

# 2nd Opinion: A new way of being Christian

July 6, 2012

Three decades ago, debates over abortion, the size of the federal government, the future of the traditional family and religious liberty galvanized the evangelical faithful. Many followed divisive leaders into the culture wars with the promise that voting for "moral" leadership would end abortion, protect traditional marriage and put our country on the right track.

---

How did that work? Not so well, it turns out.

Today, abortion remains legal, divisions over same-sex rights linger and we're still debating religious liberty. The federal government continues to expand, the economy is struggling and millions of Americans divorce each year. Christian Millennials are recognizing the flawed strategies and broken agendas embraced by their forebears. They've seen how the religious right (and the religious left, for that matter) used the Bible as a tool to gain political power and reduced the Christian community to little more than a voting bloc—and they are forging a different path.

"We are seeing head-snapping generational change," notes conservative columnist Michael Gerson. "The model of social engagement of the religious right is increasingly exhausted."

Thank God. A distinctive way of being Christian in the public square—a softer, less partisan way—is emerging. And this cultural change could be the thing our faith needs to survive.

Three primary shifts are occurring:

- **From partisan to independent.** Christians of yesteryear saw the two-party political system as an indispensable mechanism for promoting their values, but young Christians recognize the limitations and pitfalls of partisan politics. ✖

For example, a 2001 study of young evangelicals by the [Pew Research Center](#) found 55 percent were self-described Republicans. In 2007, only 40 percent remained in that category. Only one-fifth of the group who left the Republican Party migrated to the Democratic Party. The rest now describe themselves as "independents" or "unaffiliated."

This spring, at the [Q conference](#), a gathering of more than 700 young Christian leaders in Washington, a participant survey found 61 percent of participants claim they don't affiliate with either the right or left.

- **From a narrow agenda to a broader one.** An earmark of the culture wars was a tightly defined agenda, focused almost exclusively on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and, occasionally, religious liberty. There no longer is a strict hierarchy of arrangement in the minds of the emerging faithful, but rather a broad range of issues to which Christians must attend.

I've spoken with hundreds of young Christians, and one of the common denominators I encountered was the wide array of issues that enlivened them—caring for the environment, protecting the poor, waging peace, advocating for immigrants and, yes, protecting the unborn.

- **From divisive rhetoric to civil dialogue.** Americans in general are weary of the reactionary, angry, polemical language that stymies progress and the common good. Two-thirds of Americans believe we have a major problem with civility. More than seven in 10 agree social behaviors are ruder than before.

Christians are awakening to how our cultural coarseness has affected their own community. They've heard their leaders resort to extreme rhetoric,

insults and name-calling, whereby those who disagree are accused of being unpatriotic, pagans, baby-killers and anti-God. They recognize this trend has led to 70 percent of non-Christians ages 16 to 29 saying Christians are "insensitive to others," according to the Barna Group.

So Christians increasingly long for a substantive change in tone. This desire has led to efforts such as conservative Christian and Romney adviser Mark DeMoss' [Civility Project](#) and liberal Christian Jim Wallis' [Civility Covenant](#), which was signed by more than 100 Christian leaders and denominational heads. Today's Christians are not seeking ways to "divide and conquer" but to "partner and achieve." Unafraid to collaborate with those they may disagree with on other issues, young Christians and their leaders are showing up throughout the public square and working on common-ground agendas.

One can only imagine how Christian culture warriors such as Richard Land, Tony Perkins and James Dobson must feel as these shifts gain traction and their power wanes. In response, some have decried the shift while others deny it is occurring.

As Andrew Sullivan noted in *Newsweek*, organized religion is in decline, and Christians exercise far less influence over society than even a decade ago. This trend is due, in part, to Christians' partisan, divisive and uncivil engagement in the public square. So I say bring on this new brand of political engagement. Because crucifying the culture war model could be the only hope for resurrecting American Christianity.

*-Jonathan Merritt is author of A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars. A version of this column appeared in USA Today and was distributed by Religion News Service.*