

# Catalyst

PERSPECTIVES FOR WESLEYAN-METHODIST SEMINARIANS AND LEADERS

## PERSPECTIVES

# Our Postmodern Moment, Part 3: Christian Discipleship in a Polarized World

## Theology



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This is the final installment of a three-part article that I've been invited to write on the question of how Christians might engage our contemporary postmodern culture, especially the toxic polarization that characterizes so much of our world today.

In the first two installments, I drew on material from the book that Brian Walsh and I wrote nearly thirty years ago, called *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (IVP Academic, 1995). Given that our analysis back then seems to have anticipated aspects of today's current divisive and violent culture, I was encouraged to reflect on the continuing relevance of what we wrote, while also going beyond it, in order to help contemporary Christians understand and engage our current polarized context.

In [part 1](#), I attempted to diagnose the malaise of our contemporary culture, uncovering the fundamental assumptions that fuel the divisiveness and violence we see all around us. My focus was on the absolutization of the human subject—to the extent of denying any external criterion of Truth by which we could be judged.

In [part 2](#), I explored key aspects of the biblical metanarrative that ought to ground our Christian witness and action in the world. I attempted to show that, while the biblical story is the non-negotiable ground of our faith (a genuine metanarrative), it is also (paradoxically, perhaps) open to the complexity of human experience, even inviting human participation.

Here in part 3, I will suggest how we are called to live out of this grounding, yet open-ended metanarrative as disciples of Jesus in a world of toxic, tribal polarization. My question is: How can Christians, especially pastors and other church leaders, minister in the midst of a divided world (and a divided church), while offering healing and hope rooted in the gospel?

## Reclaiming the Teaching Role of the Pastorate

The place to start is by faithfully expounding the nonnegotiable story of the Bible and addressing its implications for the life of the church. Raising the level of biblical literacy in the church will be crucial for addressing the ideologies of the day. This does not mean more edifying sermons on bits and pieces of the Bible—favorite stories, psalms, proverbs, parables, or sections of Paul’s epistles. Rather we need to immerse our congregations in the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 KJV), helping them understand the inner “logic” of the unfolding biblical story and the Bible’s radical vision of life. This will not only enable church members to make sense of particular biblical passages they read, but it is also crucial for discernment about living with biblical wisdom in this complex world.

Walter Brueggemann has affirmed that “the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity” (*The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. [Augsburg Fortress, 2001], 12). Or, as Mr. Data puts it in a classic episode of Star Trek, “It is necessary for us to learn the narrative” (“Darmok,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). Most Christians have no idea of the depth and richness of the biblical narrative, the framework of meaning that ought to guide our lives.

This means that we must recover the essential teaching role of the pastoral office. When Eph 4:11 lists the leadership gifts God gave the church, the Greek syntax makes it clear that “pastors and teachers” is a single office, along with apostles, prophets, and evangelists. There is no pastoral office without a teaching component. Indeed, whenever the pastoral office is mentioned in 1 and 2 Timothy, teaching is always listed as a central duty (1 Tim 4:11–16; 2 Tim 2:11–15, 24–25; 3:14–17; 4:1–5). Teaching is so important that James warns: “Not many of you should become teachers [read, pastors], my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1). Without entirely shifting the blame from congregants, it is clear that the primary responsibility for biblical illiteracy in the church is the woefully inadequate teaching that comes from the pulpit.

More than ever, we need pastors who will immerse their congregations in the nonnegotiable biblical story as the constant framework of their preaching, teaching, liturgy, and counseling, while entering into the messiness of the stories of church members—helping them reinterpret their lives in terms of the biblical story. This is the sort of biblical formation necessary for authentic Christian discipleship. Without this formation, the church simply reinforces the values of the culture that we have been socialized into.

It is traditional to think of preaching as comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Depending on the church tradition you are in, you might tend toward one or the other. But both are crucial. The teaching ministry of the pastorate ought to bind up the wounds of those injured by the world and by the church. But it also ought to challenge the superficiality of much faith, including the idolatries of our culture that many in the church buy into.

Will members of your congregation get upset at solid biblical teaching and preaching? Undoubtedly, some will. It is best not to wait until this happens. Rather, we need to make clear in advance the difference between a normative biblical vision of life and the ideologies of our day. If biblical teaching gets people upset because it goes against their favored opinions, it is appropriate to raise challenging questions. We need to forthrightly ask our congregations to determine which story they actually inhabit—and which story they *want* to inhabit. There is no guarantee that this will convince everyone. Ideologies die hard and some people might decide to leave the church.

