

An Open Letter to Young “Post-Partisan” Evangelicals

by David French
(May 23, 2012)

It’s that time again – the time when the younger evangelical generation surveys our damaged nation, observes the terrible reputation of leading evangelical “culture warriors” in the pop culture and with their peers, and says, “You guys blew it. It’s time for a new approach, for a post-partisan approach. We’re not in anyone’s political pocket. We’re not focused on politics at all.” You look at books like Jonathan Merritt’s *A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars* and think, “Finally someone is speaking to us. We’re about Jesus – not about Republicans, not Democrats, just Jesus.” Young, post-partisan evangelicals, this letter is for you.

Dear fed-up idealists,

I used to be you. I know that’s hard to believe. After all, I’m pretty darn partisan. I’m a religious liberties lawyer, a pro-life activist, the founder of Evangelicals for Mitt, and the most recent winner of the American Conservative Union’s Ronald Reagan Award. I serve my country in uniform in the Army Reserves and am a veteran of the Iraq War. In other words, for a lot of you out there, I’m less role model than cautionary tale. I’m the guy you’re trying not to be – the guy you think is destroying our Christian witness. Heck, I’m the guy that even I used to hate.

How did this happen? Why did this happen? The short answer is that it happened because life happened – real life. So let’s take a trip back through time.

–1991–

Step 1: Despising my elders. We called ourselves “Solomon’s Colonnade” after the temple area where Jesus delivered one of his many stinging rebukes to the religious leaders of the day. There were only a few of us, friends from college, but we were determined to upend the silly, partisan hypocrisy of the religious right. I blame Bono, really. I attended a U2 concert during the 1987 “Joshua Tree” tour, and was enthralled as Bono (a real rock star!) not spoke openly about his love for Jesus, he wound up his rousing mini-sermon with a

passionate condemnation of the televangelists who were then dominating public religious life. His words were both shocking and exhilarating: “Here’s my message to the televangelists: get the f**k off my TV screen!”

Well, that generation of televangelists did eventually “get the f**k off” the TV screen – doomed by their own insatiable appetites – but that wasn’t enough for me. Simply put, I was convinced we hadn’t been doing church right, and my friends in Solomon’s Colonnade were going to do what we could to reboot the whole thing. We spent hours talking late into the night, discussing everything from ideal church governance to the right way to engage politics and the culture. We didn’t reach any consensus other than the consensus that we could do it better – whatever “it” was. And we had to do better.

I graduated from college, Solomon’s Colonnade faded into oblivion, but my goals didn’t change. Oh, I was philosophically conservative – a biblical literalist, an admirer of Edmund Burke, and very deeply pro-life – but I was convinced that the core, life-affirming values of my faith were being wasted and squandered by partisans and charlatans. Shortly after law school, while reflecting on the latest media-reported “outrage” from Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson or James Dobson, I remember emailing my friends something like this: “There has to be a

revolution in American Christianity. The old guard has to go, and we have to put Jesus at the center of all we do. I don’t have to lead the revolution, but at least let me drive the tank.” How those words would come to haunt my conscience....

–2004–

Step 2: Encountering life. I was living my dream. Sure, I was still pro-life (I co-founded Harvard Law School’s only pro-life student group), but you couldn’t categorize me! I had also written a then widely-read op-ed arguing that gay marriage was “inevitable” and that the state had forfeited any legal grounds for denying gay couples the “right” to marry. No labels for me!. Shortly after publishing that op-ed, I found myself not only leading a nonpartisan free speech organization but also being profiled in a progressive Christian magazine (sadly defunct or I’d link the article) as an example of nonpartisan Christian leadership. My friends in Solomon’s Colonnade would have been so proud.

But I soon realized that my nonpartisanship had a steep price. I could be pro-life, but not too pro-life. You see, if you’re too pro-life; if you talk about too much, then you can’t be post-partisan. One political party is completely dedicated to legal protection of abortion on demand. The other political party is completely dedicated to repealing Roe v. Wade. If you talk too much about abortion, others will define you, and if you’re defined how can you be independent?

