

Commentary: Finding common ground with different poles

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This article is 8 of 9 in the [Leading from the Center series](#) by three writers.

When the North African theologian Tertullian (c. A.D. 155-220) posed the now famous question, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?” in *Prescriptions against Heretics* 7, he intentionally was contrasting the “sacred” with the “secular” and divine revelation with philosophical speculation.

Paul, the apostle whom Tertullian loved, also could think in opposing pairs. He did so, for example, when he juxtaposed light and darkness, day and night, and waking and sleeping (see 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; compare 2 Corinthians 7:14).

Jesus, the Lord whom Paul loved, was equally apt in pitting, for example, truth against lies, night against darkness, and life against death (note John 8:44; 9:4-5; 11:25).

In concert with other ancient teachers, Jesus, Paul and Tertullian set believers (or insiders) over against unbelievers (or outsiders) in an effort to convey they were poles apart. A chasm, as it were, was fixed between the two (see Luke 16:26). In *Sesame Street* parlance: “One of these things is not like the other. Come on, can you tell which one?”

While such binary pairings, which also feature in the Old Testament (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 30:19; Psalm 1), are invaluable in shaping the identity and morality of believing communities, if used exclusively, an imbalance may develop, “a binary bias,” if you will.

Scripture, for example, instructs us not to be “squeezed into the world’s mold” (Romans 12:2), but it also calls us to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) and “to do good to all people” (1 Thessalonians 5:15; Galatians 6:10).

‘Why can’t we be friends?’

The subject of the present essay is not how Christians might best relate to non-Christians. Rather, this article focuses upon how Christ-followers who have decidedly different views on various matters might relate and cooperate with one another constructively, on which the above paragraphs arguably cast some valuable light.

Not a few of us who self-identify as centrists have experienced (sometimes significant) disagreement with sisters and brothers both to our left and right. As it happens, fundamentalism is not the preserve of either extreme conservatism or liberalism. Indeed, it can be sobering to realize how wide the divide between the two poles actually is.

If, for example, the “right” can fashion the Bible into an idol by making it in principle—if not practice—an object of worship, thereby turning the Trinity into Father, Son and Holy Scripture, the “left” can diminish or even dismiss God’s word.

To take another example, if the “right” engages in “civil religion” by dangerously conflating God and country, reducing God to a totem and wrapping the LORD in a national symbol, the “left” embraces a form of civic life that tends to privatize religion, cordoning it off from the public square.

Additionally, if the “right” has adopted wholesale a contemporary iteration of the “moral majority,” the “left” has jettisoned time-honored commitments to Judeo-Christian values.

Controversy and conflict between Christ-followers on the left and the right can grow especially acute over political affiliations, preferred media outlets and “hot button” ethical issues, not to mention a myriad of biblical and theological issues, some of which are foundational to “traditional, orthodox” Christianity—for example, how one perceives God and understands and speaks of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

Meeting in the middle for the good of the gospel

In forming my own theological convictional world and in relating to believers across the theological spectrum, I have benefited from something referred to as the “Wesleyan quadrilateral.”

This valuable approach to Christian life and faith posits the primacy and centrality of Scripture in shaping belief and behavior, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of tradition, reason and experience.

When seeking to find common ground with other Christ-followers, I start with Scripture, which I regard to be authoritative for matters of faith and practice. Common ground also might be found with other believers through the orthodox Christian tradition. Reason—though limited and tainted—and experience—though contextual and personal— also may assist when seeking to find a place to stand together.

The latter three, however helpful they may be, ultimately are—in my view and according to the Wesleyan quadrilateral—subject to Scripture, under which we must stand and seek to understand, as it does not interpret itself.

In my admittedly limited experience and exposure, I often have found it possible and profitable to collaborate with those who, arguably, are to my theological right when evangelistic emphases and efforts are in view. The

same has been true with large group gatherings, such as concerts, camps and conferences, and with times set aside for spiritual renewal, praise and prayer.

Meanwhile, I also have found it valuable and meaningful to join together with those who might be to my theological left to combat, for example, racism, poverty and ecological concerns and to support women in ministry, religious liberty and interreligious dialogue.

The previous two paragraphs are not necessarily meant to suggest the left has no interest in the former or the right in the latter. I simply am seeking to offer examples, upon which others might care to tweak or improve.

Not infrequently, “conservatives” and “progressives” can meet in the middle for common cause and gospel good. Centrist Christian educational institutions, denominations, organizations and congregations often are able to rise above polarities for the expansion of God’s kingdom and for the benefit of many.

Building bridges instead of blowing them up

Although I am no expert in bringing together people across theological divides and, arguably, can do a better job in doing so than I have done until now, I would like to offer a few suggestions for those who would care to engage in this painstaking work, which can be risky business.

1. *Be in contact and conversation with people who are not your theological clones.* If we are not careful, we can create theological echo chambers. We must resist the temptation to retreat to our own theological corners and playgrounds.

2. *Forego labelling and name-calling.* Vilifying the other to glorify oneself is

not helpful. We do well to remember people are far more complex than a simple label allows. As one wag once quipped, "God created people, and people create pigeonholes."

3. *Try to work through your theological differences with others in person or by Zoom, not on Twitter.* Small (Zoom) rooms are a better venue for working through conflict than social media.

4. *Relatedly, do not "cancel" those with whom you disagree and experience conflict.*

5. *Finally, remember those with whom you have theological differences are to be loved and prayed for, as they, too, were created in the image and likeness of God and are people for whom Christ died.*

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