

Q&A: On current political and ethical issues, why do we not hear God in the same way?

Anonymous asks:

I read with interest the series of Facebook posts sparked off by your post of the Christianity Today article. I think it is fascinating to see how Christians come to opposing conclusions from the same set of "facts".

For me, one of the biggest problems not just in the specific case of the USA but generally, is what we mean by "discerning the mind of Christ" or "listening to the Holy Spirit". I am fully in agreement with the article and your counter-arguments against the pro-Trump people. However, how do I know that this really is what God is saying to us?

The same can be said of other major issues on which the church is split. Each side is sure that they are listening to God. I think this conundrum is something that has got increasingly difficult over the 40 odd years of my Christian life. For example, in the early 70s, I think the evangelical world was pretty unified on the sexuality issue. We could dismiss pro-gay views as being part of the liberal wing. Now, I suspect that even the evangelical wing is probably in a minority in holding to traditional views.

Why does God not speak to everyone in the same way or rather why do we not hear God in the same way?

The Christianity Today article referenced is: We Worship with the Magi, not MAGA

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You

can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>

Thank you for this question. This was sent in a while ago, and the delay in my response comes from the fact that this is my second attempt at answering!



At the heart of it, your question is about *disagreement*. In particular, it's about Christians disagreeing on how to discern what God wants, what God wills, or simply what he is doing. In my first attempted answer I wanted to talk about epistemological differences – i.e. our understanding of how we *know* things – and then set our feet on the solid rock of God's revelation in Scripture and analyse our disagreements from there.

It wasn't a bad place to begin. From that perspective of Biblical truth we can form an opinion on whether people (including ourselves) are correct or incorrect with regard to doctrine or fact. We can also discern whether people (including ourselves) are wrong or right in terms of the spirit or character of our engagement. We can also reach for some conclusions about what things are *essential* or *primary*, and what things are secondary *adiaphora* on which we can disagree in unity.

On the matters you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – there has been much that has been written and said and I'm not going to rehearse it all again here. If our intention is to *disagree*

well while holding to a robust epistemology, there are some good examples. A number of years ago I wrote a lengthy multi-part review of a book called *Good Disagreement?*. One of that book's contributors, Andrew Goddard, has written very recently on the same topic of sexuality on the Psephizo blog. With regards to US politics, a recent podcast from Premier Christian Radio, *Unbelievable? Is the US Church in the grip of political idolatry?* with Shane Claiborne & Johnnie Moore, is useful.

The reason for my second attempt at an answer is that I think your question might be pushing a little deeper. **It is a good thing to analyse the *nature* of disagreement. But you are asking *why* it happens.** Why does it seem that God is not speaking clearly? If God's truth is real and foundational, why do Christians differ so significantly on what we think that truth is? And if that clarity is not there, *how* can I truly know anything?

Conflict and disagreement about God's will amongst God's people is self-evident, biblically, historically, and in our present moment. Our trust in God cannot depend on their being a lack of disagreement. So we must find the right place for it in our thinking. To that end, I discern two types of conflict, which I will tentatively call *unfaithful* disagreement, and *faithful* disagreement.

The first category of **unfaithful disagreement** is needed because sometimes God's truth *is* clear. The conflict arises simply because there are those who wish to be faithful to what God says, and those who wish to dismiss it, disobey it, or harden themselves to it in some way.

Many of the conflicts in the Bible are of this sort, which makes perfect sense when viewing Biblical history from the perspective of hindsight and a greater awareness of the grand scheme of things. There is story after story of various people whose eyes are open to God's truth being opposed by those who

are hardened or spiritually blinded in some way: from Cain & Abel and those who opposed Noah, through the mumbling moans of the Israelites against Moses, to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her (Matthew 23:37). This is truly the conflict of light vs darkness, truth vs lie.

These conflicts cannot be truly resolved by compromise or finding the balance of things. In such conflicts even if an "agree to disagree" can be found it resolves to a *diminishment* of unity, rather than an *increase*.

Take the issue of state authorities, for instance. With regards to Trump the normal "common ground" issues of how God ordains secular and civil leadership (e.g .in Romans 13) are not really the issues at hand. What is under dispute is whether some particular anointing, even of a Messianic kind, attaches to Trump, the nature and extent of spiritual warfare and prophetic utterances about Trump, and the intertwining of gospel proclamation with the ascendancy of one man, and the violent actions of a mob in Washington. These are matters of right and wrong, light and dark.

