

A Prelude to Science and Faith at the Crossroads of Creation: The Cultural Conflict Between Conservative and Liberal

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I love science the way some people love baseball. Science, like baseball, is a discipline, a construct, a way of apprehending, or knowing, of getting one's arms around this wonderful world. I also love Jesus and his book. I've read his book for 35 plus years and I love it more than ever, the way I love my wife and kids. It seems to me the culture war between science and faith is much overblown. But even worse, the noise of this conflict has become an entrenched obstacle to the spread of the gospel among those whose view of life is formed by the story of science, which in one way or another is a whole lot of people, science being one of the primary stories of our culture. This pains me, especially, because it all seems so unnecessary. The story of Jesus and the story of science, by my feeble reckoning at least, are more compatible than commonly portrayed. We won't be able to engage prophetically with science--our real task--until we drop the posture of protest we've too often assumed toward science, at least here in the United States.

One of the places where science and faith are thought to be in conflict is in their respective accounts of creation. Christians have fallen into four points of view on this issue: young earth creationism, old earth creationism, intelligent design, and theistic evolution. (A fifth category might apply to the largest group: "I don't know and couldn't care less.")

Since I know, love, and respect those who hold each of these points of view, I plan to speak of each when the time comes with respect. You'll know my leanings before we're done, but one thing I want to affirm: **what holds us together is the shared treasure we have in Jesus, not our particular views about how science and faith fit.** If it weren't essential to address because of our mission to reach the heart of Ann Arbor and surrounding communities, I wouldn't bother. But we don't have that luxury.

We live in one of the science centers of the world. Home to a major scientific research institution in the University of Michigan and a major educator of future educators in Eastern Michigan University, this area's economy is centered on research and applied science of many kinds. Go into any drugstore's magazine section and right there along with *People* and *Time* and "O" you'll find *Scientific American*, *Discover*, *Nature*, and *National Geographic*. Even those who can't make their way around $E = MC^2$ trust the scientific enterprise and the story that lies behind it, which means they implicitly mistrust those who present themselves as conscientious objectors to mainline features of the story they trust. The way we

engage the story of science, in other words, has a huge impact on the gospel gaining (or losing) a voice around here.

I hope when we're finished with this series, you won't feel the slightest obligation to agree with my particular leanings on how science and faith intersect. I do hope you'll love Jesus more, have a deeper appreciation for his book, and a wider love for world he loves. So that together, we'll be more useful to Jesus in his passionate pursuit of the world his father made and holds in being still.

Clearing Out Some Background Noise: The Cultural Conflict Between Conservative and Liberal

Before we begin this series proper, I want to address an underlying issue with a potent impact on the question of science and faith. It's to do with the cultural conflict pitting conservatives against liberals. On the whole, those who lean conservative tend to be more suspicious of mainstream science. For example conservatives tend to have more objections to the science behind climate change and evolution. Those who lean liberal [or progressive, which seems to be the preferred tag currently] are more accepting. This cultural divide generates a lot of background noise surrounding the conversation about science and faith at the crossroads of creation. It's the source of much bristling, fear, and misunderstanding.

Before we can have a truly loving and useful conversation about science and faith, we have to understand that conservative-liberal tribal loyalties are superceded, or ought to be, by our loyalty to Jesus. Because of our loyalty to Jesus, we hold more lightly to these other labels. I'm not saying drop them entirely, though that's an option; I know devout Jesus people who are actively conservative and actively liberal and I think they walk that out with integrity. What I'm speaking about is a matter of the heart more than a particular social or political alignment.

Have you ever been shocked by this saying of Jesus? "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple." (Lk. 14: 26) He had a way with words didn't he? We know Jesus didn't take his own advice literally, because he loved his mom. Which is a hint he meant "hate" in a special sense. He was using provocative, disturbing language to provoke and disturb us at the level of our most cherished loyalties. Matthew presents this saying of Jesus a bit differently than Luke--Jesus likely said it both ways on different occasions. "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Mt. 10:37) Our loyalty to him supercedes every other loyalty, including holy ones.

We human beings, social critters that we are, form loyalties don't we? To family, church, nation, political party, ways of looking at the world. We'd like to think all our "point of view" loyalties (politics, religion, etc) are strictly objective. But that's not how we human beings work. Our politics, our religion, our point of view on ourselves and the world around us--all of it is part of a web of relationships and loyalties that can't be easily disentangled.

