

Being a Christian in a Polarized World

Part 1

Steve Thompson

UUCF

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Agenda

- Session 1:
 - How do we live in a polarized country?
 - The diversity of Christianity
 - My theology
 - Godly Love
 - My answer: Godly Love in action
 - Education
- Session 2:
 - Godly love
 - Healthcare
- Session 3:
 - The Afterlife
 - We learn from adversity
 - Free will
 - National Service
 - Strengthening Democracy

Agenda

- Session 4:
 - Comparison of Liberal and Conservative Christianity
 - Bible
 - Theology
 - Laws
 - Focus
 - Stealing Jesus by Bruce Bawer
 - Bawer contrasts Fundamentalist/Evangelical Christianity versus liberal Christianity
 - He also gives a history of the rise of the politically activist conservative Christian organizations that have lead to today's situation where the Republicans claim to be the party for Christians, yet depending on your view of what a Christian should do, many would agree that it is the Democrats who are doing the work Jesus commanded us to do

How to Live in a Polarized Country?

- I want to provide a forum for discussion of this question
- While there are no simple or comprehensive answers, I think the mere act of discussing this topic will be beneficial, as thoughtful debate always is
- Hopefully my thoughts on this along with your contributions will help all of us to understand the problems and issues better and spur us to think of better ways to deal with the enormous complexities of distrust, misinformation, disinformation, isolation, threats to our planet, threats to democracy, and constitutional crises that our current political polarization has brought us
- While the word “Christian” is in our group's name, and I identify myself as a Unitarian Christian, we welcome everyone, Christian or not, to participate!

Why are we so Polarized?

- It has not always been this way; 50-60 years ago we were not nearly as polarized as we are today; what has changed?
- Many factors play a role
 - Shifting demographics
 - Economic changes and uncertainty
 - Legacies of discrimination still unresolved
 - Income inequality; greedy corporations
 - Technological changes, creation of echo chambers, spread of disinformation
 - ***Two very different viewpoints of Christianity***
 - Fundamentalist/evangelical Christians tend to be Republicans
 - Liberal Christians tend to be Democrats

Christianity is Very Diverse - Why?

- Those of you who have attended my Bible studies know that I have presented a variety of strong evidence that the Bible is full of contradictions and that some of it (Torah) was written by people driven by their own agenda
- There is plenty of reason to believe that Jesus came to *overturn the wrathful, judgmental view of God and instead describe God as good, loving, and forgiving*
- Consider these stark contrasts in the Bible:
 - The Jewish Scriptures, which are incorporated in the Christian Bible as the *Old Testament, portray a wrathful God* who is to be feared; yet the God described by Jesus in his parables is quite the opposite: merciful and loving
 - The people who knew Jesus best (his disciples) were mostly illiterate; the Bible has *nothing* written by them of their experiences with Jesus; the Gospels were written by people who did not know Jesus, written 40-60 years after he lived
 - Paul, who was *not* a disciple of Jesus, scared away the disciples and thus never learned from them what Jesus actually taught; but he wrote epistles that form a major part of the New Testament and have a large influence on Christianity
 - In an effort to convince fellow Jews that Jesus was an extension of God's plan, the Gospel writers tried very hard (too hard) to find clues to the coming of Jesus in the Jewish Scriptures; these connections, obviously false to the Jews, fool many Christians who do not understand Jewish history

Christianity is Very Diverse - Why?

- All these contrasts exist in the Bible, yet many Christians fail to notice the differences:
 - Wrathful view of God in the Old Testament
 - This understanding of God should be discounted as Jesus overturned it
 - Biographical accounts of Jesus in the Gospels
 - These should not be taken literally as they are based on attempts to show that the Jewish Scriptures “predicted” Jesus based on snippets from them that really have nothing to do with Jesus
 - Epistles of Paul
 - These writings are mixed (some good, some not) as Paul, who initially thought Christianity to be heretical and thus worked to stamp it out, scared away the disciples and never learned from them; his Road to Damascus vision convinced him Jesus was God’s son, but he knew nothing of what Jesus taught; I think it is accurate to say Paul became the leading spokesman for Christianity without knowing what he was talking about, though he did get some things right
 - Parables of Jesus in the Gospels
 - These represent the real teaching of Jesus! Fortunately Jesus preached in parables that were easily passed down by word of mouth. The parables teach a God of *love*, in contrast to other parts of the Bible which describe a wrathful God.
- Given these contrasts, it is not surprising that there is a wide range of understandings Christians have of God, especially given the belief in Biblical inerrancy held by many fundamentalists and evangelicals