With regard to the issue of human sexuality; there is a lot of complexity and nuance, and things to understand and embrace in the middle of it all. Nevertheless, sometimes the dispute *does* encroach onto matters of fundamental clarity, and we do face (on both sides of the politics, to be honest) fundamental matters of idolatry and grossly negligent handling of the Scriptures.

To some extent, then, this answers something of your *why* question. Why do we disagree? Why do we claim God's support on different sides of various debates? It is simply the human predicament: We long to stand in the light and truth of God, and at the same time our rebellious self-centred hearts oppose it. That essential conflict is therefore within society, within church communities, and even within our own

souls. In our sin, we do not hear him as we should, therefore we disagree. This should not surprise us.

The response to it is *hope*. One day the Father of Lies will be defeated, and the One who is the Way, Truth, and Life, will shine and all will be revealed.

However, there is also a form of **faithful disagreement**. It rests on the reality that God made us good, and he also made us *finite*. There is *goodness* in our epistemological finitude; it is part of God's good design that we are limited in our knowledge of the truth. Those limits are a dynamic part of us that *draw* us towards a deeper knowledge of God, a deeper *worship*.

It's one of the reasons I am wary of Trumpist-like prophets who sometimes speak of getting a "downloaded" word from God. Biblical and personal experience, rather, indicates that God's truth is something that we have to *learn*. After all, Jesus had *disciples*; i.e. he had *students*! He promised that the Spirit would *lead* them into all truth (John 16:13). And through the various modes of ministry and gifts within the church, a process of *maturity* is expected (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Some of us will know certain aspects of God's truth differently than others. Some of us will be better versed in the Scriptures. Some of us will have had different experiences to bring alongside those Scriptures. In our learning there will be *difference of opinion*. But that doesn't mean that that *process* of learning is flawed.

Consider the ideal: Adam & Eve walked and talked with God in their innocence; their growth and maturation sprung, in all goodness, from that relationship. (Interestingly, the fall is portrayed as an attempt to seek knowledge on their own terms). Similarly, Jesus gathers his disciples and they sit at his feet where they receive the words of eternal life (John 6:68) – and that was good! It was good when they first started

being taught by him, and it was good after three years of walking and talking. And, we might note, it didn't stop them having disputes – some of them painful – which were, in themselves, opportunities for Jesus to teach them, yet again.

At our best, this is what we see in the “disputes” of the church. They lead to greater understanding, and deeper worship. Paul talks to the Bereans and they run to the Scriptures with *eagerness*, (Acts 17:11), to test what they have heard. The leaders of the church come together in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and they ponder together Peter's experience with Cornelius, and the truths of the Law, and their own eyewitness learning from Christ himself, and they resolve the dispute about the inclusion of the Gentiles. They don't pitch these things against each other to find some shallow overlap; they wrestled *in their faithfulness* to Scripture and the direct teaching of Jesus, in order to grasp what was happening in their experience. From this wrestle came a greater fathoming and proclamation of the gospel!

This isn't some mystical magical thing; it's the ordinary experience of the gospel. Personally, I remember how one of the greatest joys of my theological training was the lunchtimes debates of one topic or another – well-hearted differences of opinion that forced me back to the word of God, to wrestle, to learn, and, in the end, it led to greater worship.

Why do we not hear God the same way? Because, in his divine wisdom, our ignorance is a call to worship, as we bring each other to sit at his feet.

How, then, do we know, with the issues that are rising in our own time now, **what sort of conflict we're dealing with?**

I will always do my best to take heed of the disputes around me – even the matters of Trump and sexuality. I may learn something from them, you see. Here's the framework I use to

parse that:

1. **Is this dispute a matter of fundamentals?** Are we seeing, here, a matter of spiritual *opposition* to God and his word. Have we slipped from asking “What does our Lord say?” to “What am I going to say anyway?” In this case, I either call out the error as constructively as I can, or I walk from the dispute; it cannot lead me to greater worship.
2. **Is this dispute a secondary matter?** That is, does what I have learned from God’s word stay the same on either side of the debate? I will enter into the matters if I have the inclination or energy to clarify my own opinion, but only if it’s edifying. Paul warns us away from needless controversies (Titus 3:9) and about needlessly offending our brother or sister (1 Corinthians 8:9).
3. **Is this dispute taking me to sit at God’s feet once more, to learn from his word, and explore his heart?** At this point I will attempt to receive the dispute as a gift, even if have to expend some energy and suck up some humility. In this moment it can be a great joy and delight that we do not all hear God in the same way; there’s something more to learn from his Word.

