

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

April 18, 2017

Well, here we are at 5 p.m. on "Tax Day."  
Are your taxes done?

For some of us, last year's taxes are old news at this point. For others of us, we're sweating the number of hours we have left and are wondering about just filing for an extension. Either, way, this is a day on which most of us may be thinking about government in one way or another.



And because this column is generally an effort to think theologically about various aspects of our lives, I was intrigued by one of the opening articles in the current issue of *The Atlantic*, entitled "Breaking Faith."<sup>1</sup> The thesis of the article is that, **as American churchgoing has declined, politics has grown more vicious and convulsive than ever.**

The author, Peter Beinart, points out that the number of Americans who reject any religious affiliation has grown from 6% in 1992 to 22% in 2014, and that among Millennials, that number is 35%. Many had thought that, with secularism's triumph over conservative Christian views on many hot-button issues, the vitriol of "the culture wars" would become less. But intolerance is a significant problem for the Left as well as the Right, and our increasingly non-religious nation has not stopped viewing our common life as a struggle between "us" and "them." Beinart notes that "Many have come to define *us* and *them* in even more primal and irreconcilable ways."



One of the changes that led to last year's election results is the fact that the percentage of white Republicans with no religious affiliation has tripled since 1990. For the most part, the evangelicals who helped to elect President Trump are those who do not go to church at all.

Beinart wonders why these religiously unaffiliated persons embraced Trump's dystopian view of America at a much higher rate than their church-going peers. Has the

absence of church made their lives worse, for example, or are people with troubled lives more likely to give up on church?

He points out that culturally-conservative white Americans who are disengaged from church experience less economic success and more family breakdown than those who remain connected. They are more likely to suffer from divorce, addiction, and financial distress. They have difficulty holding down a job, getting and staying married, and forging real and lasting ties in their community.

## A Life that Matters; Relationships that Last?

<sup>1</sup> Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *The Atlantic*, April 2017, 15-17.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/>

And Beinart notes that **when conservatives disengage from organized religion, they don't become more tolerant. They become intolerant in different ways.** Research shows that evangelicals who don't regularly attend church are less hostile to gay people than those who do. But they are more hostile to African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, and immigrants in general.

The good news in that sad story is that the evidence supports the idea that the more committed members of Christian churches are more likely to let Jesus' message of love for all—even enemies—to erode their prejudices. As one example, Beinart notes that the Alt-Right critics of Christianity usually blame Christians for being insufficiently nativist (!).

Conservatives are not alone in abandoning faith communities. Persons on the Left are even less religious, with 73% of white liberals seldom or never attending any church. This has inclined many white liberals toward more revolutionary political candidates, and that trend is also apparent among African Americans.

Although African Americans are more likely than whites to attend church, African Americans under 30 are three times less likely to attend church than are African Americans over 50. This change is apparent in many ways, not least in the Black Lives Matter movement, which is decidedly non-churched, if not actually anti-church.

Jamal Bryant a pastor in an AME church in Baltimore, noted that “The difference between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Civil-Rights movement is that the Civil-Rights movement, by and large, came out of the church.” As a result of this change, the ethics of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation that empowered leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela are missing from the movement.

Beinart concludes his essay with the observation that “*Secularization isn't easing political conflict. It's making American politics even more convulsive and zero-sum.*”

Political commentators dreamed for years that the culture war over religious morality that began in the 60's and 70's would fade away. *It has. And the more secular, more ferociously national and racial culture war that has followed is worse.*”

Now while Beinart's review of our culture wars is sobering, I hope you also see the Hope it contains. Simply attending church as a passive onlooker probably doesn't do much good for anyone. **But being a meaningful part of a faith community that lives and loves like Jesus is still the Hope of the World.**

Dave

