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Does Faith Divide Us? | Tahera Ahmad & Russell Moore

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The Veritas Forum

Tahera Ahmad, Associate Chaplain and Director of Interfaith Engagement at Northwestern, and Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, discuss their Muslim and Christian faiths respectively and whether faith divides or unites us. Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast ~ Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we're here from Russell Moore. President of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission with the Southern Baptist Church, and Tahera Ahmad, Associate Chaplain and Director of Interfaith Engagement at Northwestern University, asking the question, "Does Faith Divide Us?" from the stage Northwestern University.

So, one of the things that I wanted to start off with in terms of this conversation and some of the questions that were asked of me in conversation, and to really think about some of the questions that we are going to, I think, explore during the moderation period, I wanted to start this conversation not as the representative of all of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. I wanted to speak from my own perspective as an American Muslim woman on her journey in this religious tradition, and be able to express this from a more personal perspective. And so, if it's okay with you, I'm going to talk about this topic via my own experience, if that's okay.

Is that okay? And I will try to do justice to my understanding of American Islam, as well as a global perspective of the 1.6 billion Muslims. I wanted to start with my own journey

in the Muslim tradition as we start this conversation. So, I actually grew up not very far from here.

I grew up in Martin Grove, if some of you know where that is. Actually, first we were living in the city, I used to play street basketball in Chicago, and then we moved to the suburbs because my parents wanted all of our siblings to preserve our Muslim identity, so I went to a private Muslim school. How many of you have been to a JDS, like a Jewish day school or a Catholic school or a poor or a kyyl school? Okay, a couple of people in here.

So, maybe you could relate to me when I say that in many ways I felt like I was indoctrinated to the faith tradition from the time I was a young girl. So, what I mean by that is I don't think I really questioned my Muslim identity. I was going along with what everyone else was doing.

I was wearing this hijab because all the other young women would wear the hijab. I would fasten Ramadan, which by the way is coming in a week. Not because I was really excited to fast from food and water, but because it was part of the faith and everyone else was participating, and I was remembering five times a day all of those things.

I don't think I really questioned my faith identity until I was graduating from junior high and going on to high school, and I remember begging my parents to send me to a public high school so that I could not just argue with something like, "I don't want to get to just know Sara and Khatija and Ahmed and Ali. I wanted to get to know the Stacies and the Kins and the Jacobs and the Jasons." My dad would never allow Jacobs and Jasons, just kidding. Anyway, I went to Nausea's high school.

I played Varsity basketball, I ran track, I played volleyball. I felt like I was part of this social kind of milieu because if you play a team sport, you're kind of part of the athletes in here probably know what I'm talking about. Three years fast forward because of the sake of time, I have a lot to share with you, but in terms of that formative period of my life, I remember most Americans at the time were talking about right before 9/11.

So senior year of my high school is when 9/11 happened. The same teammates who were like, "Oh, you're cool. I don't know what that's on your head." But we just got along, so to speak.

Those same teammates were really quiet, the locker rooms got quiet. The same referee who had seen me play in the center of suburban league for the last three years who would give me high fives and say, "Hey, there are recruiters out here today for you." Actually, stop the game at a minute, 34 seconds left into the fourth quarter and said, "Number 33, you're in violation of the IHSA." Illinois rules for uniform and code and conduct, meaning he was questioning everything I was wearing. So interesting things have happened.

When I was back into the game, a parent walked down from the bleacher and said, "Number 33, it's a shame they let you back in." And said something along the lines of, "They shouldn't let any of you in." So I knew that the rhetoric was changing. I felt it. A lot of things happened.

A young man in my gym class, he was in leaders gym. We would lead gym class together, decided to tear my hijab off, spanned my face and said, "I know why you don't want to date me. I'm not going to be a kid." I mean, really horrible things.

For me to just kind of whisper it right now for the sake of time is actually, there were all tragic things that happened. So in terms of this question around, does religion divide us? Do we live in a polarized age? I experienced that firsthand as an American Muslim growing up in this country. What's interesting though is that the stats around the 9/11 and what happened after that are actually quite similar to where we are today, in terms of the experience of the American Muslim, young Muslim community today.

