

The Evangelical Elites vs. the Evangelical Deplorables: An Attempt at Mediation

I have no desire to minimize the growing divide that exists between pro-Trump and anti-Trump evangelicals, nor is it my desire here to take sides. Instead, I want to do my best to improve the communication, since, for the most part, we are like ships passing each other in the night, reacting to each other more than responding to each other.

Worse still, this dispute is being played out before a watching world, and it is making for a juicy, Christmas-season news cycle.

On Christmas Eve, the Drudge Report, which is read by multiplied tens of millions, featured headlines such as: "Christian mag raises issue of 'unconditional loyalty'"; "Editor Quits Amid Evangelical Civil War" and "PAPER: God did not elect Trump, people did." Then, relating more broadly to the Trump era as a whole, there was, "In the age of Trump, it's OK to be (deeply) conflicted."

It's one thing to have an in-house dispute behind closed doors. All families do that.

It's another thing to air our dirty laundry for outsiders to see.

Yet both sides believe it's important to make our statements openly and publicly, feeling that if we do not, our integrity is at stake.

Of course, we will always have our differences. And sometimes it's even necessary to divide and separate. Yet in the current evangelical war over Trump, there seems to be little effort

for either side to understand the other.

Like it or not, there are fine, genuine Christians on each side of the debate, yet we seem quicker to condemn each other than to communicate with each other.

The polarization is growing by the minute, especially as things trickle down on the popular level to the world of social media.

Christianity Today has now published two articles, one by editor-in-chief Mark Galli and the other by president Timothy Dalrymple. This has triggered a flood of individual and even corporate replies, with each side feeling deeply insulted or misunderstood by the other.

I too have responded to each CT article (see [here](#) and [here](#)). And I personally oppose the president's impeachment and removal. So, I'm more against the CT articles than for them.

At the same time, I am appalled at the deepening divide.

President Trump responded to Galli's article by referring to CT as "far left," which is certainly an exaggeration. But then Galli, who describes himself as "center-right," referred to Trump-supporting evangelicals during a CNN interview as "far right." This is also an exaggeration.

But all this is downright polite when compared to the mudslinging on the ground, where post after post accuses either Trump-proponents or Trump-opponents of being unsaved, nonchristian, unspiritual or of the devil. People are lashing out rather than listening, not even attempting to understand each other's concerns.

Even my attempt here at mediation will be met with derision by many, as if I'm calling for moral compromise or lacking in conviction. (If that's your reaction, I would dare say it might reveal more about you than about me.)

This conflict feels like a battle between the evangelical elites and the evangelical deplorables, with each side claiming the higher moral and spiritual ground. May I at least attempt to mediate some of the dispute by pointing out blind spots on each side?

When evangelical Trump proponents hear criticism of the president from his evangelical opponents, let alone calls for his removal, their immediate response is, "So, you would have preferred Hillary Clinton? Or you would prefer one of the current crop of Democratic candidates? You'd rather have abortion and socialism and LGBT activism?"

But I don't know a single evangelical opponent of the president who wants any of these things.

Rather, they're saying, "We can find a better Republican candidate, a better conservative. We can find someone who shares our values without embarrassing us and degrading us as a nation."

That distinction is rarely heard by the Trump proponents.

But there's a reason for that, and this is what the opponents normally miss.

The proponents do not believe there is another candidate who can defeat the Democrats or, if elected, would have the backbone that Trump has. In their minds, it's either Trump or a radical Democrat, and they cannot fathom how any God-fearing Christian would want the latter.

That distinction is rarely heard by the Trump opponents.

When it comes to character issues, the supporters hear the critics saying, "We think Donald Trump is a terrible person who is destroying the nation with his nasty tweets and mean behavior. And to the extent evangelicals support him, we are destroying our witness."

In response, the supporters say, "How can you be so shortsighted? We are fighting an existential battle for the soul of our nation, standing at the precipice of freedom or bondage, hope or destruction, for the generations to come. And you're getting upset about a few tweets? Trump is sacrificially helping America on so many fronts, and he's one of the first presidents we've had who keeps his word. In my view, that's real character. The other things are superficial and not worthy of our attention."

But what the supporters fail to hear from the critics is:

1) We evangelicals have been famous for shouting, "Character counts!" Just look at what some of our top leaders said during the Bill Clinton campaigns. Our mantra was, "We will not and cannot cast our vote for an immoral, ungodly candidate!" Yet now, it seems, we have cast our lot with a man with many glaring moral deficiencies. Do we not see how hypocritical this makes us look in the eyes of the nation?

2) The critics are not so upset that the supporters voted for Trump. Rather, the critics are disturbed by the proponents' wholesale support of him and their defense of him at any cost. "Criticize Trump," some proponents are quick to say, "and we'll question your salvation."

3) The critics believe that whatever ground we have gained through Trump's many fine appointees to the courts and other legislative acts, we have lost even more ground through turning hearts against the gospel and allowing our nation as a whole to degenerate into crassness, rudeness and cruelty.

Conversely, what the critics fail to understand is that the supporters are looking at a bigger picture as well, akin to a general fighting off an invading army that was poised to kill our men, rape our women and sell our children into slavery. (I'm painting a graphic picture to make a point. I'm not saying the Democrats want to do all this.)

Yes, it would be great if that general was a kind man, married once, who was careful in his speech. But we'd rather have a cussing, mean-spirited, nasty general who could defeat the invading army than a really nice general who had lost his fighting skill. And when that cussing, mean-spirited, nasty general keep his promises to us and saves our nation from extermination, we feel a sense of loyalty to him. Which general should have our support?

So, the critics have their reasons for saying, "The man is so immoral!" But the supporters have their reasons for saying, "He's moral where it counts!"

When it comes to the question of whether God put Trump in office—meaning, in an unusual display of divine sovereignty—here too there is a gap in understanding.

When the critics hear talk of Trump being appointed by God, what they hear is, "The man now has carte blanche to do whatever he desires. And if you speak against him, you are speaking against God's anointed."

Not only do they see that as a very dangerous concept (unchecked, political power can be very treacherous), but they are absolutely shocked that their evangelical friends and co-workers can view such a godless man to be God's anointed servant who stands above all criticism.

In their view, he has a very checkered, misogynist, narcissistic past, and they view him today as an unstable liar who could lead us into an international conflict. "That is the man you call anointed and appointed by God? What has become of you?"

In reality, what the proponents often mean when they speak of God appointing Trump is that: 1) His election seemed so farfetched, from the primaries to the general elections, that this must have been the Lord's sovereign plan; and 2) He is such an unlikely candidate and the last one many evangelicals

would have supported that we see parallels in the Bible where the Lord used non-believing, pagan kings to do good for God's people. It's a parallel more than a prophecy, and it doesn't mean the president is above criticism.

Unfortunately, as things stand today, there is often more heat than light, especially on the popular level.

That's why I appeal once again for evangelical believers on each side of the divide to have some respectful, gracious interaction.

Perhaps we could first ask each other, "So, who is Jesus to you?" And, "What do you believe about the importance of God's Word?" And, "Do you have a burden to reach the world with the gospel?" And, "Do you believe we should be known for our good works and our integrity and our helping the poor and the needy?"

In more cases than not, you'll find yourselves in harmony.

Next, you can ask, "Are you pro-life? Pro-family?" Again, you'll probably be in essential harmony.

Then, "What's your view of President Trump?"

Some sparks might fly. But hopefully, having humanized each other and recognized each other as fellow children of God and members of the same eternal family, you can at least understand one another if not respect one another.

How about we give it a try?