

# THE GENIUS OF THE “AND”

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## Making America Glorious Again

Text: Psalm 11:3; John 1:14

### Why Good People Divide

In this week when we remember the anniversary of our nation’s founding, I’d like to reflect with you about what unites us as an American people and about how we can work together to form a more perfect union. I know that, for some of you, your “Whacko-Detector” just went off. You’re thinking: “*Are you crazy? What unites us? Have you not noticed, Dan, that we’re at each other’s throats in America today?*” Yes, I’ve noticed. Not since the Civil War, have we the people seemed so bitterly divided.

And that’s why it feels urgent to me to talk about where we come together. Whether it’s in a marriage, workplace, or a nation’s life, one of the surest ways to make progress in times of conflict is to remember our common values. There’s something about recovering a sense of our shared foundations, that often gives us the footing needed to make our way forward on the difficult issues that have confounded us. So, let me give this a try, and see if it might be helpful to you and others you know.

As I’ve shared on another occasion, one of the most provocative books I’ve read in recent years is Jonathan Haidt’s, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND: Why Good People Divide Over Politics & Religion*. Professor Haidt contends that underlying many of the debates of our day is the passion people feel for six major values found the world over. In other words, you can go to any culture, in any place, at any time in history, and you will find these six values (he calls them “Moral Foundations”) being expressed in some way. Haidt is not a religious man, but if ever there was empirical evidence of the character of a common Creator who has stamped his image into humanity, I think Haidt is on to it.

Today, I want to look very briefly at each of these moral foundations. Let me stress that I do NOT expect you to remember all of this! I just want you to walk away with a solid sense that there may be some very good values underlying the behavior or positions of some of the people with whom you most bitterly disagree right now. And if all of us could remember that, it might just lower the emotional temperature enough to enable us to have some conversations about policies that get us somewhere. Will go on this journey with me?

### The Moral Foundations We Share

Alright. The first moral intuition embedded in human nature is the impulse to **CARE** for people in the face of real or potential harm. Whether our passion is to care for the unborn baby and the wounded war vet, or for the urban poor and the immigrant child, we all believe we are called to protect the vulnerable and true victims. If a family shows

up at our border or doorstep, fleeing from starvation or terror and we don't feel care for them, something is wrong with our moral sensibility. We're supposed to provide help to those who genuinely can't help themselves. Jesus declares how much God himself identifies with the Care value when he said: **"I was hungry / thirsty and you gave me something to eat / drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick / in prison and you looked after me / came to visit me... Whatever you do (or do not do) for one of the least of these, you do (or do not do) for me"** (Matt 25:31-46).

The second moral foundation at play in our disputes today is the value of **LIBERTY**. There is not an American who, at the core, does not want to see basic human rights respected and freedoms extended. We all believe that people should be released from unjust bondage and relieved of undue burdens. We may differ on whether forbidding someone from carrying an AK-47 is a violation of "basic" rights or whether a particular commerce regulation constitutes an "undue" burden. But we are essentially united in being *for* liberty and *against* oppression. In this, we stand with Moses and the Psalmist and the Prophets and certainly Jesus, who said: **"The Spirit is upon me... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and release for the oppressed"** (Luk 4:18).

The moral foundation of **FAIRNESS** matters to all of us too. Some of us are incensed these days by the thought of all the "takers" sucking the life from the "makers," killing the cow that provides the milk. Others of us are outraged at the thought of all the "makers who ARE takers," living the high life, hiding their profits, while the little person works hard all day and struggles to feed the family. Wherever we are on that continuum, it's the sense that some people are *cheating* that works us up. We'd like to stop free-riding and abuse by the lazy or the powerful. We think that everybody ought to have fair opportunity and fair reward from their labor. Isn't this so?

The Bible agrees with us in this: **"If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure"** (Prov 29:14). **"The Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy"** (Psalm 140:10). But, **"If a man will not work, he shall not eat"** (2 Th 3:10). **"A man reaps what he sows"** (Galatians 6:7). **"The worker deserves his wages"** (Luke 10:7). Somewhere in this balance lies fairness, and we need to keep struggling to find it.