My honors English teacher asked me to stay after class one day and said, "Tahara, I just want you to know that if you need to talk to someone, I'm here for you." And I thought, finally, someone wants to really listen and understand what's going on. I said, "Tahara, if your father forces you to wear that or if he beats you at home, I'm here for you. Their counselors here, their social workers here, we are all here for you." And I know that this man went really well, like he was well-meaning, but clearly there was something, he had some form of misinformation that was guiding his question, so I said, "Why do you feel that way? Like my father is a neurosurgeon.

You've met him. Like he's one of the most brilliant people you probably ever met." And, well, I didn't say that part to him. I was thinking that part.

And so he went back to his desk. We had printed something, and it was this image of a man from Taliban, and he was holding a stick with what it seems like he's beating a bunch of women wearing burquas, very in that part of the world. So he put that in front of me.

Now, look at the juxtapositioning of that. I'm 16, 17 years old. He's asking me to answer some questions about Islam, his perception of Islam.

I was the only other girl in the entire 4,000 student body that wore the hijab, so I'm the Muslim for him, right? The expert on all things. I remember thinking him. I was like, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." And I was leaving that classroom thinking to myself, like, "Oh my gosh, the world's going to continue to ask a whole lot of questions, and I need some answers fast." And I think those answers were more for myself than trying to answer other people.

But what's interesting is, for me, the question around this idea of growing up in a polarist

world was a reality. So that's where I kind of want to start in this conversation in terms of my own personal journey in this idea of faith. What does faith really mean for you? Often I have to answer what it was not, then what it is, right? That's my journey.

This young man, this is an image from UC Berkeley. He was asked, he was an art major. He was asked to come into a class with his project, and he walked in this form, and he's like, "This is me.

This is how I feel every single day in terms of my religious identity. This is what people think of me." And what's interesting is this is from, actually, Gallup and Pew both used these stats, and you can see from 2001 through 2010 that there were unfavorable attitudes, obviously, towards Muslims. This is a very recent image of a young woman, right? Same.

You can see that the juxtapositioning is almost the same. Same kind of labels that are being thrown out. So when we talk about polarization or the idea that one religion or many religions are part of this kind of conversation in the political climate, Islam happens to be even worse than atheism in terms of how Muslims are perceived, or how negative attitudes are subjected towards Muslims.

The idea that faith is good, generally speaking, but your faith is what divides us. That's how I grew up feeling or thinking, is that generally speaking, because, as many of you know, Gallup reports that in the western part of the world, this includes Europe, America is the most practicing or religious nation in the western world, so to speak. So religion is valued in the sense of faith is a good thing, but your faith in particular is what divides us, divides the entire world.

You look at all of the different parts of the world that are on fire, the West Bank, all part of the exterior, commonly, if you think about it. So this is kind of where I want us to have a conversation in terms of how I grew up and how I perceived all of this. Islamophobia is a reality.

It wasn't just 9/11. It was actually pre-9/11. Running me trust report is something that you can all look at, but it's this idea of prejudice against hatred or big a treat towards fear of Islam in Muslims.

And what is it all tied to? It's all tied to this idea that Islam is monolithic. It cannot adapt to new realities. It cannot share same values as major faith traditions, that it's inferior, archaic.

Islam is a religion of violence, supports terrorism, and that it's a political ideology, not a faith. So this is an important part to remember in this conversation, that if you brand an entire tradition, something that is a political ideology versus an actual fate that's practiced, that changes everything when we talk about the political climate. These next

few slides I'm going to go through quickly because they're all just stats, right? To kind of give you an idea of much of this has been reported by Gallup, all the way from 2002, where 48% of American Muslims say that they have personally experienced racism.

You have 65% of young Arabs, 76% of young Arabs, all the way to 2010. 47% of Americans showed unfavorable attitudes, and the question Gallup asked was, would you want a Muslim neighbor? And 47% of Americans in that study said, no. What's really interesting is, 58% of those same people polled said they don't even know a Muslim.

Really interesting, right? That 47% said, I don't want a Muslim neighbor, but then 58% said, well, I've never actually really met a Muslim. They probably have, because one out of 10 American Muslims is a physician, for example, and I often say that you're more likely to be saved at the hands of a Muslim than die at the hands of a Muslim, which most people don't know about. This is from Pew, but it's a few years old, and I purposely put it in here.

It says 57% of the US population is currently Protestant. Does anyone know what's wrong with the slide? 2014, Pew came out with a really, really important stat around Protestant, because, well, basically the difference between the people that are in the state, and the difference between where we are now in terms of Protestant Christianity in this country. So it went down to 49%.