My Theology

- God is good, loving, and forgiving
- Godly love
- God given Free Will
- We learn from adversity
- Jesus's mission was to teach us to act in Godly love, not to die
- We have Eternal Life: initially on earth and then in the afterlife
 - There is no hell
 - The afterlife is composed of “many rooms” of societies based on integrity, compassion, and ethics; to me, these “rooms” consist of everything in between the extremes of heaven and hell, with Heaven being the highest “room”; it is earned only through major internal transformation
 - It is people, not God, who decide who lives in each of these “many rooms”
 - One can always redeem himself/herself through contrition and coming to a new conviction to live as a better person; one's “station” in the afterlife is fluid, one can move up as one becomes more loving

Godly Love

- In his classic The Road Less Traveled, Scott Peck defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”
- Godly love means we *help* someone become the best person they can be; we help them spiritually grow; applies to one’s self as well
- We already do acts of love for other’s benefit
 - *Parental* love motivates us to act in the best interest of our children, including sacrificing our time, money and effort to raise them; good parents do this without even thinking about the sacrifices
 - Ditto for *romantic* love for your lover
 - Out of *friendship* we act in the best interest of our close friends
 - In these three cases, we benefit from the experience; there usually is payback because of the mutual relationship

Godly Love

- Peck is saying that Godly love is *action* and that the acts of Godly love can be similar to what we do for our spouse, children, and friends, *and sometimes it is done for people who are not in these categories*
- The motivation is that God wants us to
 - It also makes us better people
- Godly love, unlike romantic love, parental love, or friendship, *has nothing to do with emotion*
 - How much you like someone is irrelevant
- Love is *doing* something to help that person regardless of your feelings for them, sometimes even *in spite of* your feelings
 - Godly love, unlike romantic/parental/friendship, can be a real challenge to us, though in many cases it is not a challenge, but something we do quite willingly
 - We are *not* motivated by payback

Godly Love

- How do you help people grow spiritually? The answers depend on your skills, who you are helping, and on what *their* needs are
- The goal is spiritual growth and thus the prerequisites for spiritual growth are essential: one cannot grow spiritually unless basics such as food, shelter, education, and minimal health care are met; thus anyone helping to provide these or other prerequisites is performing an act of Godly love
- Godly love can be performed *for* individuals or groups, and *by* individuals or groups
- Godly love be done short-term or long-term, for people you know or do not know; the common characteristic is to take action for the sake of someone, regardless of feelings and without expecting payback; it is motivated by altruism

My Answer to Living in a Polarized World

- I know of no better way for us to live life than to *exercise Godly love and live according to democratic principles*
 - Three proposals of Godly love in action
 - Education
 - Health Care
 - National Service
- These of course will require years to have an impact, but the problem has developed over time and there are no quick remedies
- I also have a few ideas for strengthening democracy

Education Proposal

- The U.S. ranks far below where we should in public education
- Our schools are open 9 months a year, allowing children three months each year to forget what they had learned; instead those three months should be used to teach them more
- Our teaching methods are very old-fashioned
 - We have roughly 3.5 million students per grade; assuming four classes per day of 25 students, each teacher teaches ~100 students per day, so roughly 35,000 teachers teach the same subject each day; having a teacher lecture at a blackboard is very inefficient!
 - 50 years ago, that was perhaps the only way to teach, but not today
- By using currently available technology, developing federal computer courses, keeping kids at school longer, and changing how we use teachers, we can revolutionize public education

Education Proposal

- My proposal starts with keeping kids in school more
 - Extend the school year to 12 months and extend the school day to 9 - 9.5 hours; this will almost double the hours students spend at school
 - Make the school year 12 months, with 3 weeks off (a week in April, week before Labor Day, and Dec 24-Jan 1) plus President's Day, Memorial Day, July 4, Labor Day, and two days for Thanksgiving; so schools will be open 48 weeks per year; give students 2 weeks of vacation (timing is the parent's choice so the whole family can go on vacation) results in a 230 day school year, which is a 27% increase over the current school year of 180 days (some countries already have 230 days)
 - Combining a 27% increase in the number of school days with an almost 50% increase in the school day results in 90% more time in school than what kids have today, yet kids will attend school only 63% of the days in a year