The restructuring that begins when you call Jesus "Lord" is primarily a loyalty revolution. It's not at the core a moral revolution because Christianity at the core is not moralism--though it has profound moral implications. No, at the core, faith in Jesus is just that, faith in Jesus. Every other attachment, holy or not, it matters not, must bow, become subordinate to this attachment to him. Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, and every other thing, influence, identification and loyalty is not. And without all those "is nots" Jesus is not Lord. This is not a minor theme either; it's the heart of the gospel.

When Jesus hit the scene, Israel had several different communities which shared different points of view. They were more than religious parties, because, especially in that day, religion was of a piece with politics and social standing and everything else. These groupings included Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and an emerging renewal movement led by John the Baptist. Each of these groups commanded loyalty. In a God-centered culture like ancient Israel, you were loyal to your party believing this was the way to be loyal to God. But Jesus, so far as we know, was a card-carrying member of none of these groups. Not even the Baptists. He transcended all the pre-existing loyalties.

Paul addressed the issue of loyalty groups within the Jesus movement community of Corinth: "My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'" (1 Cor. 1: 11-12)

It's not very likely that anyone in the church would have said, "I'm for Paul, not Jesus." Paul was discerning something more subtle in the spiritual climate of the community. It was for each person to examine whether their own identification with Paul or their leaning toward Apollos was off kilter.

Paul had a phrase for this phenomenon. He called "party spirit" and it was a "work of the flesh"--meaning a human tendency, rooted in that part of our humanity still in hiding from God. "Now the works of the flesh are plain....strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit...I warn you, as I warned you before that those who do such thing shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5: 19-21) Party spirit is different than what happens on campus every weekend.

In the book of Acts, the Pharisees are referred to as a "party." "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.'" (Acts 15: 5-6) "Party," in this sense, refers to a group of people with a shared outlook, set of convictions, and agenda. Again, we note the presence of parties within the earliest Jesus communities.

All of this is background to my main point of application. "Anyone who loves father and mother more than me....is not worthy of me." If Jesus felt the need to speak so strongly, so provocatively, to our deepest held and most holy of loyalties--to father and mother, kith and kin--wouldn't he speak thus to the loyalties we call "conservative" and "liberal"?

Fifty years ago mainline Protestant churches (e.g. Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, etc.) were dominant in our culture. If you wanted to be seen in church on Sunday to advance your career at General Motors, you went to one of these churches, because they defined mainstream American society at that time. Many influential theologians and clergy as well as local congregations in this family of churches went through a rediscovery phase regarding the social dimensions of the gospel and the biblical concern for justice. In society at large they saw this gospel concern echoed in the movements of the left. Loyalty bonds to these movements were formed that were perilously close to idolatrous: bowing before something which is not God as if it were. This amounted to a kind of trademark infringement on the Jesus brand one might say.

Today, the dominant churches in American society are evangelical. (Those who would identify with one of my heroes, Billy Graham, as a chief spokesperson.) Alan Wolfe, Professor of American Politics and Public Policy, Boston College, has said that evangelicals represent the mainstream of American society in our day. (See the interview with Alan Wolfe in Cutting Edge magazine, Vol. 8, no. 2) The Vineyard as a movement is part of the far flung evangelical movement. It's no stretch to say that evangelicalism as a whole, especially in the suburban part of American society, leans conservative.

As Jesus people, and as those with any sense of historical perspective, we should be very nervous about this. He's our man, but it's his Brand! We are not at liberty to drag his brand under the banner of our loyalties. So we need to be willing to place our conservative and liberal loyalties in open hands, and bend the knee before Jesus and say, "My deepest loyalty, sir, is to you, and to you alone. If that offends the liberal agenda so be it. If it offends the conservative agenda so be it. And if these agendas are distorting in any way my grasp of your agenda, help me Lord." You might think of this as a Prayer for a Recovering Partisan.

Because as sure as Jesus is Lord he transcends them both. And if we don't see that, we've gotten too cozy with a cat who ain't Aslan.

How might one discern the party spirit in one's own soul?

1. The party spirit makes it difficult for us to see how "the other side" might be closer to the heart of God on any issue. We engage the world as we engage our marriages too often: we constantly give our side the benefit of the doubt, while we hold the other side to an exacting standard. No wonder our side always comes out smelling like a rose!