“No problem,” my hip inner voice said. Pro-life is really whole life. Anti-poverty programs, environmental advocacy – that’s all ‘pro-life’ in the broad sense, right? Can’t I be pro-life and maintain my independence?” But my rational inner voice quickly rebelled. If I’m “whole life” without talking about unborn children then I’m functionally pro-abortion, but if I’m “whole life” and bring unborn children into that conversation in any meaningful way, then I’m right back where I started. Besides, the effect on life of driving a Prius over a pickup truck can’t be measured with a (metaphorical) electron microscope. But if an abortion clinic shuts down or a young mom is persuaded not to abort, a real live human being is born – a person of incalculable worth. Yes, I want them to grow and flourish in a just society, and yes I want them to have economic opportunity. But it’s tough to enjoy justice and opportunity when you’re dead.

So I was pro-life. Firmly. Actively.

I clung, however, to my marriage position – with even greater ferocity. But my rational voice rebelled once again against my hip inner voice. Didn’t no-fault divorce fly directly in the face of biblical marriage? Weren’t legal regimes that were focused entirely around adult self-actualization having measurable and devastating effects on our culture? Why then would we continue down the path of marriage as a legally recognized means of adult self-actualization rather than marriage as a legally-protected institution of cultural preservation?

Then, as a lawyer, I saw the catastrophic effects that normalization of same-sex relationships was having on religious liberty. And I realized I was wrong.

As I decisively entered the “culture war” I discovered something shocking: there aren’t that many of us. (What’s that? Are you telling me that Christians aren’t obsessed with gays and abortion? That’s what all the polls say!) As I traveled around the country and spoke at churches, Tea Party rallies, and conferences, I realized that the number of Christians who truly fight the culture war is quite small. How small? In 2011, I researched the budgets of the leading culture war organizations and compared them to the leading Christian anti-poverty organizations. Here’s what I found:

How do those numbers stack up with leading Christian anti-poverty charities? Let’s look at just three: World Vision, Compassion International, and Samaritan’s Purse. Their total annual gross receipts (again, according to most recently available Form 990s) exceed \$2.1 billion. The smallest of the three organizations (Samaritan’s Purse) has larger gross receipts than every major “pro-family” culture war organization in the United States combined. World Vision, the largest, not only takes in more than \$1 billion per year, it also has more than 1,400 employees and 43,000 volunteers.

In other words, Christians are overwhelmingly focused with their money and their time on the poor, not on culture war issues. Then why are Christians portrayed differently? Because the media is obsessed with the sexual revolution and demonizes dissent. If news outlets focus on Christians only when engaged on culture war issues and ignores the much more extensive work we do for the poor in Africa, in Asia, and at home, then it’s no wonder the wider world sees us as politically-obsessed. Anyone who believes that Christians are in control of their own public image does not understand how public perceptions are created in this country. No one is in

total control of their own image and reputation. Not even the President – and shame on me for not realizing that in my days of naive rage.

–2007–

Step 3: Becoming my elders: I’ll never forget the day I met James Dobson. I was preparing to appear on a Focus on the Family broadcast highlighting a number of my cases on behalf of Christian students. In a very real way that broadcast would cement my transition (not that anyone cared about that but me) from “post-partisan” to firmly, completely “religious right.” I was joining Focus and many others in their long fight against cultural and legal trends that result in millions of aborted babies, millions of broken families, persistent poverty, and increasing inequality. On that day, I was struck by Dr. Dobson’s humility and the humility of his staff. There was a palpable feeling that they were answering God’s call on their lives – serving their role in the Body of Christ, a role certainly no more important than that played by others but vital nonetheless.

Of course they’re not perfect. Of course I’m not perfect. Of course I’m in fact deeply flawed. But so are relief workers at World Vision. So is the pastor you may admire so much. So were each one of Jesus’s disciples and apostles. As we fight the culture war, we’re going to make mistakes, we’re not going to agree with each other, and sometimes I still get deeply frustrated at my own side. But I no longer believe the lie that there is a path for Christians through this culture that everyone will love – or even most people will love. I no longer believe the lie that American Christians are “too political” and if we only spoke less about abortion we’d be more respected (the mainline denominations have taken that path for two generations, and they continue to lose members and cultural influence).