## Responding to the Toxicity in Our Culture

Beyond good teaching, pastors will need to host meaningful (and difficult) conversations in their churches with members across seemingly entrenched ideological differences. This is not an easy task. We may have insightful analysis of our cultural context and a good grasp of the biblical story. Yet, when it comes to engaging with people who have extreme positions, we may become paralyzed. The toxicity we encounter—whether on the news, in social media, or in the voice or face of people we know—can simply overwhelm us. Or, perhaps we try our best to ignore the conflicts around us (whether in the church or wider society) and get on with business as usual. If we do respond, we often take sides immediately, reacting at a visceral level to points of view that we sense are deeply wrong and harmful to others. But when anger or outrage is our gut response, we can end up treating people as competitors, even enemies.

The very nature of the Christian story—and the God who authors this story—has the potential to reshape our instinctive responses to our toxic culture. Just as God heard the groaning of Israel in their bondage in Egypt, hosted the complaints of the psalmists in their anguish, and took the protests of Job seriously, so we need to listen to the cries of our generation. For beneath the stridency and toxicity of our culture and our churches, there is often deep hurt that has never been adequately processed. I suggest that we understand the tribal polarizations we encounter as evidence of deep disorientation—even trauma—that needs to be addressed.

This doesn't mean that there isn't genuine evil in the world. Indeed, Scripture often speaks of a spiritual battle. But it isn't people who are the enemy. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). Indeed, this isn't a battle that we actually need to fight. Four times in Eph 6:10–14, Paul notes that rather than directly fighting the enemy, our characteristic action in this battle is to *stand firm*. It is God in Jesus Christ who fights for us.

Standing firm in Truth, in a reality that I did not construct, allows for non-anxious hospitality towards others, even those with whom I radically disagree. I don't need to be defensive about God's Truth. After all, who needs to defend a Lion?

Practicing non-anxious hospitality across ideological differences is really difficult in our current cultural context where everyone wants their point of view to be validated. And, of course, I want *my* point of view to be validated too! At one level this is legitimate, but it may reflect our own internalization of the world's toxicity. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (Jas 4:1) Such "friendship with the world" is equivalent to "enmity against God" (Jas 4:4).

This suggests that before we are able to address the toxicity in our culture or have meaningful conversations in our churches across ideological divides, we need to engage in self-examination. Christian leaders need to do honest soul-searching to discern the extent of our own alignment with the polarizations in our culture so that we may help our churches address this question.

## A Template for Self-Examination

As a template for self-examination, I want to revisit the story that I recounted in [part 1](#) of this article about three umpires having a conversation after a baseball game, with each umpire explaining to the others how they distinguished balls from strikes. I'm going to focus here on the first and third umpires; I'll come to the second umpire shortly.

The first umpire confidently asserts: “There’s balls and there’s strikes and *I call ‘em the way they are.*” In his blindness to any slippage between reality and his articulation of it (which we might describe as naïve realism), this umpire epitomizes the totalizing attitude of modernity. This attitude has been prevalent in the church through the ages and is by no means absent today. It often takes the form of asserting with more and more force “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), especially in the face of new challenges to traditional verities. Many traditional Christians find it difficult to countenance the truth of alternative perspectives and so end up marginalizing them (and the persons who hold these perspectives). It is up to the reader to discern if this attitude characterizes their own stance concerning Truth.

The third umpire seems, on the surface, to be radically different; he claims: “There’s balls and there’s strikes and *they ain’t nothin’ until I call ‘em.*” This umpire represents the quintessentially postmodern posture of pure constructivism, which is now pervasive in our culture. In practice, however, this isn’t very different from the perspective of the first umpire. In their extreme forms, neither is willing to be corrected vis-à-vis an external standard of Truth or by dialogue with other points of view. Many churches today are populated by folks who have bought into a contemporary ideology (on the left or on the right) and refuse even to entertain the possibility they could be wrong, often demonizing those who disagree with them. Once again, the reader needs to discern whether they have affinities with this stance.

## The Second Umpire and Hospitality to Other Points of View

The second umpire, however, represents a genuine alternative to the other two, when he explains: “There’s balls and there’s strikes and *I call ‘em the way I see ‘em.*” This umpire’s perspectival realism is consistent with the Christian affirmation that there is a genuine reality or Truth that exists independent of our constructs, while admitting that every articulation of this Truth is necessarily a human construct. Our formulations certainly aim at describing reality, yet they do so inevitably from our particular point of view.