2. The party spirit produces little or no sense of "internal dissonance" with our chosen tribe. If we lean conservative we may listen to Rush or Shawn Hannity and rarely cringe. This is not a good sign. Or leaning liberal, see a Michael Moore film and it never occurs to us, "Maybe it's not all gospel truth." If you never feel the wind, one of two things is happening. Either the wind is not blowing, or you're blowing right along with it.

When Jesus asserts his claim there's a cost. We feel at home with God but we also feel at least a little like "a stranger in a strange land" wherever else we find ourselves. (Until the heavenly Jerusalem is our home.)

3. The party spirit thrives on contempt. Contempt is one of seven basic facial expressions that have been identified as universal: the same expressions convey the same thing in every known human culture. Contempt stands out among the seven basic facial expressions because it's the only one involving facial asymmetry, that sneering lift of one side of the upper lip.

If you find yourself slipping into contempt for the other side of the conservative-liberal divide---I don't mean strong disagreement, I mean contempt, an internal inclination to dismiss another human being out of hand--then you're D.U.I: **disciple under the influence of the party spirit.**

Contempt has always been the guardian of the party line. Why do partisans on either side use it so much? Because it works! It's powerful and primal and keeps people in their place. With a look, a gesture, a word it says, "don't you dare think, do, say, or be that!"

Contempt works because it offers us something. If we feel bad about our own brokenness; if we are bothered by the gap between our values and our behavior (and who isn't?) contempt offers easy relief. All we have to do is project the negative feelings we have for ourselves onto a chosen group of others and we feel immediate relief. It's like instant sanctification, but without the cost of holiness!

But Jesus--yes, "gentle Jesus, meek and mild"--came down hard on contempt! "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother [some manuscripts add, 'without cause'] will be subject to judgment. Anyone who says to his brother 'Raca' [an Aramaic term of contempt] is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fires of hell." (Mt. 5: 21-22)

Why such a strong warning against contempt? Because contempt strikes at the heart of the gospel. The Jesus movement, after all, was organized around love of enemies. Did you realize that? The entire Jesus movement is organized around - -has as its defining center--love of enemies. Why? Because Jesus is "God's love for God's enemies" in flesh appearing. We've all set ourselves, one way or another, against God. But God, in Jesus, is for us, not against us. It's one of his names in fact, Immanuel, God for us.

But, and it's a big one: To say God is for us means his fierce and gentle and merciful and unrelenting love is for us. It doesn't mean he's "on our side" over and against "their side."

When Paul speaks of various factions at work in Corinth, they include those who say, "I am for Paul, for Apollos, for Cephas...." But there's one other group. Those who say "I'm for Christ...." What could that possibly mean? Isn't that the group we're all supposed to identify with? How could it be a faction? Perhaps, and this is just a theory, perhaps there were people who felt so right, so correct, so balanced, so orthodox, so *Christian*, that surely God was on their side, over and against the other misguided bozos in Corinth.

That my friend, is the party spirit; it's not a spirit of faith in the love of God for sinners, which is the only love we're privy to; it's a spirit of presumption: because I'm with the right group, God must be on my side.

Let's wrap this up with a bedtime Bible story.

The night was thick around Joshua, the leader of a pilgrim nation. Joshua was frightened and lonely. His mentor, Moses, was gone, leaving him in charge of a nation that wasn't yet a nation, because it didn't yet have a homeland. And it was the task of Joshua to lead the people into their homeland. Well and good. Except the homeland was already occupied by fierce warriors who worshipped fierce gods and were nothing to mess with.

Joshua had already led the people across the river Jordan, so there was no turning back now. Everything was solemn in those dramatic days: the Lord had

the men--all of them survivors of the wilderness wanderings, all of them orphans, because their parents had died on the pilgrimage and it was just this new generation and Joshua and Caleb--the Lord had them undergo the rite of circumcision. And then he had them, men and women together, celebrate the solemn Passover meal, with the sacrifice of a lamb for every household and the eating of bitter herbs to remind them of their history as slaves in Egypt.

What was next? Joshua didn't know, except he knew it would take courage, every ounce he had. He knew it meant doing battle with those fierce warriors who worshipped those fierce gods. Rumors were circulating that these people were willing to sacrifice their own children to these gods and that the walls of Jericho had in their foundations the remains of such awful sacrifices, which is why it was thought they were walls not likely to be breached.

