

CURRENT ISSUES

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Redeeming Human Interaction in the Church

Belinda, deeply frustrated with the youth leader, yelled at her husband: "This is getting out of control—she's brainwashing our kids with her woke nonsense!" Mike, incensed about his friend on vestry, blurted out: "He's sick…those atrocious, hateful beliefs of his!" Tens of millions of people feel, if not say: "This is crazy, I feel like we are fighting for the soul of our friendship…or our family…or our church."

I talk to hundreds of pastors. I would guess that from the start of the pandemic to today, 99% of them have faced division in the church caused by members' previously held commitments to partisan politics. A recent article in *Time* reports:

> A lot of people have quietly blocked family members on social media or speak sadly of siblings or grandparents with whom they surreptitiously try to avoid spending time, and they worry that talking about [politics/religion] will further inflame the feud.

If people are treating important family relationships in that way, the more casual relationships of church are in trouble.

I've been thinking about *staying in the room with difference* for months but was spurred on to write by listening to the recording of a recent Trinity Forum. The event featured Jonathan Haidt and Peter Wehner. I do not know much about Peter, but I had read and appreciated Jonathan's book: *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. I listened because for more than a year now, I've heard from clergy that keeping together a congregation with vastly different political views has become a vital challenge.

Studies name what we are experiencing and confirm our fears:

> A postelection Pew Research Center survey found that fewer than 2% of voters felt those who voted for the other party understood them very well, and only 13% of Joe Biden's voters and 5% of Donald Trump's voters expressed any desire for future unity.

Yet hostile division is not inevitable; it is not baked into the cosmic cake. Our churches don't have to give in. Discord is not inescapable. We, the people of God, model something different, while teaching and working for its spread in ways appropriate to the moral vision of the Bible, to the life and teaching of Jesus.

Let's think a bit about the drivers behind the common instances of hostile vestry conversations, blocking people on social media and people leaving one church to find another that better fits their political ideals and values.

Why Are Divisions So Harsh?

The people in your church may not realize the cultural conditioning that is leading them to take sides or behave in hostile ways. The Trinity Forum guests described some of the elements that are contributing to our age of rage:

Instead of publishing/broadcasting we have moved to what is called *narrow casting*. Fox News and MSNBC are examples of outlets that communicate only with a narrow band of people who have a specific worldview and maintain certain beliefs. Google has also made it possible to find seemingly credible information on any idea and conspiracy theory. Social media algorithms have fueled confirmation bias (the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories) which has, in turn, multiplied rage among strangers and created online communities linked to falsehoods or conspiracies.

We are losing touch with facts, with right and wrong, with truth and falsehood. Where there is no common set of facts, no agreed-upon data points, normal methods of reasonable, even kind, persuasion are cut off. Instead of helping each other better see and interpret facts, we rush to demonize others. The middle is now gone. *Moderate* is a term of contempt.

Along this path, the ever-present tension between elitists and populists has grown. The elites may have privileged knowledge of sophisticated ideas, but they cannot trump the lived experience of the populace. The large-and-fast rise in education levels has allowed some people to deal with all manner of theoretical issues and come to hypothetical points of view—for instance, on sex and gender, globalization, technology, economics, etc. Yet the vast majority of people are just trying to pay rent and put food on the table. Around and around the mutual antipathy goes.

We've always had polarization, but the current degree of hatred is stunning. During wars, Americans usually have common enemies. We seem to need an enemy. Increasingly, we are making enemies out of anyone with a different opinion. It should not surprise us that foreign governments would use this predisposition against us. If nation states are willing to drop powerful bombs on each other (at least 108 million people were killed in wars in the 20th century), surely we can imagine a spy agency dropping an occasional false Tweet or misleading Facebook post intended to make Americans hate each other even more.

The rise in diversity is creating moral and ethical challenges. *Others* scare us. Difference means *caution*, not *love* (of neighbor and enemy). We don't know each other anymore. We settle for labels based in pseudo-truths: Old people are control freaks. Young people have no moorings. Intellectually and relationally weary, we stereotype everything we can. We seem to have lost the emotional and psychological energy to give people a chance, to give others the benefit of the doubt. To *listen in order to learn* is now seen as weak. Learning implies growth, which implies change. But we fear that to change is to betray or to compromise.

Politics, religion and identity have always been a potentially toxic brew. Politics and religion have always competed for that which gives a person the core of their identity (today we would have to add gender and sexuality). It seems everyone has a political identity, but comparatively few have a clear spiritual identity. This is why we have trouble debating civic issues: To not agree with someone 100% means we are attacking their core identity. *Faith is now a weapon in political wars.* Faith attached to conspiracy theories allows people to name the bad, evil guys. People of faith then prescribe (almost always immoral) ways to savagely fight back.

Arguments for the Sake of Heaven

The Rabbis of the Talmud called the disagreements I have been describing a *makhlokhet*—a *separation*. In contrast to such arguments were those that were for the sake of heaven. That lovely phrase denoted disagreements that, once discussed, led people closer to truth, to understanding reality, to God. These were conversations that yielded new forms of discernment.