This means that I can’t complacently rest in the assumption that I have the Truth, with no remainder. I may not have any actual doubts about a particular belief or of my overall position on a subject, but I need to be willing to submit my point of view to scrutiny—both from myself and from others. Without such scrutiny, there is a real danger that my beliefs will become an ideology, blinding me to the damage I may do to others in the name of these beliefs. Even the apostle Paul said that we see in a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12). Being open to Truth that is genuinely not under my control requires my taking up my cross, including my epistemological cross. This is part of the necessary journey of discipleship for those who seek to follow Jesus the crucified Messiah (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).

While it is certainly possible that readers of this article may find themselves aligned with the first or third umpires, I’m hoping that we find most resonance with the second ump. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews puts it: “Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation” (Heb 6:9).

One implication of perspectival realism is that we need to shun both relativism and absolutism. Not all perspectives are equal. What you believe really matters. However, commitment to Truth is perfectly compatible with acknowledging that there may be diverse perspectives on that Truth. Epistemic humility means being willing to acknowledge that the Truth may be different from what I (or my tribe) would like it to be. Awareness of the perspectival character of my theological point of view (indeed, of all my opinions) thus allows me to be hospitable toward others, open to listening to them sympathetically—even to learning from them.

This hospitality does not mean that I lack confidence in my point of view or am wavering in my core beliefs. There is no contradiction between being well-grounded in a commitment to Truth, while being open to learning from others. It is possible to have psychological confidence, while embracing epistemic humility.

Nor does it mean having an attitude of passivity, allowing others to force their beliefs on me. True hospitality involves having clear boundaries, while being fully present to the guest (humility is different from modesty or reticence). I certainly don't need to treat all truth claims as equally valid or even equally important. There are many claims that have no basis in reality and many points of view that are morally repugnant because they involve denigrating other people and causing them harm.

But it is possible that the person holding views that I find distasteful might be genuinely open to discussion. Before entering a conversation about contentious issues, it is important to ask whether the potential conversation partner might ever think of a situation where they could change their mind about the issue in question. Are they actually open to considering reasoning or evidence that would count against their belief? If that is the case, a respectful conversation may be possible. Here, the story of the three umpires might be useful as a template not just for ourselves but also for church members, to help them gain self-understanding about their own orientation to Truth.

## The Fourfold Gospel

To clarify the point of view of the second umpire, we might explain that even Scripture admits of diverse perspectives on Truth. The New Testament contains four canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Although we use the term *Gospel* for each of these writings, the church fathers used the term *Fourfold Gospel* to emphasize that they were four testimonies to one Gospel (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8). In other words, what we call *the Gospel of Matthew* is really the Gospel of Jesus Christ *according to Matthew*; it is Matthew's perspective on the Truth.

Unlike many moderns, the early church didn't find it problematic that there wasn't a singular, linear narrative of Jesus's life and ministry. They celebrated the variation among the Gospels. Although Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all emphasize the death and resurrection of Jesus as the core of the gospel (which accounts for the space they give to passion week), each writer selected certain actions and teachings from the ministry of Jesus, often ordering them differently, and even editing the same event or teaching that occurs in another Gospel to give it a particular focus—in harmony with the point the Evangelist wanted to communicate.

The early church wasn't even troubled by the significant differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, such as the different placements of the cleansing of the temple (near the start of Jesus's ministry in John or near the end in the Synoptics) and whether Jesus's ministry occurred primarily in Galilee (the Synoptics) or in Judea (John). And what about the question of whether Jesus's scourging and mocking took place prior to Pilate's sentencing him to death (in Luke and John) or afterward (in Matthew and Mark)?

Legitimate Gospel diversity extends even to the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The four Gospels recount differing details about how many women go to the tomb—just Mary Magdalene in John, Mary along with others in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are different numbers of angels reported at the tomb—one in Matthew and Mark, two in Luke and John. The sequence of whom Jesus appeared to differs in the various Gospels. Then there's the question of where Jesus appeared—in Galilee according to Matthew and Mark, or around Jerusalem according to Luke.

And what about Paul’s version of the resurrection appearances in 1 Cor 15, which is different again? This non-negotiable event—which Paul affirms is essential to our faith (1 Cor 15:14–19)—is legitimately narrated from multiple perspectives in the Bible. The canonization of this complexity should open us to considering points of view other than our own. You never can tell what you might learn by viewing the Truth from another angle.