Walking alone at night, pondering what the morning would bring, Joshua saw in the distance the shadowy figure of a man, so Joshua approached, and called out in the words of the watchman, "Are you for us, or for our enemies?"

That's when the man turned to face Joshua; a dread he'd never felt before fell upon him then. "Neither," the stranger replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence: "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" he asked.

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." And Joshua did so. And then, and only then, did Joshua get his orders, the orders that paved the way for him to lead his people into the land of promise. And from that day on, Joshua understood that though the Lord was with him, the Lord was not on his side.

The party spirit--it's the spirit of our age is it not? and too much the spirit of the church and our own hearts--is a spirit only purged when we have an encounter with the holy God like Joshua had.

Here's why I bring it up. Ours is a new day, and this is a new generation and the times, like Joshua's times, they are a changin' and they are perilous. The gospel is spreading like wildfire in the developing world, with growth rates that are truly astounding and without historical precedent. But in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America, the gospel is not making inroads beyond the Bible Belt, and even there it's stuck. Church attendance has remained more or less stagnant for decades, even though signs of spiritual hunger are high and a new generation is here, bigger than the baby boom. Scholars of religion and western history are suggesting that we may be in a once-every-500 year "hinge of history." The project called loosely, "modernity" is coming to a close, and the era that is so little understood it can only be called "post-modernity" is upon us.

Those on the outside of faith looking in, think our religion is just part of the background noise they hear on cable TV and talk radio hour after hour. He who makes the biggest noise often gets to define a movement in a noisy culture like ours. People on the outside looking in have a clearer idea what Christians are against than what they are for. And it's not all the media's fault.

One of the things people on the outside of faith looking in assume we're against, or that we fear, or that we hold under a magnifying glass of suspicion, and not without evidence do they assume this, is science. Now if you think science tells a pretty good story, why listen to a story that often seems to be profiled in protest against your pretty good story?

Whether or not science and faith at the intersection of creation interests you, there are two reasons to pay attention to this. First, we are affected, and properly so, by the story of science. I hope we're not living our lives like ostriches with our heads in the sand. We have all been moved, or shaped, if only subconsciously, by the story science tells about the world we live in. As people of faith, it's our job (not the biologist's job, per se) to integrate this story of science with our story, which is the story of God in search of humanity.

Here's a second reason to tend to this question of science and faith: our task is to engage the culture as Jesus himself did, sympathetically, as one called alongside the culture, to transform the culture from within. Remember, Jesus reserved his strongest protest, not for the common people, for the people who were on the outside of religion looking in, but for the religious establishment. Why is it then, that so much of the Christian protest is aimed elsewhere in our society? We've got things almost exactly backwards. We need to listen to the defining stories (science) of those who are on the outside of faith looking in as sympathetically as possible, rather than as defensively as possible, so that when the time comes, we can engage this story with the prophetic and transformative voice of the gospel. If you think we're already doing this well, then this series will be very disappointing and quite possibly a colossal waste of your precious time.

Here's what I hope and with every fiber of my being: The old way of partisan politics and partisan religion and the witches brew of the two combined is fast losing it's effectiveness in American society. We've gone as far as we can go on that horse, or donkey, or elephant. The so called "culture war" between left and right is not, or is no longer, the war we're called to fight. We're not going to receive the kingdom so long as we carry that spirit with us. [Which does not mean you can't be a Christian and a conservative with integrity. Or that you can't be a Christian and a liberal with integrity. Jesus needs a presence in both of these tribes. It just means your loyalty to Jesus must supercede them both.]

So, in a manner of speaking, the church is in a time like Joshua's time. We haven't been this way before and the way forward is not clear. We're pacing the night with Joshua, not knowing how to move into the territory promised, but knowing something has to give and soon. And because it's so dark, when we see the Lord, it's not always so clear who it is. And when we ask "Are you for us or for our enemies?" we, like Joshua, may be surprised by his answer.

"Are you for us conservatives, against those liberals? Are you for us liberals against those conservatives? Are you for us Christians, against the rest of mankind?"

"None of the above!"...Lord, I didn't know it was you! What shall I do? "Take off your shoes! This is holy ground, and the shoes that got you here are the not ones that will take you there."

Unless we have an encounter like that, that scares the party spirit right out of our petty hearts, we're not getting any new orders and we're not getting anywhere.

But as soon as we take off our shoes and fall on our face, we're on our way.

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