The fourth of the six moral foundations found the world over is **LOYALTY**. As someone has said, human beings are "groupish" creatures. We find identity and security in belonging to a "tribe" of one kind or another. We rise to defend our tribe against threats and competitors. Our Human Resources Director is a Packers fan, and his life is at risk every day here! We'll often be loyal to our clique, our family, our party, sorority, or platoon even when it is against our immediate self-interest. Some have even been known to lay down their life for their friends (John 15:13). Those on the right and left today are fighting over which group deserves our greatest loyalty. Should our focus be on the welfare of this nation or on the wider community of man? Should we focus on

jobs here or on the development of a global economy with power to lift even more? Is the arrival of new people in our country a threat or a blessing?

It's hard to see straight or together on these things. Sometimes the ties of loyalty that bind us also blind us. Our groupishness brings out our most selfish, violent tribal side. But this capacity for commitment to others is one of the most beautiful things about us. **"Don't let loyalty and faithfulness leave you"** (Prov 3:3). **"Though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other"** (Romans 12:5). **"Let's work for the good of all... and especially for those in the household of faith"** (Gal 6:10), say the Scriptures.

Alongside these other moral foundations lies the value of **AUTHORITY**. This value is eroding as more and more of us view life through the lens of individual autonomy. It erodes further every time we see authority abused. But deep within many of us lies this respect, nonetheless, for the role that laws and hierarchies play in ordering society, cultivating virtue, and protecting the weak. I don't know where I'd be without the elders, mentors, and other authorities who pushed me to do things I'd never have done (and be less now without) – or restrained my selfishness, when that was needed.

God intended for authority to be a blessing. **"Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you"** (Ex 20:12). Or, **"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord"** (Col 3:20). Or, **"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for... [these] authorities that exist have been established by God"** (Rom 13:1-2). Let me be clear that when authority is abused, it should be opposed. We should fight to repeal or reform unjust laws or make better ones. But a nation without respect for authority or a rule of law devolves into chaos.

The final moral foundation I want to touch on today is the value of **SANCTITY**. Simply put, Sanctity is the moral intuition that some things are holy, pure, or sacred and should, therefore, be protected against degradation. In God's Word we read: **"Be holy because I, your God, am holy"** (Lev 19:2). **"Do not give dogs what is sacred or cast your pearls before swine"** (Matt 7:6). **"Among you there must not even be a hint of immorality, impurity, or greed, because these are improper for God's holy people"** (Eph 5:3). So, **"Keep yourself pure"** (1 Tim 5:22).

The Bible supplies a list of sacred things – human life, Sabbath time, the covenant of marriage, the innocence of children, the creation God called us to steward. Some people feel we should widen the circle of the sacred to embrace other things, ranging from the National Anthem to only certain kinds of music to other forms of marriage. Because people have such strong feelings of protectiveness or repugnance around sanctity issues, or because their sense of care, liberty, and fairness affect how they look at these subjects, conversations about such issues are especially intense and difficult.

## Three Steps Forward

Now, as I said at the start, I don't expect you to remember all of this. I've laid all this out to support the major headline I do hope you'll take with you: Remember that much of the conflict we see in America today is a struggle over how and where to express positive values – moral foundations that the Bible teaches are highly important to God and to the well-being of his creation. Research indicates that political or social progressives, tend to particularly cherish the three values on the left – care, liberty, and fairness and see many issues in light of those. Conservatives also esteem those same values, but often look at issues through the lens of the rightward values of loyalty, authority, and purity. Libertarians -- the middle.

I tell you all this in the hope that you and I as followers of Jesus will help to lower the Culture of Outrage that is dominating our society today. Certain elements in the news media or blogosphere will tell you that all the people who think this way or that way are stupid, evil, or both. Maybe some of them are, but not most. Keep in mind that many of the people with the microphones in our time, depend for their livelihood on keeping you whipped up with anxiety and anger, and tuned in to them. They'll tell you that you can't be awake enough to the horror of what those other people are doing. They've got a lot of competition in the communications realm, so they need to get louder and shriller just to hold their marketshare. Be suspicious of them. Turn off the TV more. Leave Reddit behind. Read books. Talk personally to people more. Listen to them. Share your concerns.