Key Ideas

- Traditionally, (1) teachers lecture to a class of 25-30 students, while students listen and take notes at the teacher's pace; and (2) students do homework at home by themselves with no collaboration
- In this proposal ***both*** parts of learning are done ***at school***
- ***Replace teacher lecturing with lessons provided by laptop computers that students take at their own pace***
 - Federally developed lessons will be of very high quality and all students across the country will receive the ***same lessons***
- ***Replace “homework” with a teacher lead class in which students will be able to collaborate with each other***
 - Greater student-teacher interaction; when students come to the teacher's class, they have ***already*** completed the laptop lesson which ***introduced*** them to the topic; the teacher led class will be active ***“application”*** learning
 - Having students collaborate ***will teach them social skills*** and make the school day more interesting; the teacher's laptop will assign student groups each class so that each student is grouped with every other student in the class equally often throughout the year
- Keeping kids at school all day will enable parents to work their jobs without worrying about kids being home alone and getting into trouble

Key Ideas

- Each student will be issued one laptop to cover grades 5-12 (tablets for younger grades)
- This laptop will come with *high quality lessons stored in memory*
 - The laptop will store a few weeks or months worth of federally generated lessons, with new lessons downloaded at school as needed
- The laptop will come with headphones and navigation software to track students progress and ensure each student stays on schedule
- The laptop will be a “standalone” device: since *the lessons are in computer memory, no home internet is required*; the laptop will have internet network capability, but will *not* have a browser; students will *not* be able to access the web; the restricted network capability will be used for *phone, text and e-mails to the teacher and the student’s family only*
- By providing restricted phone/text/e-mail capability to every student for free, parents will be free to *stop buying cell phones for their kids*
 - A reduction in cell phone ownership by students will be beneficial: it will reduce cell phone addiction, cyber-bullying, social anxiety, etc.

Key Ideas

- The laptop lessons will be a mixture of *audio narration, text (bullets and paragraphs), pictures, videos, diagrams, and computer generated graphics*
 - Lessons will *not* be a video of a teacher lecturing
- The laptop will track the student's performance, report status to each teacher, guide the student to meet his/her required schedule, and present announcements from the principal
- Students will spend roughly half the school week in class with a teacher doing exercises according to their schedule
- When not in class (the other half of their time), students will report to “study hall”, which will be a classroom where each student conducts his/her laptop lessons independently of the other students; thus study halls can be a mixture of grades, and do not require a teacher at all; each student decides which subject to study as needed

Lesson Generation

- The laptop lessons will be assembled by the Dept. of Education using a variety of methods
 - Contracts with private companies who create the lessons
 - Purchase existing lessons
 - Develop lessons in-house
- Once a set of lessons is created, they can be *re-used for years at no additional cost*; only history lessons will need minor, incremental updates
- Contract with laptop manufacturers to assemble the tablets and laptops according to standards created by Dept. of Ed
 - Given the large quantity (3.5 million per year), I would expect each laptop to cost roughly \$1000 and last a student 8 years (tablet for younger kids); the cost of the laptops, tablets, and lessons will not be high, roughly \$120/student/year (\$4B) or less
- Laptop lessons can be outstanding in *all* subjects
 - The next few slides will discuss sample lessons of different subjects

Sample Math and Science Lessons

- Math: the screen will show equations being worked as a narrator explains; geometric drawings are drawn as a narrator explains key points; mathematical objects are drawn, shaded, rotated, etc. as narration describes what the student should understand
- Biology: diagrams, photos, pictures, videos can be shown with matching narration; imagine a diagram of a cell in biology: arrows and labels appear as the narrator explains the parts of the cell; the screen zooms in as the narration describes the inner workings
- Chemistry: diagrams of atoms and molecules show interactions as the narrator explains the chemical reactions
- Physics: a dynamic, computer generated drawing of earth revolving around the sun showing its tilt as narrator describes the changes in seasons due to the relative position of the sun to each hemisphere; as narrator speaks, arrows appear to highlight what is being explained
- New course: “Quantification and the Scientific Method” for 7th grade will teach kids the importance of measuring things and stating quantities in well defined units of measure; students will become familiar with many units of measure and learn how to convert from one to another; also teaches the scientific method before real science classes (biology, chemistry, and physics) are taught
- Create and supply equipment for hands-on work in science labs
- New: create “hands-on” props for math (for example, create objects and graph paper that can be used to physically measure lengths, areas and volumes to complement computation of these values)
- Laptops will have built-in calculators, but will ensure students learn the fundamentals of how computations are done before learning to take short cuts with a calculator