The back-and-forth showed someone they were wrong. But this was fine. It was preferable—even heaven-like. How so? When you want the truth enough to change and grow, then being shown you are wrong is a gift. I had a love/hate relationship with videotape in athletics. I swore I was doing it right, but at the end of a clip, more than once a coach hollered at me: "Hunter, the tape don't lie!" I was wrong—sincerely and passionately in error. We called that learning, not losing. In theological and spiritual terms, we want to value moments of insight as *discernment* rather than *defeat*.

Imagine the learning, the discovery that will come to us when we *shall see face to face [and] shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Corinthians 13:12). If you suppose that such knowledge, such improved perspective is a good thing, then why is it not good in our conversations today?

This form of inquiry-based conversation seems pie-in-the-sky—I get it. But I write this during Easter Week. I believe in and have based my life and work on resurrection. That means I can believe in the transformation of human interaction—at least in the Church, at least among those who seek to practice resurrection. I have joy at the thought of C4SO churches pursuing love-based conversations in search of truth.

Redeeming Human Interaction

The root cause of our mean-spirited, will-to-harm discourse is not technological. It is not caused by the web and social media platforms. It is not ultimately rooted in cable television or talk radio. I don't think it is primarily caused by contemporary angst about "What is truth?" and "How much can we actually know with certainty?"

I believe our core issues are spiritual, ethical and moral. *This means spiritual leaders are hugely important in our day.* Transformation begins with us. Clergy, as models and spokespersons for love, have a key role to play not just in church, but as vision-casters for the life commended by Jesus. In and through a heart transformed into Christlikeness, we are best equipped to deal with the truth/reality about any given issue. To redeem human interaction in our churches and communities, to be spiritual leaders, we must become students of Jesus in kingdom living, learning to live presently as he would if he were alive now.

In no particular order, here are some practices that can lead your church to conversations not of separation, but of heaven:

Cultivate modesty and humility. These do not imply weakness or compromise. They are the embodiment, in the inspiring words of Tom Wright, of an "epistemology of love," a way of knowing that works for the good of others, not to gain power over them.

Believe in and search for *truth*. As Christians, we of all people should know that *there is a way things are* independent of our considerations of it. I am indebted to both Dallas Willard and Tom Wright for seeing the practical and religious value of *reality*, while being willing to be critical of my grasp of it. Growth implies an invitation to notice when one is wrong. Maturity comes as we welcome others lovingly to the table of investigation.

We all see through a glass darkly—but we can see better when others can teach us. Everything is fallen, including cognition. Everything is being redeemed—including the ability to see reality and to deal with it appropriately. For now, we may only be able to see enough to love God, neighbor and enemy. That is enough truth for most human interactions. Begin with loving God and others and then search for all the truth you can possibly get!

Seek redemptive interactions. These shift from being opportunities for *victory* and become prospects for *discovery*. The Church is one body, moving in parts toward cosmic, eternal truth. In this body, we are imperfect in every way, including our supposed knowledge. As long as we are trying to triumph over others, we will rule out arguments for the sake of heaven. When we are seeking discovery—to be closer and closer to *God's rightness*—we value others instead of separating from them.

If you read the news at all, I encourage you to add to your newsfeed two sources that aid intellectual due diligence and thus intellectual integrity: All Sides and The Flip Side. They both will help keep you connected to *the others* who help us see reality.

Christians, above all, should be searchers of truth. This means we engage in open-hearted listening and model it for others. This is not seeking the muddy middle; it is not giving up your own thoughts. It is not a slippery slope to compromise. Listening simply seeks improved knowledge of truth through multiple perspectives. I am (in)famous for asking questions. Just ask any of my teachers, mentors or coaches. My goal is to seek first to understand and only then to be understood.

To do this, to redeem human interaction, I must think of

others as better than myself (Philippians 2:3). I must have confidence that truth is not impossible nor merely a will to power. Truth is a gift to steward.

We know this in many areas of life. We trust labels with a "sell by" date. We rely on dermatologists to accurately discern a mole from melanoma. We have confidence in the engineering and manufacturing of the steering wheels in our cars.

But when it comes to religion, political parties, legislation and government, increasingly we move quickly to naming, pigeon-holing and contempt.

You, a Christian leader, are alive today in this social context by the grace and wisdom of God. It is no accident of history (Jeremiah 1:5; Psalm 8:4-8; Psalm 139:13-18). As a person with an elite-level graduate degree, you have been given talents to invest on behalf of conversations *for the sake of heaven*.

Keep at it, little by little. Model thoughtfulness and charity in sermons. Never treat a contrarian with contempt. Try to discern the emotion, the gut-level feeling that underlies jarring comments. Respond with: "I am genuinely curious and open. Can you tell me more?" Be willing to take the risk of sharing your thoughts, respectfully, of course. Make falsehood the enemy. Make conversation partners your allies in mutually seeking the truth.

If you need a model: Jesus washed the feet of Peter, James and John—and Judas. As we mimic Jesus in our life and work, we will redeem the Church's social discourse one conversation at a time.