Finally: Embrace "the Genius of the AND." Business writer Jim Collins popularized that term after discovering that one of the secrets to the highest performing and most enduring companies was their unwillingness to accept simple EITHER/OR approaches to moving forward. These visionary companies, writes Collins, *"reject having to make a choice between stability OR progress; cult-like cultures OR individual autonomy; home-grown managers OR fundamental change; conservative practices OR big hairy audacious goals... Instead, they embrace... the paradoxical view that allows them to pursue both A AND B at the same time."* And the companies that operated this way achieved results fifteen times higher than average organizations did.<sup>1</sup>

The early church noticed this about Jesus. A lot of the religious people of Christ's day were EITHER/OR people. They figured you had to be a righteous person OR a friend of sinners, but you couldn't be both. You had to value God's sabbath law OR be willing to help somebody on a Saturday, but you couldn't do both. You worshipped God on the temple mount in Jerusalem as the Jews did OR on Mount Gerazim as the Samaritans did, but certainly not both. People in the first century had settled into camps and parties, each majoring on particular values to the exclusion of other values. Sticking to your value-set and that of your people gave you security and certainty and an ability to know who was in OR out, good OR bad.

And then along comes Jesus. Here's a guy who can't seem to make up his mind on his values. He teaches against sin AND eats with sinners. He proclaims himself the most high God AND stoops to wash people's filthy feet. He loves the Law of God AND takes liberty to heal people on the Sabbath. Jesus prizes rest AND work. He exercises mercy AND judgment. He extends blessings AND sets boundaries... Jesus demonstrates freedom AND discipline... Vulnerability AND strength... tolerance AND confrontation. Watching Jesus live was like watching a great speed skater or cyclist in action. You see the powerful muscles of his character driving down on one value, then shifting to the other side. It is this continually shifting placement of his weight on one side or another of an almost paradoxical tension that gives Christ's life its extraordinary balance and powerful progression. His most beloved disciple summed it up in awe: **"And we beheld his GLORY... full of grace AND truth." (John 1:14).**

No wonder even Christians struggle to agree on immigration policy or many of the other complex issues of our day. It would be admittedly easier to follow an EITHER / OR God. It would be a relief if we could simply choose between compassion for the stranger, mercy for women and children, shelter for the exile – all such prominent themes in the Bible; OR if we could isolate instead on the value of restoring gates and walls, taking care of our own families, respecting the rule of law – also recurring themes in scripture. It is so much more demanding to follow the God of the Glorious AND – to chart out a personal position or public policy that is full of grace AND truth. But if we are truly going to follow the Jesus we meet in the Bible (rather than the Jesus of our party, pundit, or preference), then this is our charge.

Let me close with a story. Back in the 1990's, Amy and I lived in a San Diego community where Lloyd Bentsen, the former U.S. Treasury Secretary and four-term Democratic senator from Texas, had a home. On one occasion, I passed by his table at a local restaurant and paused to say hello. The senator showed the kind of cordial distance that public people do when interrupted in a personal moment, until I asked him if he'd known my great uncle, Peter Dominick, a three-term senator from Colorado and chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

At the mention of Peter's name, the Texan softened visibly and he invited me to sit down! "Your uncle and I were great friends," Bentsen said. "In fact, my wife still keeps in touch you're your aunt, Nancy... We sat on different sides of the aisle and sometimes knocked heads in debate. But then we'd go out for a beverage afterward. We'd talk about our families, what we agreed on, and what goals we could work on together." The old man's eyes smiled as he recalled that glorious partnership. And then they got sadder. Senator Bentsen said: "Now, things are really changing." Twenty years later, the change to a culture of outrage has really hurt us as a nation. But you and I are servants of the Lord who is full of both grace AND truth. Let's help make America GLORIOUS again.

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Collins & Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 342 pages