Sample History Lessons

- Computer graphics, photos, maps, narration and diagrams can grab students' attention and tell an enticing story
 - For example, a map of the U.S. is displayed; then states are colored to show which join the Confederacy, and which join the Union as the Civil War begins; as the narrator describes major battles and events, the map shows their locations; interspersed are comments about the Union's and the Confederacy's assessments, plans, and fears in the voices meant to sound like Lincoln and Davis or their generals; pictures of the generals leading each army, the weapons used, and the dead on the battlefield, etc. are shown as the narrator describes what happens in each battle and its consequences
 - These lessons would have some of the best characteristics of well-made “documentaries”

History Lessons

- History should be taught differently; instead of dividing history courses geographically (US, European, Western Civ, etc), we should divide history into time periods, teach it chronologically and teach it world-wide in each time period
 - Would probably want greater share of history to be done on the laptop, and less in class; extra time should allow for more complete covering of history
- Divide 40 centuries of human history over 7 years (grades 6-12): cover roughly 15 centuries in each of the 6th and 7th grades; then ~4 centuries each year in 8th and 9th grades; study the 19th C in 10th grade and the 20th/21st C in the 11th and 12th grade
 - Learning history chronologically puts it all in context time-wise
- Cover *history all over the world* in each time period, not just one region; this will put what happens in each region *in context* with what is occurring elsewhere at the same time
- In addition to “political” history, include topics such as the lives of ordinary people, technology, *religion, minorities*, medicine, science, etc.
 - We have been afraid of teaching religion and thus *we have been unaware of just how significantly religious beliefs have steered our politics* (Bawer, Stealing Jesus)
 - Geography should also be included in teaching history and not taught as a separate subject

History Lessons

- History should be taught *fully, fairly, and honestly*
- We have been guilty of glossing over black history and women's history; their history should be seamlessly included
- We need to teach history in a *balanced* manner that covers both the good and the bad
 - In doing so, I am convinced the US will look good, but we are not a perfect nation, and we should not ignore or deny our faults
 - Our Founding Fathers understood that we should work to be a “more perfect union”, and allowed for Constitutional amendments
 - True patriotism is not just “rah, rah, rah!” but:
 - *Appreciation of what is good*
 - *Recognition of what is bad*
 - *A determination to fix our problems*
 - *Our history should be taught with these ideas in mind*

Sample English Lessons

- English: the screen will start with poorly written paragraph; the narrator will explain why the sentences are disjointed, with the topics poorly ordered, and the screen will highlight the deficiencies; as the narrator explains how to improve the paragraph, a clause will be highlighted, and then the student will see new words typed in over the original; as the narrator explains why, the sentences are re-arranged; finally when a much improved version is achieved, the narrator will explain why this is better as the screen highlights what the narrator is discussing
- For poetry, the narrator can read the poem as images suggested by the poem (wealth or poverty, good weather or bad weather, happiness or loneliness, etc.) appear on screen, encouraging the student to imagine what the poem is saying
- Reading classic literature is great and some books should be read in their entirety, but there is not enough time to read them all; literature lessons could cover many classics in a shortened version, with the student reading some passages and the redacted portions being summarized so the student can follow the plot and themes
- ***Reading literature should be coordinated with history lessons***; when students are studying a particular time period in their history lessons, the literature they read should come from the same time period; this automatically puts literature into chronological context and reinforces what students should be learning about the cultural and political environments of the time period they are studying in their history lessons