So, “post-partisan” Christians, please ponder this: First, as the price for your new path, are you willing to forego any effective voice at all for unborn children? Are you willing to keep silent when the secular world demands your silence? After all, that is the true price of non-partisanship – silence. Second, if you believe that a more perfect imitation of Christ (more perfect than the elders you scorn) will lead to more love and regard for the Church, consider this: No one was more like Christ than Christ, and he wound up on a cross with only the tiniest handful of followers by his side.

Follow Jesus, yes, but don’t think for a moment that will improve your image, and don’t be surprised if He takes you down much the same path He took the generation before you.

Responding to the Young “Post-Partisan” Evangelicals

by Denny Burk
(May 25, 2012)

Jonathan Merritt has responded to David French’s “An Open Letter to Young, ‘Post-Partisan’ Evangelicals.” If you still haven’t read French’s letter, do so now. It’s provocative, good, and right.

It’s no surprise, however, that Merritt disagrees with that assessment. Instead, he says that French has put forth a false choice. Merritt writes:

I am most troubled by Mr. French’s promotion of a popular false choice rampant among many partisan Christians today. He writes, “So, ‘post-partisan’ Christians, please ponder this: First, as the price for your new path, are you willing to forego any effective voice at all for unborn children? Are you willing to keep silent when the secular world demands your silence?”

According to Mr. French, Christians today have two options. We can either continue to fight the culture wars as some conservative American evangelicals have done for more than three decades, or we can retreat from the public square, abandon the unborn, and “keep silent.” But I don’t know anyone who advocates for the latter.

I don’t know anyone who advocates for the latter either – at least not in so many words. But that’s not really the point of French’s letter. The point is that no matter how you frame it, the cultural elites will not allow you to be too pro-life. As far as access to the mainstream media megaphone goes, your options are limited if you are too pro-life. You either have to tone it down or forfeit the platform.

The fact is that the cultural elites have very little time or patience with those who treat the pro-life cause as a transcendent moral issue—one deserving a certain priority in the ordering of our public life. If you say out loud that abortion-on-demand is the greatest human rights crisis of our time, you will find yourself on the margins pretty quickly. That is the cost of access to those platforms.

Ordinary evangelicals, however, do not have access to those platforms, nor do they seek them. As Christian Smith demonstrates in his book *Christian*

America? What Evangelicals Really Want, the average evangelical isn’t much of a political activist, despite the way they are portrayed in the media. For most evangelicals, the extent of their political activism is showing up to vote at election time. These evangelicals view the franchise as a stewardship and a privilege, and that is just as it should be.

My concern with the post-partisanship of Jonathan Merritt is the message that it sends to ordinary evangelicals. When the ordinary evangelical steps into the voting booth this November, he will in fact have a choice to make. And that choice will involve prioritizing some issues over others. But I think Merritt disagrees. In his new book *A Faith of Our Own*, he writes:

Evangelicals... often reduce the immense witness of the Scriptures to only a few culture-war issues – namely, abortion and gay marriage. Both are important issues deserving serious thought. The Scriptures speak often about life and sexuality. But they also regularly address poverty, equality, justice, peace, and care of God’s good creation.

If Christians act as if the culture-war issues are the only issues or make them so paramount that they dwarf all others, we distill the limitless bounty of the Scriptures into a tiny cup of condensed political juice (p. 89).

How is a reader to apply this reasoning when it comes to voting? Merritt seems to be saying that evangelicals need not prioritize ending the regime of *Roe v. Wade* in their exercise of the franchise. If that is the message he’s trying to send, I think he is dead wrong.

When it comes to voting (which is the extent of political activism for most evangelicals), if

everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. Merritt’s “post-partisan” approach causes the pro-life issue to get lost in the din of competing interests.

Christians should cast a wary eye toward anyone who suggests that abortion-on-demand is just one among many social ills. In America, it is the single greatest human rights crisis of our time, and to overlook the fact that it is legal in all fifty states to kill a person at any time from 0-9 months gestation is unconscionable.

Abortion definitely deserves more than “serious thought” in the voting booth. It deserves priority.