And that shift is what, kind of what you were alluding to, right, is what some folks say, right, and then in the world of understanding what happened in the 2016 election, and what drove much of that conversation was around this idea that if the United States, right, obviously if you add the Catholics and Protestants together, the United States is a Christian majority. But if you were to say, well, who am I to say, because I'm a Muslim, very Catholics, of course, are Christian to me, right, but if you were to say, well, does it have a denominational majority of Christianity, and no longer does? So that keeping the back of your minds, right, in terms of how we're having this conversation, that the United States does no longer has a Protestant majority anymore, right, and actually it's dropped out about 48%. In terms of American Muslims, though, very diverse.

You have a third of the population of American Muslims. It's actually African American, which roots back to the transatlantic slave trade. Folks like you've heard of Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali.

The idea that many of them believe that they were Muslim and they were brought here during the transatlantic slave trade is an interesting conversation, but not for now. Point being they're very diverse. And one of the questions around polarization of religion and this idea of division that continues to be asked of the American Muslim community is, why don't you condemn terrorism? And the truth is, many Muslims have.

There was a million Muslim march in New York City right after 9/11 that was not really

covered. There are many statements by Muslim legal scholars as well as large organizations that hijacking planes, terrorism that's not part of Islam. And then Muslims in Chicago right here started something called the My Jihad Campaign.

Jihad is often a word that's used in this idea of polarizing religion, right, where Jihad is the idea of a struggle that one goes through, but in the state of war it's fighting, right, your enemy, so to speak. So this campaign was started and Northwestern actually took part of it, right? You see actually this is from several years ago. This young man says, "My Jihad is to celebrate all kinds of love," meaning my struggle towards humanity is to do this work.

Another, this is actually one of the fraternities, right, our Jihad is the Foster Brotherhood. Well, what happened? Let me just show you how it can be polarizing, right? The same thing can be misused. So here religion is being used to unite people, but that same ad was taken by, I'm not going to say who you can find out for yourselves, but it was taken and misused on New York busties.

By saying, "My Jihad is to blow up this bus full of guffars," right? That same terminology. So the question around, okay, does religion divide us or unite us is an interesting one. My take on it is historically, if you were to look at numbers, just statistics, right, and we have a professor who can do a better job than I can on this.

But in terms of running numbers on, okay, when we think of the way in which lives have been lost, could you put religion as an identity of a people or culture that ate someone else for dinner before they could eat them for lunch, so to speak, or ate them for lunch before you can eat them for dinner, right? That's the common idea. Of course, there are numbers out there, right? We can look at those. And then when you think about Kingdom of Heaven, how many of you have seen it? So I wanted to put this out here because I have a bunch of Christians in the room.

I got to do this. We got to talk about Jerusalem. The idea of the crusades, which is a reminder that many of the forums that I've been to, I've had many atheist students who will approach me and say, "Well, explain Islam, eating people for the sword." Why is it that Muslims have gone out there and fought people and built their empires or they'll often talk about the crusades? And why is it that Jerusalem is constantly at the core of all these arguments in terms of the Holy Land and the Holy Land wars? Valant here asks at the end of the movie, right, when he's giving up Jerusalem to Salahidim, right? He says, "What is Jerusalem worth?" And Salahidim walks away saying, "Nothing." And then he walks back where he turns around and he says, "Everything." Now, that image itself, right, or this interchange has been studied, right? There's like all these articles about it.

You can watch, you know, scholars like debating what was that? What does that mean? And why is that really significant up until today? Because it seems that the Abrahamic faith traditions seem to fight over Jerusalem and it clearly seems to be a point of

division. Right? So, I do want to highlight that that is a reality. However, what folks don't know and don't talk about is how many of the leaders within those religious communities actually helped save each other.

For example, the second Khalifa of Islam Omar Al-Hatab, very well respected in the Muslim community. So this is a man who came about 15 years after the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon the past away. He actually, when he goes into Jerusalem, historians record that he brought in 60 families, Jewish families with him and said they have a right to be here.

And they were on the outskirts up until because of the Roman, when the Romans basically kicked them out. Right? So he brings them in, they were in exile, he brings them in, he says they have a right to be here and to honor them. And then when he was asked by the bishop of the Holy, the Church of the Holy Sephigir to pray, he said, I know you need to pray, you can pray here.

