

Blue Church and Red Church

We elected a President in 2004. The popular media finally got hip to the fact that religion affects people and we do vote according to our moral values. They also saw that there is a rift over the moral vision for our country. And just as there are red states and blue states, there are red Christians and blue Christians, red church and blue church.

Red church: abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research

Blue church: poverty, social justice, war, care for the environment

Few see morality as one list or the other. Most include both in their list of moral issues. But many put one group higher in importance than the other.

Coming of age in the 60's for me included dealing with culture conflicts. I remember people shouting "hell no, we won't go" and " America, love it or leave it." Some of that conflict was in church. I felt a fear then that conflict would undo my country, and worse, my church. Ever since then I've been trying to help people in my churches appreciate and learn from those with whom they disagreed, rather than subvert and counter-act each other. That election in 2004 again showed me the rift in our churches. Now I've come to realize that unless we help people learn from each other, we won't heal. The wounds block our ability to spread the Good News. I've also come to realize that mediation needs to include helping people identify and share their basic assumptions. Sharing reasons for their positions, even Biblical reasons, doesn't get at the basic values that are the real locus for their disagreements.

So I set to identifying some basic assumptions our people hold.

A pastor in my city stated in a sermon "Too many look for a belief system to support a gut instinct." He means they are not evaluating their gut instinct by classic Biblical values and Christian tradition. He also said "Why have liberal Christians decided to be antinomian in matters of personal morality?" They feel it doesn't matter what individual morals are. Personal behavior doesn't matter as much as social behavior.

We have learned from God of the sanctity of life. Genesis tells us that creation, including people, is "good". We are created in the image of God. God stopped Abraham from killing Issac. God led us past retaliation as a response to evil. Jesus resuscitated bodies and demonstrated the resurrection power of life over death. Life is Godly. But Christians, along with other Americans, disagree about what to do when the individual life seems to conflict with the communal life. Does the sanctity of human life refer to us as individuals or us as a group?

Red and Blue Christians

Why do some of us prioritize one list over the other? One reason is that some people define morality in personal terms and some in social terms.

- Those who feel financially stable are often more likely to define moral values in social terms and those who fear financial hardship are more likely to define moral values in personal terms. Those who are rich can afford to buy their way out of personal indiscretion, cover it up, or buy off those who are wounded. The poor cannot afford to buy their way out of the consequences of sexual sin. They have to take the pain.

- The consequences of social sin are too far away to understand for those who can't handle abstractions. Some have more mental tools to conceptualize than others. Some can appreciate perceptual distance, and can handle social concerns. Africans are just as real as my children. Some of us have limited perceptual distance, we can't see beyond our own bodies, so can't appreciate social concerns. My children are real, Africans are a distant foggy notion.
- Most people are not at a time in life, a developmental stage, where the needs of social groups take up much attention. They are dealing with the life tasks of adolescence or young adulthood or middle age that take all their attention. Personal moral indiscretion is more of a threat at their developmental stage than is social moral sin.
- Some Christians decide the soul is important and the body is not. What will happen to us after we die is more important than what is happening to us now. Therefore, poverty is not as immoral as sick sexuality. Sex is soul business, poverty is physical business.

Ecological righteousness is not as important as personal righteousness because ecology has to do with this world, personal behavior has to do with the next world. The crucial thing is acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior, being born again. This gets us to heaven. Our choices about politics, war, poverty, and the natural world are not crucial. The eternal matters more than the temporal. Personal life issues such as abortion, sexuality, end of life, etc. effect the soul, and therefore eternal salvation.

- Red Christians are more likely to be blue collar. Extended family lives nearby so more people will hold them accountable for their abortion or sexual affairs. Blue Christians who are more likely to be white collars have more personal privacy. Their social circle is more centered on career than family. People in their social circle are less interested in their personal lives. So they are less likely to be concerned about the consequences of personal sin.

Individual and Communal Faith

Personal faith and social faith are both necessary for spiritual maturity.

For personal faith, the emphasis is on me and my relationship to Christ. Evangelism invites individuals to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Discipleship teaches me and mine how to live better by Biblical principles. Mission is to make new churches that will make new Christians who accept Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Social action is charity to feed and clothe individuals so they will accept Christ as pL&S. What little justice concern there is organizes to convince government to protect me and mine from threats to the nuclear family. The independent evangelical churches that are growing teach personal faith.

Social faith emphasizes our relationship to Christ. Our commitment to God in Christ is lived in group behavior. Faith tells us to make daily decisions according to what is most just for all. How we spend our time and money, how we vote, who we empower, how we live is based on God's love for the world, not just me, mine, and my country. Our identity is as members of community more than individuals. We do faith with others, or it is not faith.