The difficulty with the matters that you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – is that in different ways, with different people, on different particular topics, I have found that all three parts apply. Sometimes it’s a matter of opposing what is blatantly wrong. Sometimes it’s needless controversy. Occasionally it is edifying dialogue. You will see all three aspects at work simultaneously, and because of that, much wisdom is needed.

Thanks for the question.

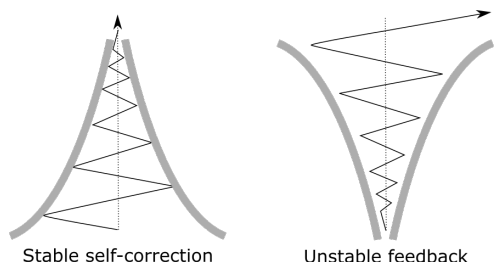
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Speed Wobbles in the World and Church

I woke up this morning, the day after the 2020 US election. I'm slightly despondent because it's close to being the worst possible result. I can say that without showing political bias because there's no winner yet! It looks set to be a close, contestable outcome, and I can only see further division emerging.



I've been thinking about it: America, and the Western World, has the **speed wobbles**. Do you know what I mean by that? Speed wobbles happen when you're on a bike, or perhaps a scooter, or some other form of vehicle. At a certain critical moment there can be resonance with the bike's built-in instabilities; the bike lurches from left to right and left to right, again and again. It falls afoul of its own feedback loop of movement until it crashes and causes injury. It doesn't crash into anything. Nothing happens to it. It crashes into itself.



The physics is graspable. A system is in some sort of equilibrium, running along smoothly until something shifts; the bike-rider adjusts for a change in the road. At this point there is always a form of over-correction. We

start heading too much in one direction, we pull back to the other, go too far, and return back towards the centre. In a

stable system these over-corrections slowly diminish until the equilibrium returns. In an unstable system each over-correction amplifies the next and it goes back and forth with increasing crescendo until it all falls apart.

We've got the speed wobbles in the West. There are two over-amplified directions. We have Trumpism on the "right", pulling back from government over-reach but also towards the gutter of blatant mercantilism and nationalist oligarchy; and the Wokeism of the "left" pulling us away from deep-seated social injustice but also towards the gutter of blatant progressive moralism and enforced globalist conformity. In the end, both extremes are terrible options; all gutters connect to the same sewer. So we lurch back and forth trying to avoid both.

The Western church is another example. We've come to look like the world, and so we reflect these two extremes. The gutter at one end is caricature of "evangelicalism" and "traditionalism". The former looks like a consumer-class hypocritical industry; by way of example, take a look at the portrayal of Christian marketing in Amazon's *The Boys* and you'll wince at how it hits close to home. The latter can look like a non-benign fanaticism, complete with the funny clothes. The gutter at the other opposite end is a similar Christian veneer over the worldly spirit. It is a caricature of social activism that becomes a militant more-equal-than-others paganism, preaching a message of autolatry ("You do you, you're perfect as you are") and burning nonconformists at a de-platformed stake. Again, both extremes are unpleasant reflections of each other.

We're not fully in those extremes of course. But we are wary of them, and usually seek to avoid them. The world is full of good people trying to put a tick in the box next to the candidate who is the least bad. The church is also full of faithful people seeking to avoid the divisive extremes, looking for a common ground somewhere amidst the encroaching shibboleths. As we search we move from left to right, and

right to left. At a certain point of instability, the speed wobbles appear.

There are many factors to this instability. Social media is certainly one of them. It forces nuanced adjustments to pick a side: "Are you for us or against us? What's it going to be? If you're not us then you must be them. All lives matter. Silence is violence. Wear a mask. Don't be a sheep!" etc. etc.

So here's the thing. What stops it? Once the speed wobbles start, how do you stop them? Doing nothing is not an option. The instability of the system itself drives the over-reaction. Without intervention a rending apart is inevitable. So what to do?