## The Possibility of Multiple Perspectives on Truth

It is helpful to think of my point of view or perspective as a window that gives me access to the landscape outside. The landscape is really there, but I can view it differently depending on where I stand. Or we can think of our perspective as if it were a photograph of a prominent building. Perhaps my cherished photo is of the building from one side, but imagine how I might gain a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of the building by considering photos taken from other angles.

This doesn’t mean that all photos are equal. Some may be blurry; others might not be framed well; some photos may be of a different building altogether. We would need discernment in evaluating the photographs. Not all the so-called Gospels were canonized by the early church.

The legitimate (yet bounded) plurality of perspectives possible on the Truth should predispose us to listen to the concerns of others, who may see things differently from us. It should prevent us from peremptorily shutting ourselves off from them—despite their different perspectives. Ian G. Barbour puts it well: “It is by no means easy to hold beliefs for which you would be willing to die, and yet to remain open to new insights; but it is precisely such a combination of commitment and inquiry that constitutes religious maturity” (*Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* [Harper & Row, 1976], 138).

There is no reason why pastors couldn’t engender such mature conversations in the church among folks of differing beliefs. While we might discuss the content of these beliefs, it would be even more important for us to explore why we hold them. This would include our personal stories of how we came to such beliefs, but would also need to address the cognitive basis for our beliefs (what leads us to think these beliefs are true?). And then there are the implications of our beliefs—how they lead to ethical or unethical actions—and how these actions square with normative biblical faith. Would it be too radical to imagine pastors or other church leaders engaging in such frank conversations with church members, either in small groups or one-on-one?

## Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

In all this, there would need to be some ground rules, both for church members and for those attempting to lead such conversations. All parties in the discussion would need to avoid the “genetic fallacy”; that is, we shouldn’t judge an idea based simply on its origins (its genesis). If someone whose overall opinion I find problematic makes a particular claim, this does not of itself invalidate the claim. Today it is common for people on one side of an ideological divide to argue against a claim made by someone on the other side by saying that the claim was ideologically motivated. So what? That is strictly irrelevant to the validity of the claim. We need to engage ideas for their validity, rather than dismissing them because they are propounded by someone with a different overall stance from ourselves. Nor should we attribute ulterior motives to people we disagree with—unless, of course, we have good reason to do so.

This means that ad hominem attacks are out of bounds. I ought to be able to treat someone with respect even if I disagree radically with them. Denigrating someone simply because of the ideas they

hold is not just a logical fallacy; it is ethically problematic since it shows a lack of respect for a person made in the image of God. This is not a new problem; it was an issue in the first-century church, as Jas 3:9 makes clear: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.”

Respecting the other person, even if you disagree with them, affirms the image of God (*imago Dei*) in them. It also models our own imaging of God. Jesus taught that the Creator sends sunshine and rain indiscriminately on all people, whatever their moral condition (righteous or evil). So if we want to put the *imago Dei* into practice and be genuine children of our Heavenly Father (reflecting God’s character), we need to love all people—even our enemies (Matt 5:44–45; also Luke 6:35). Therefore, “be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36)—and this applies even in the midst of a culture of toxic polarization.

This certainly does not mean that I need to engage with people who attack me personally for my beliefs or who write me off simply because I disagree with their cherished views. If I deem it appropriate, however, I might challenge the ethics of their actions. But if someone isn’t open to the possibility that they might be wrong, then it isn’t clear that there is any value in trying to have conversation with them. As Jesus instructed his disciples (Matt 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; cf. Acts 13:51), we should shake the dust off our feet and move on to others who are more receptive.

## Speaking the Truth in Love

Yet, wherever possible we should engage with those willing to listen. “Speaking the truth in love” is a pastoral duty. This phrase is based on Paul’s unusual use of the verb for truth in Eph 4:15 (that is, “truthing in love”). This duty can be difficult. It is not easy for a person to be convinced and corrected. But, as Bernadette Waterman Ward puts it, “Every attempt to get other people to understand real things is an act of sacrificial love for the human community” (*World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* [Catholic University of America Press, 2002], 257). In this case, an intentional and comprehensive attempt to ground congregations in the fullness of Scripture and our willingness to engage in meaningful conversations with those with whom we disagree can be an act of pastoral love for the sake of the body of Christ.