Those whose chief faith identity is more individual are more likely to choose the red morality list. Those whose faith identity is more communal are more likely to choose the blue list.

Moral Values

Joe Klein in Time Magazine quotes Pew research. It finds that moral values of the voters also included straight talk, personal qualities, the way people live their lives. Bush scored higher on these. He says the "middle class squeeze" identified by John Edwards as mom and dad working more, falling behind economically and spending less time with their kids, means that Middle Americans need faith and strength. They want leadership from someone who is more likely to counteract the influences in society that will hurt their kids, the drugs and media sex messages. The moral absolutes of red religion give comfort in the "middle class squeeze". Republican strategists understood this, Democratic strategists did not. Bush gave signals he cared about this, Kerry did not. Kerry used symbols from the weird & threatening parts of society (Hollywood & pop music), Bush did not. The very people who pay for Hollywood and pop and drugs, voted for someone to protect them from it. The fact that a president can't do that doesn't matter. By voting, they can pretend they've done something about the threat to moral values. Then they don't have to do it themselves.

Double minded Americans live with contradictions:

- Those who fear losing their jobs to China and Mexico buy the cheaper goods made there.
- Those who vote according to moral values make "Desperate Housewives" and "CSI" the most watched TV shows.
- Those who vote out of fear of terrorism are least likely to be attacked. New York City, one of only two places to be attacked by terrorists, voted overwhelmingly for John Kerry.
- Those who sport yellow ribbons in support of our troops don't want their son or daughter going to Iraq. Recruiting is down.
- Those who don't want indefinite prison terms for sex offenders don't want them living in their neighborhood.
- Those who want limited government want more rules governing personal behavior.

Why do people concerned with personal morals watch immorality on TV?

Herbert Gans, author of Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste says "For some people it's a case of 'I am moral, therefore I can watch the most immoral show.'" Gary Schneeberger, senior manager of issues at Focus on the Family tells us "History has shown that even people who could be described as values voters are prone to sinful behavior and watching representations of sinful behavior". (Quoted in NYTimes, Nov. 22, 2004 p. A23)

When they've voted for the "moral" candidate, they feel less likely to be contaminated by the culture, and feel immune personally. They've inoculated the culture, now they can feed the virus again. They've done right, now doing the wrong isn't so harmful. Or, in terms of the classic Protestant complaint, they've confessed, now they can sin again.

Why, in a country where so many are Christians who vote according to moral values, don't the God shows do well on TV? It is because we can get God in public, at church, so we have to get our titillation in private, at home. Folk, blues and country music express the classic American "Saturday night/Sunday morning" dichotomy. We need to both raise hell and summon heaven. We need to party and pray. The more intense the

Saturday night indiscretions, the more intense the Sunday morning confessions. TV is rowdy Saturday night, politics is righteous Sunday morning. We want government to protect us from our dangerous side.

Other reasons

There are more reasons I've heard for choosing one set of moral issues over the other:

- Dodge to responsibility

I've heard each side claim that the other side uses their set of issues to dodge God given tasks. The left sees righties protecting family with rules for personal morality so they don't have to care about social problems. The right sees lefties crying about social issues so they don't have to feel guilty about personal sin.

- Education

White collars who have received a post high school education based on the philosophical values of the enlightenment have different spiritual needs than their blue collar cousins. Sociologists tell us a fascination with the supernatural means primal people need salvation from the bonds of evil. This has been educated out of white collars who don't fear personal evil, but seek salvation into an ordered, loving society.

- Individual and community

The United States was founded on freedom for the individual to pursue happiness. It was also founded by a community organized to declare freedom from England. We want both the advantages of individual freedom and the advantages of communal protection, prosperity and power. The community makes laws when the tyranny of individual choices harm the whole, but we protect individual choice on many matters as well.

It is said conservatives promote individual responsibility and liberals champion society's responsibility. It seems that the list of red issues is about personal morality and the blue concerns are social morality. But this does not mean that the red list protects individual rights and the blue list holds to group responsibility. Each side wants laws that protect individual autonomy in different areas. This is partly due to the fact that economic conservatives (limited government) and cultural conservatives are not the same. Economic liberals and cultural liberals are not the same.

In the physical life issues of abortion, stem cell research and end of life matters, the right seeks communal laws that would restrict personal choice, while the left would give more freedom to the individual. In environmental issues, the left seeks communal laws that would restrict personal choice, while the right would allow us each more choice. In homosexuality, the right wants the community to make laws governing behavior and the left wants laws protecting individual choice. In poverty concerns, the left wants the community action and the right wants the laissez-faire. In gun control, the left wants more community restriction, the right wants less. Another issue is physical force, the proper use of physical aggression in child raising, law enforcement, family disputes, school discipline and punishment of law breakers. The right holds to individual choice of its proper use and the left would make laws restricting it.