Sample Foreign Language Lessons

- Foreign language: the narrator will read texts as the students follows along on the screen; the student can also perform exercises to test learning by typing in answers to questions in the foreign language
 - Using AI, the laptop can carry on a conversation in the foreign language with the student; I am sure the AI could be taught to understand the student's English when the student does not know how to say what he wants, and the laptop can tell the student how to say what is desired
 - The students can hear the foreign language spoken while the screen *shows pictures* of items mentioned; I have never seen this tried, but I suspect that this might be *conducive to students learning to "think" in the foreign language* instead of translating each word into English
- The ability of the laptop to teach American kids a foreign language can also be used to help immigrants learn English; the lessons on the laptop in other subjects (math. history, science) could be given both in English and Spanish on the laptop so that students weak in English could be educated in all subjects while they simultaneously learn English

Laptop Lessons will be self paced

- For any subject, the lessons will spend a few minutes teaching a topic, then have the student perform a few exercises to see if the student has learned what he/she should; these exercises can be of a very wide variety (not just multiple choice!), from writing sentences, to short answer, to writing mathematical expressions, even drawing things; computer AI can be used to intelligently assess the correctness of student replies to these exercises; based on how well the student performs on these exercises, the laptop can allow the student to continue, or it may tell the student what he did not understand and repeat the topic; and at any time, if the student realizes that he did not fully understand something, he can voluntarily go back a few minutes and repeat; the students will be *working independently* so no one will know when a student back-tracks (thus not embarrassing to do so); students will learn it is better to back-track and learn the material than to blunder forward
- Four major things students should learn:
 - Listening - now and under this proposal
 - Reading - now and under this proposal
 - Writing - now and under this proposal
 - *Speaking* - is not part of their school experience now; will be under this proposal

Laptop “Short Courses”

- Laptop “Short Courses” are designed to teach students about non-academic, but important topics they need to know to successfully navigate life’s issues
- Short courses help “level the playing field” by teaching kids things that other kids typically learn from their parents
- Example topics: (1) personal finances (banking, credit cards, making a budget, tax preparation, etc); (2) healthcare: hygiene (younger kids), anatomy, diet, exercise, sleep, what to void, etc.; (3) cooking; (4) driver’s ed; (5) basics of economics; (6) renting vs. home buying, mortgages, closing, home maintenance, etc. (7) navigation and map reading; (8) stock market, investing, etc. (9) music; (10) travel; (11) meteorology; (12) psychology, (13) dancing (social development), (14) careers
- These short courses would vary from roughly 2-20 hours each and would take 1-2 hours per week; the difficulty would be grade-appropriate; at 2 hours/week over 6 years, this adds up to 500 or so total hours!

Education Proposal

- The advantages to this program are numerous:
 - Laptop lessons will be of *high quality* and students will take them at their *own pace*; communication with the teacher is provided by the laptop
 - The laptop lessons will “*level the playing field*” by giving all kids the same set of high quality lessons; lower income kids will feel special by getting a laptop just like the rich kids get
 - The “in school” class that replaces homework will allow for much *greater teacher-student interaction and allow students to collaborate with each other*
 - *Enhanced social skills*
 - *Students will learn to collaborate, work as a team, respect others*
 - *Students will learn to speak up*
 - The longer school year and day will ensure kids spend adequate time learning, will help keep them out of trouble and yet will allow free time on evenings and weekends
 - Students who wish to take a heavier than usual extracurricular load will be able to do so by spending time at home in the evenings and on weekends catching up on laptop lessons

Education Proposal

- The advantages to this program are numerous:
 - Given the superior instruction and immediate feedback on the exercises a student does, the laptop will essentially serve as an *individual tutor* for each student
 - The goal is that average students will accomplish all they need to do in school, allowing free evenings and weekends; but slower students can use some of that time if needed to keep up, and the better students can learn extra by taking advantage of bonus material
 - Students unable to attend school because of health issues will receive a laptop and be able to fully complete the lessons though they will miss the hands-on learning class-room experience; still a big step forward
 - During unscheduled school closures, students may do laptop work at home
 - Students can take up to 2 weeks vacation per year, with teacher approval, and the laptop can be used to either get ahead on lessons before the vacation, or cover some school work during vacation; this provides incentive to do well, and allows families greater flexibility as to when to go on vacation
 - Distributing these laptops to third world countries (in native language) could be a tremendous boon; would be a wonderful foreign aid tool