He says, no, I'm not going to pray here. Because if I pray here, I fear that after me, maybe the Muslims will turn this until mosque because of the honoree. So he decides not to pray there.

And so if you go to Jerusalem today, you will see that next to the Church of the Holy Sephigir, there is a mosque of Omar. Right? So this idea that there were leaders who understood that what can unite us is also through our faith and our understanding of our faith. But I think a lot of that has to do with Scripture.

And so that's what I'm going to be talking about a little bit. So where am I with time? We're good. No, I'm like, I'm supposed to be done now, right? I have a few more slides though, is that okay guys? Yeah, okay.

So the question of, is war due to religion or economic survival? I think that in itself could be a 10-week course here at Northwestern, right? The question I often get as a Muslim is, if Islam, if you claim that Islam is a religion of peace, explain this. Right? Explain why is it that you have these young men or women who have ISIS out there, you have ISIS using the core principle of Islam. La ilaha illa al-Lamha madrasulallah, the testament of Muslims.

Why is it that they call themselves an Islamic state and they're butchering them actually statistics say that more Muslims have died at the hands of ISIS than non-Muslims have, right? In terms of, of course, every life matters. But the text that I want to share with you that you all can definitely look into is by Professor John Espazzito and Dali Amajahid, if you haven't had a chance to look at it. It's basically a six-year study on who speaks for Islam, what a billion Muslims really think.

And it goes deeply into different parts of the Muslim world. 35 predominantly Muslim

countries, there are 57 of them, so they study 35 of them and understand what is it that leads to this kind of behavior. And is it, does it have to do with their religion? Do Muslims actually really believe that their faith teaches them to go kill people or to be violent? Or does it have more to do with the socio-political climate, the geopolitics of the nation, the land, power, privilege, all of those things? Another scholar that I think you all should definitely look into is Robert Peep here at the University of Chicago.

And he actually studies suicide terrorism over the last 18 to 20 years. And what he finds is that there's a little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions, rather, but nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common, is a specific secular and strategic goal to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland. So does it have more to do with religion, or does it have more to do with the actual fact that they feel like their land has been stolen, or that they don't have bread and butter anymore, so to speak? Again, more research around this is, you know, the question of who is doing this recruiting and who is recruited, right? Those are questions that need to be asked around this conversation when it comes to the geopolitics of terrorism.

Gallup came up with this research that they asked, some people think that for the military to target until civilians is sometimes justified, while others think that kind of violence is never justified, which is your opinion. And the Muslims were actually the, you know, like if you think about the graph, 78% of them said never. 78% of Muslims said it's never justifiable, right? And then 21% said, okay, maybe it's justifiable.

So that's actually a really interesting stat to think about, but does scripture actually contribute to division? And I think that's a really good question when we're having this conversation. So the big questions that I asked around this are their scriptures of violence in every tradition. And I can only speak for Islam.

And then who has the authority and the Muslim community to decide, like what to do with that scripture? And then is there any consensus on what we call exegesis, which is interpretation of the scripture? And then what do you do with geopolitics in scripture, meaning if you're living in a land where, yes, you are being abused and you are using scripture to defend yourself, is that okay? And then scripture in the Muslim worldview, right? Like how many Muslims actually think in a certain way? So the sources of the Muslim tradition, as you all know, is for Anne, and maybe some of you don't know, the Hadith are the narration of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. Muslims have one basic belief system, which is belief in one God and the final messenger. I'm going to go through this a little bit quickly.

So faith literally means security in the Muslim tradition. Amen. It comes from the idea of security.

The Quran was revealed over 23 years. I'm saying all of this is just background because

some people just don't know basics of Islam. The Quran is believed to have been revealed in 23 years.

And most of it is divided between Mecca and Medina. In Mecca, you have ritual practice. All the verses are about ritual practice.

And Medina is where you have these verses or scripture about self-defense. And that's really important for people to understand. I'm going to go over here.

So after Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him passes away, because up until he was alive, he was interpreting scripture for them. But when he dies, the question is who's going to interpret scripture? So very early on, even within the first hundred years of Islam, we had people known as the Ha'waraj who would interpret scripture. And they would say we have every right to interpret it the way that we want.

And they were causing a lot of violence behavior. And really they were causing a lot of divide in the community. And the Prophet Muhammad clearly said even in the state of war, do not cut down trees, do not burn crops, do not kill women, children elderly and fight only those who fight you.