We all want free speech. We all want to be heard. We don't agree on when it should be limited so feel the other side is undermining our rights. The right fears that "hate speech" laws will limit religious expression. The left fears that "decency laws" will limit free expression.

When is it right for society to intervene in individual lives? Should individuals make their own decisions about use of their bodies when it comes to recreational drugs, pregnancy termination, prostitution, suicide? The right wants the community to intervene; the left wants more individual freedom. We disagree, not because one group is on the side of the person and the other is on the side of the community. We disagree over the locus of balance on certain issues and accuse the other side of imbalance.

There is plenty in the Bible supporting both sides in each argument. Each side finds Biblical statements to be definitive in proving their position. For example, the Bible speaks about the sanctity of human life. Some assume this means the sanctity of individual life, so abortion, stem cells, and sexuality are the most important issues. Some assume this means the sanctity of corporate life, so war, poverty and environment trump individual concerns.

Is there a meeting place?

We keep in mind that the original audience of the Biblical writers was not American. American assumptions about the importance of the individual were unknown to Palestinians and Greeks of Old and New Testament days. Ancient Near Eastern identity was more communal than ours, more like present day African kinship and tribal systems. Just because some conservatives and liberals both get their theology from the Bible does not mean we can prove whatever we want from the Bible. It does not mean the Bible is not definitive. It does mean that conservatives and liberals, red Christians and blue Christians, must share their convictions and exegesis in order to find together what is definitive. Each side must honestly determine, not only why it believes what it does, but why the other side believes what it does.

This is not happening often enough now. Mostly what we have now is one side protecting itself by mischaracterizing the other side. Few in the culture wars even care why those who disagree disagree. How many cultural leaders can accurately explain the values of both sides? Family members, neighbors, community members, church members, and business partners sometimes disagree. They have found that when they ignore or misjudge the needs of the other, they lose. They have found that the only way to a solution that furthers common goals is to find one that meets at least the core needs of both. The left and the right need to learn from each other.

An old truism says a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged. This infers liberals have not yet had their idealism challenged by reality. It also is said a liberal is a conservative whose child has come out of the closet. This means conservatives have not yet had to face painful issues in their immediate family. Each side believes the other is unrealistic.

Those two stereotypes also demonstrate that all politics is local. We generalize what happens to us here as true for the whole country. We will do better when we remember that others don't live like we do, nor need to.

Basic Assumptions

The left and the right have shared values, but they disagree on how to live by those values. Values such as life, liberty, prosperity, survival, freedom, etc. are important to

both sides. Some on each side don't understand that the other side values the same things because they can't seem to separate the value from the action. They don't know the difference between the means and the end. Here's one example. The right claims liberals don't value survival because those lefties oppose the Iraq war in response to 9/11. The left claims the right doesn't value survival because they support the Iraq war in response to 9/11. Since they have different ways of dealing with a threat, they mistakenly assume the others don't appreciate the threat.

The left and the right both value the same things, but they disagree on the priority of those values when they conflict. When survival and freedom conflict, which is higher? Both sides value freedom. For the right, this means limited government. For the left, this means group prosperity. Most of us see value in both, but we disagree on the priority and when each needs to be applied.

In abortion, capital punishment, war, and end of life issues, we come up to conflict of life with life and ask "whose life is more valuable and how do we define it?" We don't disagree about the ends, we disagree about the means.

Economic conservatives have different priorities than moral conservatives. The same is true on the liberal side. So each side notices contradictions in the logic of the other. They don't understand the first principles, the basic assumptions, that are the basis for the logical construction.

There is a lot of wasted breath when the right and left try to convince each other. That's because we are arguing about practice when we should be dialoging about values. We are arguing about the means rather than the beginnings and the ends. We are arguing about actions when the real issue is epistemology. We are using the same words (liberty, freedom, life, justice, responsibility) for different concepts. Jonathan Chait in the New Republic (Feb. 28, 2005, p. 15) gives an example. Liberals waste time trying to convince conservatives of the necessity of a government program by proving its effectiveness when the economic conservatives don't care about effectiveness as much as they value the inaction of government. If you want to convince somebody, talk about what they care about.

The church can be a good place for red Christians and blue Christians to respectfully dialog. We can hold forums where people are asked to define their terms, and testify to their values. Since we have Christ in common we have more tools to honestly listen and persuade than do other communities in society. We can share theological foundations for our conservative and liberal assumptions. When we do, we can get to political and cultural commonalities and find solutions to political problems that meet the social needs of both sides.