disagree with somebody by just beating them from the outside,” he said. “You have to come into their framework. You critique them from inside their own framework; you don’t critique them for not having your framework.”²⁷

Keller got to the root of the problem. As the world has fragmented into independent groups with their own worldviews and moral frameworks, these factions invariably judge others by their own standards. When others don’t live up to their judgments, they have a visceral reaction to them rather than trying to understand their positions. More important for the believer is that when we respond to outrage with outrage, we ruin our witness. When we desire to beat the other into submission with claims of intolerance, offense, or bigotry rather than trying to engage our opponents in dialogue, we cannot be ambassadors of Christ’s love.

We need to recognize that what we often see as a scriptural issue, the world around us sees as a justice issue. Their framework of belief around any opposition to LGBTQ beliefs is similar to how most people feel about racism. I’m outraged by racism and hope you are as well. However, I am not outraged by following the teaching of Scripture when it comes to sexuality. Therein lies the problem—we and the rest of the world see things from a different starting place. When we see someone discriminated against because of their race, Christians should have a visceral, gut response of justifiable anger and righteous indignation. That is the same response many people have when Christians do not support same-sex marriage. We start from our understanding of Scripture; they do not start from that same place.

The problem comes when we believe that the reason others hate us must be *because* they disagree with us. This is why we respond to intellectual disagreement with emotional reflex. We truly believe we are so right that the other person must disagree with us based on moral hatred rather than simply intellectual dissent.

The Fork in the River

Let's go back to the river illustration, because by understanding where we have come from and where we are, we can gain a better appreciation of where we are going. As these trends continue, it appears likely that the cultural divide between Convictional Christians and other groups will actually widen.

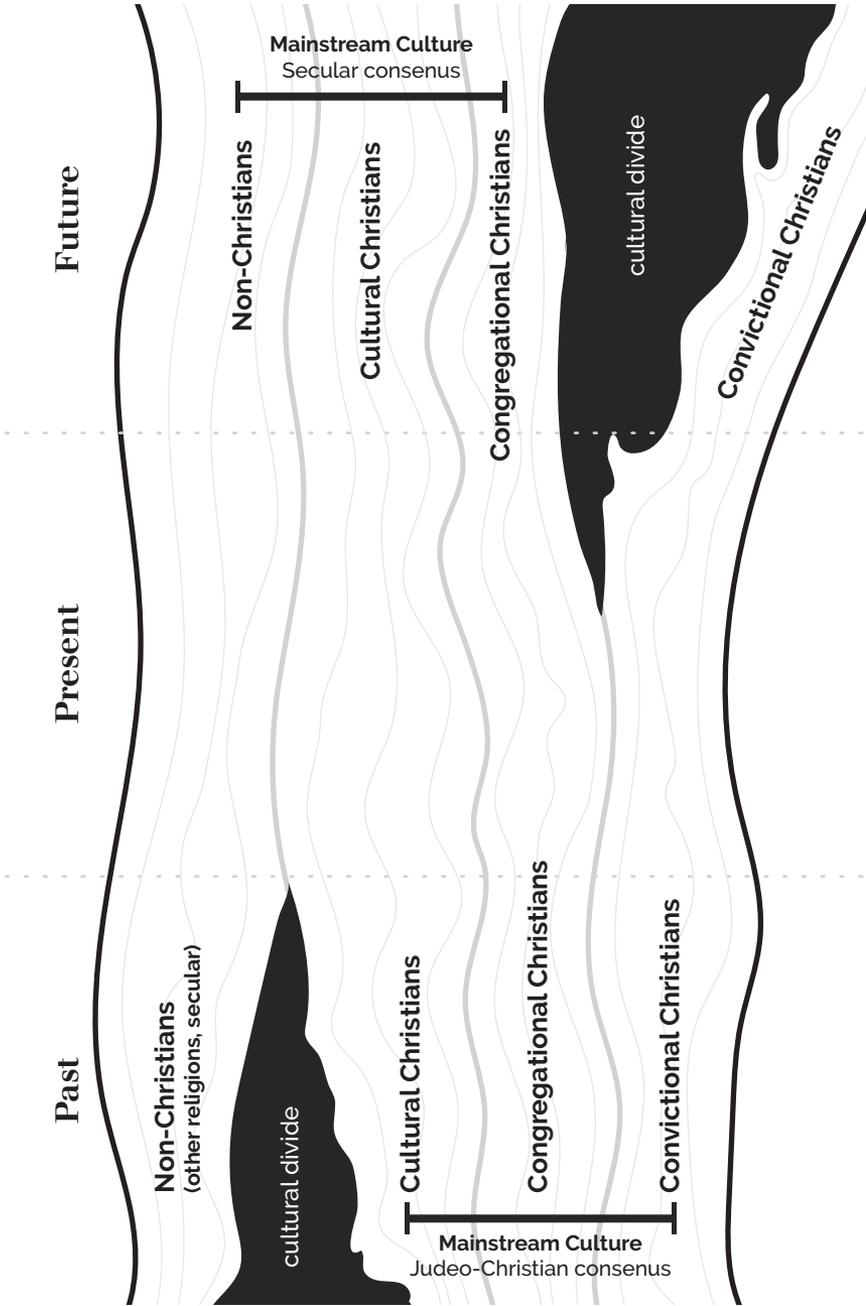
Remember, the number of Convictional Christians appears to be holding steady, but the number of Cultural and Congregational Christians is shrinking by about one percent per year. And that rate may be accelerating. In other words, those streams are moving away from Convictional Christian belief and practice. I've seen it myself.

You see, like many in the Northeast, I grew up a little bit Catholic. Actually, most of my family did. We were Catholics on Christmas and Easter; the rest of the time, Saint Bernard's Catholic Church was the church we did *not* go to on Sundays. Most of our neighbors went as well because, like us, they were "Chreasters" (people who go on Christmas and Easter, and yes, that's a thing).

As I look at my family now, I see that most of us are not where we started. As is often the case, people don't tend to stay a little bit religious. Over time, they become more or less engaged. As such, most of my family are not involved in church or matters of faith today. They have moved away from the nominal Catholic experience. But some of us—a minority, to be clear—have moved the other way, becoming more involved in church and matters of faith. (I go to church way too much . . . let's just get that out there.)

That's what happens today. Nominal people tend not to stay nominal. And why would they? Unless there is cultural pressure and guilt (hello, Irish Catholics on Long Island, where I grew up!), there is no reason to keep following traditions that don't have meaning. Yet for some of us, our faith has changed and deepened.

My family is a microcosm of our culture and its shifting faith practices. We've come to a fork in the river.



Christians can try to make their stand by turning back the clock. We can try to reclaim a cultural norm that is dying if not already dead. Or we can grasp the central truth of the moment in which we live, understanding the challenges and opportunities Christians face in this new culture. We have to consider both the moment we are in and the mission we are on.