But they would say to this narration, they would say judgment is up to God, not a prophet. Like the Quran says to fight people and we're going to do it. So they were interpreting it in their own way.

So one of the things that even the Quran recognizes is that there are going to be people like that. That there will be people who come about and they're going to be doing corruption under God's name. One of the questions that we have in every religious tradition, and this is my, I guess as a theologian, this is my understanding and I'm putting this out there for the group.

I believe that in every religious tradition, you have the pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist understanding on scripture. In the Muslim tradition, for example, you have a pluralist idea that believers will all seek their reward with their Lord, meaning everyone can have the way to heaven. Then you have folks who believe that there's the inclusivist position that not everyone can go to heaven, you have to have a certain level of understanding of like, what is it that you believe in.

And then finally, you have people who are exclusivists that no one can go into heaven, only people who follow Islam. There are those three positions. I've laid them out in this way.

And all of them have scripture to prove their points, so to speak. The point I'm trying to make is within the Islamic tradition, you have folks who believe in all three. You have the inclusivists, you have the pluralist and you have the exclusivists.

And then you have obviously the mystical position in Islam as well, that you know what, leave it up to God, like, why are you guys all arguing? The Sufis all believe, like, you know what, the Qur'an says it's in your heart, God's going to look at your heart, why are you all arguing in the first place? So the question of does religion unite us, and I'll end with this. The role of the Qur'an in the Muslim world is very important. That's why we even celebrate Ramadan, because we believe that the Qur'an was revealed during the month of Ramadan.

One of the things that's really important for us is that these verses all say that no one should be forced into Islam, so that's a creed for us. There's no compulsion in religion, and then we believe that God does not forbid, so this is a verse from the Qur'an, that you should not fight people who have not fought with you. If you're trying to defend yourself, that is the position that I take as an inclusivist Muslim.

And then one of the verses in the Qur'an that's actually revealed towards the end, I told you it's revealed over 23 years, is that God says in the Qur'an that everyone will be judged based according to whatever they were taught. So the Prophet Muhammad said on the day of judgment, they're going to be the Jews, they're going to be with Moses, the Christians who are following Jesus, and they're doing it in their sincerity. Jesus will be interceding on their behalf, and the Muslims will be with Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, and that everyone will be judged according to whatever it is that they put forth.

So that idea is part of the Muslim tradition. For Muslims, we pray, as you know, five times a day, we fast, we go to Hajj, we give Zakat, all of those things are meant for us to unite ourselves, but then also give back to society. And I would say for the most part that religion in my tradition has helped the Muslim community integrate here.

You have my friend Abdul Matin, Ibrahim Abdul Matin, who has started a movement called Green Dean about the environment, saving the environment. You have folks who are part of the American, like this is Chief Jafar, he's actually giving back to society by being part of law enforcement. President Obama recognized this young girl who has really helped with the food deserts here in Chicago.

So has religion in many ways helped integrate American Muslims? Absolutely. The teachings of it, the idea of being part and parcel of the society in which you live in and contribute to that, absolutely. So I would argue that it is not how religious you are, it is the position that you take within the tradition.

So you could be a devout religious person, it has more to do with how you interpret the religious tradition. So thank you so much, I appreciate your listening to me and I'm looking forward to listening to Dr. Moore. Over a little over a year ago, I found my blood pressure going up precipitously because of a bumper sticker on a car in front of me.

And the bumper sticker said, "If Jesus had a gun, he would be alive today." The reason this made my blood pressure go up, number of reasons, but one of them was because I could tell from other things on the car that this was purportedly a Christian. So as a Christian, I was saying, "Jesus is alive today." That's sort of the most basic thing of the Christian faith and didn't really need a gun to get there. But also because it was very clear that what was taking place there was something that was happening all over the world, which is really religion being used as a means to an end to some other argument.

And the argument, whatever you think about guns, whatever you think about gun control, the argument was really about identity. The argument was about tribalism, the argument was about who's on my side, who's on someone else's side. Really, I should have been less alarmed by the content of the bumper sticker and more about the fact that the bumper sticker was there because there was a study done at Colorado State University several years ago trying to do something that was not a problem.

And I think that a study done a lot about the idea of the bumper sticker that was used to go up a little bit earlier in the last year, which was a study done at Colorado State University in Chicago. The idea of the bumper sticker was to be a very large range on the basis of someone's age, on the basis of someone's income, on the basis of the make of the car, of the model of the car, of the age of the car, of the price of the car. The only predictor was the presence of bumper stickers.

