

Are We on God's Side?

As the story goes, during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was asked if God was on his side. He replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

What about us? When it comes to the pressing social and moral and cultural and spiritual issues of our day, are we on God's side?

It's easy to be partisan and to live in an echo chamber of affirmation. It's easy to preach to the choir and be invigorated by the choir's hearty "Amen." But are we really searching out these issues? Are we allowing our views to be challenged? Can we even articulate the arguments of those who differ with us? Are we seeking God's perfect perspective? If not, what makes us so sure?

People on the other side of the political or social or racial or cultural or religious aisle are also dogmatic and convinced. They are sure that they are right and we are wrong, and they too have their comfortable echo chambers. What makes us so sure that they are the ones in error? How much critical thought have we given to our positions?

We already know how most of the major media players will respond the moment we hear the latest political news. The response will be as partisan as it is predictable, to the point that the news commentary often sounds more like a parody than honest reporting.

We know how CNN will see things, and we know how FOX will see things. We know what Huffington Post will highlight and what Breitbart will highlight. But will anyone be impartial? Will anyone be dispassionate? Will anyone allow truth and facts to be the arbiter rather than partisan politics to rule the day?

When “my side” acts poorly, am I willing to admit it? When “my position” is exposed as faulty, am I willing to address the problems? When “my guy” does wrong, am I willing to acknowledge it? Or, to the contrary, will I defend my side and my position and my guy even to the point of embarrassment? Will I demonstrate integrity, or will I simply play the game?

In the aftermath of Sen. Jeff Flake’s attack on President Trump from the Senate floor, coupled with his announcement that he would not seek reelection in 2018, headlines and bylines fell into place, as expected. The Huffington Post announced, “[Flake’s] departure is a political earthquake for 2018.” Breitbart, of course, saw it differently, with the pulsating words “Winning” flashed on the home page, accompanying this headline: “Jeff Flake Out, Will Not Seek Re-Election.”

Personally, I’m glad I don’t have to defend President Trump or the Republican Party or the Congress or the Supreme Court or even my country for that matter. But am I more partisan than I know? Do I listen to dissenting voices? Does my reputation, not to mention my identity, hinge on being right?

These are questions I ask myself, and I welcome challenges from those who think I am tone deaf. It’s all too easy to get caught up in the spirit of the age and lose sight of eternally relevant qualities like justice and mercy and truth.

Jesus even rebuked some of the religious leaders of his day, men who were famous for their religious scrupulosity. Yet in their attention to religious details, they missed what mattered most to God. As the Lord said, “For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things” (Matt. 23:23, NLT).

Does this describe any of us?

When it comes to issues like same-sex “marriage,” I have challenged myself to the core of my being with LGBT activist arguments, theologically and morally and socially and personally. I have heard their cries for “justice” and “equality” until those cries have torn at my heart out of love and concern for their wellbeing. Yet I am 100 percent sure that homosexual practice is not sanctioned by God and that, no matter how devoted a gay couple may be, they are not doing the Father’s will together.

Call me a homophobe or bigot or hater or KKK or Nazi or whatever and it will only reaffirm to me the truth of my position and increase my concern for you. Of course, this doesn’t make me right, but I can assure you I have done my due diligence to hear out the other side in coming to my firm convictions.

When it comes to abortion, I am equally dogmatic, totally convinced of the sanctity of life in the womb.

But when it comes to other issues, I have to admit it’s all too easy for me to be swayed by the arguments from those on my side of the aisle, with little tolerance for arguments on the other side. Am I really hearing what they are saying, or do I immediately have my defenses up? Have I prejudged the matter without even hearing it? And am I the only one guilty of this?

The book of Joshua contains this striking account as the children of Israel were about go to war against Jericho. As Joshua neared the city, “a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’” (Josh. 5:13c).

This seemed like a logical question. If you’re a warrior—perhaps sent by God—whose side are you on? The man’s answer was classic: “Neither, for I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come” (Josh. 5:14a).

I love this! Joshua asks, “Are you for us or against us?” The

messenger of the Lord replies, "No!" Instead, he says, "I have come as the commander of the Lord's armies."

That was enough to put Joshua on his face before this divinely sent messenger, who then told him to take his shoes off, because the ground was holy. Joshua's only need was to align himself with God.

Without a doubt, the days ahead will be fraught with deep social and political divides, perhaps worse than what we have seen so far. Those of us who claim to believe in God and honor him need to our best to rise above these divisive tides, to worship him and to align ourselves with what is right and best in his sight. If we do that, I imagine we'll have our own Joshua-like encounters that start with a divine no.