Many of us have become adept at hauling back in the opposite direction to the currently favoured force. It doesn't work in the end. Usually it just adds to the instability. Many of us have tried the art of the compromise, to do our best to speak of the common centre ground which will "dampen down" the volatility and bring stability. But that won't work if that shock absorption is no longer part of the system. No bike rider can maintain a constant series of equal-but-opposite reactions when it all goes wobbly.

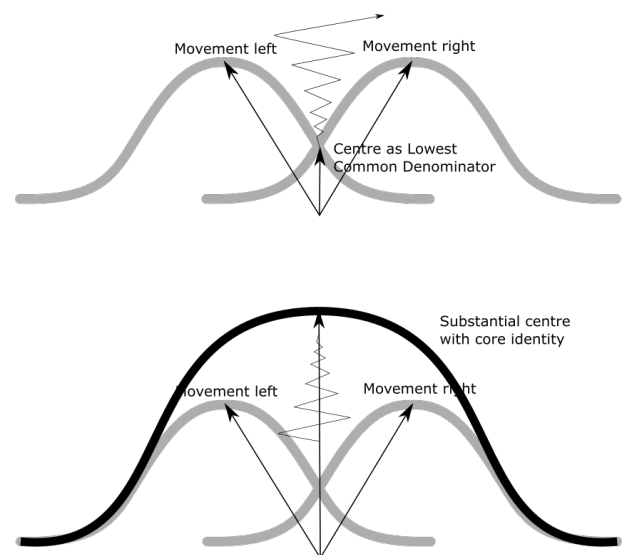
What is needed is a force, a movement, a direction that cuts across the oscillation. On a bike you get rid of the speed wobbles sometimes by slowing down, but also by speeding up, in the *forward* direction.

This is how it used to be in the political sphere. I heard a commentator the other day who had studied political manifestos from the 1950's. Political rivalries were just as impassioned then, but this was the observation: It used to be that the political differences were about different ways of applying the *same idea* but now they are about two competing ideas that are different altogether. That common *idea* was the stabilising forward force.

Finding that common idea is hard. It's not enough to long for it in the abstract, to speak of wanting *unity*, or *peace* for instance. Unity around what? Peace in what sense? These things only really exist as an appeal to something deeper, a sense of *identity*. In the UK, for instance, there was once a sense of what it meant to be "British." For better or for worse, the notion of "For King and Country" was a unifying stabilising common ground. The Americans have had the "Free World" as their identity marker. They may not be *great* identities, but they are stabilising ones.

In the church we have a similar difficulty. Our common ground has become abstract. We reaffirm that we are the "body of Christ" and that we "see Jesus in each other, no matter our differences." Such articulations have an admirable intent, but they only work when there's substance underneath the form. Who actually is this Jesus that we can conceive of and see in each other? If we can't agree on that big idea the instability only increases.

It's not enough, you see, to maintain the status quo. You can't re-centre an unstable system simply by reflecting the lowest common denominator in the middle. Look at what the church *does* talk about, either collectively or through its public persons, and you'll see what our lowest common denominator is: climate change, feeding the poor, and generally being good citizens. We agree on such things. But what *aren't* we saying? That's what is missing in the middle.



A broad church, well centred, is a thing of beauty, but that's not the same as a church with two centres and an overlap in the middle. We can do our best to maintain that overlap, but

it *is* in an inherently unstable system. The speed wobbles will start, and appeals to unity in the abstract are not enough to provide the centring, stabilising force.

I'm not sure what a positively centrist message looks like in the political world. I'm actually entirely open to the possibility that we've gone past our Commodus moment. It may be that the demise, decline, and fall of the Western world is as inevitable for us as it was for Rome, once it lost its way and didn't know who it was anymore. When I pray for our leaders in the political sphere, and other places of influence, this is the heart of my prayer: Oh Lord, give us the grace of a leader with a positive vision of how we can come to a substantial centre.

I pray something similar for the church world. But, of course, here there is a clearer kerygma. The centre has always been about Jesus. It's always been about worshipping him, learning from him, following him, as we gaze upon him through the revelation of God's word. There is no other Christian identity other than Jesus. When we are defined by him, in the ancient posture of sanctification rather than the presumption of our self-made existence, we are more and more his.

It is therefore, of course, why as Christians we are now looking to Jesus who is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, able to still the nations (Psalm 46:10). As the political world around us wobbles into a collision with itself, we, once again, entrust ourselves to one who is a rock on which to stand.