

Bridging the Divide

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Why are some people so unwilling to listen to the other side? It's because they're convinced their side is right. People won't listen if their minds are made up. How did they become so close-minded? Entrenched thinking often results from fear. People are afraid of losing their rights, privileges, protections, and freedoms. They are afraid of losing their security and safety. Their national, cultural, and racial identities are being threatened. Fear makes us dig in and fight. When we feel threatened, we aren't open to discussion, but we will defend or attack. We hunker down and guard our position. The side that threatens us becomes our enemy. It works both ways. The people on the other side feel as threatened as we do.

When we aren't given to fear, our stance can be more open, instead of a defensive or attack posture. With our guards down, we're able to listen to the other side. Alternate viewpoints won't threaten us because they won't be taken as personal assaults. The more we're afraid, the more we take things personally. Fear transforms external influences into threats against our person. If perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18), then love for our enemies is one way to reduce our fear of them.

Humility as a Response

Humility is another way to respond to opposition. Humility, in this context, means letting go of our need to defend ourselves. When our trust is fully in God, then God becomes our refuge and protector (2 Samuel 22:3). We entrust our cause to God and rely on Him to defend us. I'm not saying we can't take up a cause, but our foremost cause should be love of neighbor, including those neighbors who disagree with us.

Brotherhood, love, understanding, and compromise are more important than defending our personal viewpoint. Viewpoints come and go, but faith, hope, and love endure forever (1 Corinthians 13:13). We must guard against identifying too much with any group or ideology. The more we do that, the more we have at stake and the more we have to defend. The most secure

person has nothing at stake and nothing to lose. The possibility of loss is real, but it's the *fear* of loss that steals our peace and makes us build walls. If we have placed our trust in God, then we shouldn't be terrified of loss because God is more than able to take care of us through any adversity.

Setting Aside Our Egos

Humility is characterized by a willingness to accept loss. Are we willing to be found wrong? Sometimes, we're afraid of being found wrong because it suggests ceasing to belong to a vital group, rejection by our peers, abandoning a long-held belief system, or a drastic change to our way of life. Are we willing to compromise and accept loss for the sake of unity? Are we willing to put aside our egos to make room for someone else's ego? Egos jockey for position, so it feels painful to let someone else gain the upper hand. Yet Jesus teaches us to be a servant to all (Mark 9:35). We would do well to set our egos aside and look to bless others rather than expect others to bless us.

Humility expects us to relinquish our need to be right. What does that gain us anyway, except more strokes to our egos? If Jesus is to be our example, then life is more about losing than winning. He asks us to entrust everything to Him, even our very lives. We aren't supposed to keep our lives, but lose them. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25). Christians have no entitlements, although many act as though they do. We give up our rights, privileges, protections, and freedoms. The only freedom we're offered is freedom from fear and from the demands of ego so that we can live for God without inner and outer hindrances.

Dualistic Thinking

Dualistic thinking is "either/or" thinking that reduces judgments into two simple categories: good or bad. Dualistic thinking doesn't allow for shades of

gray or for opposite sides to be simultaneously true. It's characterized by a belief that things are either right or wrong, true or false, valuable or worthless. It's a convenient way to judge the world without having to invest oneself in the work of discerning subtleties of variation. When fear infiltrates dualistic thinking, then it can manifest as tribalism: us versus them; good guys against bad guys; we're right and they're wrong.

Non-dualistic Thinking

By contrast, non-dualistic thinking is inclusive "both/and" thinking that can hold multiple possibilities. This mature form of thought can sustain contradictions and opposites. Christian theology is rife with such mysteries: Jesus is *both* God *and* man; God is *both* one being *and* three persons; God is *both* beginning *and* end; He executes perfect justice *and* mercy. When we move away from dualistic thinking, then we can make room for both sides to have a measure of truth. No one side *ever* has the corner on truth, hence the need for humility. We grip our perceived "truths" too tightly because of our fear of losing them, when Truth is supposed to make us free from such fears (John 8:32). Genuine Truth cannot be lost, no matter what may threaten it, because God, who is the embodiment of that Truth, cannot be lost or threatened.

With a non-dualistic approach to the world, we allow opposites to coexist peacefully without having to pit them against each other. We believe that unity is possible when multiple viewpoints exist. I think this is what Jesus meant when He prayed that we, His people, be one. (John 17:21). Given the enduring diversity within His church, I doubt He meant we should all think alike. Oneness is the joining together of *diverse* parts, as illustrated by Paul's example of the parts of the human body working together in harmony (Read 1 Corinthians 12:15-26). Unity is more about harmony than conformity.

Being a Peacemaker

We need to be careful when taking sides. Claiming that God is on our side

has often been the basis for bloodshed. Let us claim to belong to God, instead of claiming that God belongs to us. Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said (Matthew 5:9). Peacemakers are bridge-builders who stand in the *middle* to create opportunity for two sides to move closer together. Give serious thought as to what being a peacemaker means to you during this time of great division.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What ideologies threaten you the most? Why do they have such an effect on you?
 2. What advantages do you fear might be taken away from you? Can you trust God with such a loss?
 3. What is your response to groups that threaten you? Do you get defensive or do you attack? What might be a third possible response from you?
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