They say, "Practice random acts of kindness or my kid can beat up your honor student. It doesn't matter." And it doesn't matter what sort of place on the ideological spectrum the bumper stickers are. It just is, if there's a bumper sticker, that person is more likely to erupt into road rage and the more bumper stickers are on the car, the more likely that in fact is.

And the researcher said, "We really can't explain why that is, but we assume it's because people who take the effort to put a bumper sticker on their car are the kind of people who are wanting to communicate to random strangers. This is who I am, and this is what I think about filling the blank." It makes sense to me, but that's especially true when we're living in a social media ecosystem in which everyone is posting digitized bumper stickers all the time about an entire host of issues. So when you think about these questions of, do religious convictions unite us or divide us? In some sense, I think that's really the wrong question because the point is that the problem with religion, in my view as an evangelical Christian, is when that religion becomes one more vehicle for self-expression, one more vehicle for differentiating oneself from others, one more vehicle for some sort of cultural identity.

Rather than a claim to a transcendent truth. So when I'm talking to my own community in the evangelical Christian community, I actually think the resources are there to be people who are combating polarization in the very religion itself, in our commitment to

the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is sometimes an assumption that the only way that we can get along together is if somehow my neighbor's Muslim convictions become incidental to her and my evangelical Christian convictions become incidental to me, and all of us are of multiple different religious convictions as long as we're all really liberal epistemologies.

I don't think that's the way forward. I think instead a genuine diversity of belief being expressed where we are disagreeing often with each other, while at the same time seeing one another as created in the image of God as those who bear dignity and should be treated with respect ought to be fundamental to the evangelical Christian tradition. Now, I think that that means that there are some things that are actually the most controversial aspects of evangelical Christianity, that if they are actually believed and practiced, create greater sense of kindness and love toward others and outsiders rather than the other way around.

I'll briefly go through what I'm talking about. First is judgment. If you talk to a typical American outside of evangelical Christianity, what is your thought about evangelical Christians? Judgment will usually come up very quickly.

Sometimes people who don't know any passage of the Bible at all will know "judge not lest you be judged." And we'll say the evangelical Christians I know are very judgmental. Actually, though, in the New Testament, the understanding of judgment is not intended to create censorious and quarrelsome people but the reverse. There is innate in the human being a sense of justice and a sense of a need for justice, a sense of a resolution to the tensions that are all around us.

In the Christian tradition, that is summed up in the day of judgment before the tribunal of God. That day of judgment means that individuals do not enact judgment on one another in the time between the times. A Christian who actually believes that there is a day of the revealing of all things, of the judgment of all things, ought to then be what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 2. The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome.

Doesn't mean the Lord's servant is not full of conviction, but it means treating everyone with kindness, understanding and knowing that judgment day is not enacted person by person by person, but is something that is yet future before the throne of the Lord. The second thing would be the new birth. Sometimes secular Americans are really disturbed when they hear evangelical Christians talking about evangelism.

I was just with a group of secular progressive people in Washington who completely disagree with me on everything as it relates to religion. They were very concerned about evangelical Christians who were doing evangelism and doing missions. They said, "We're just afraid that that's going to lead to incivility because you have people who are believing that some people go to heaven and some people go to hell." My response would say, "Look, I know you disagree with me on this, but actually the Christians who

are doing evangelism are not the ones who are engaged in hatred and rancor towards you, usually.

These are usually people who are doing evangelism precisely because they love their neighbors and because they understand their own state before God apart from the grace of God in Christ. And because they understand that what it means to come into right relationship with God does not happen through coercion, whether that's through the coercion of the state or through the coercion of some sort of cultural pressure, but can only come about by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit uniting a person to the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. So the Christian who really believes that Jesus Christ is the way the truth and the light and that no one comes to the Father except through him should be the last person who would suggest that a mosque should be zoned out of existence in his or her community.

Why? Not because that Christian thinks all truth claims are relative, all religions are ultimately leading to the same place, but because that Christian believes the state cannot turn people into Christians made right with God, all the state can do is turn people into pretend Christians. And that's one birth short of what the New Testament would define as genuine Christianity, but also because if we have an understanding of not only the necessity of the new birth, but the possibility of the new birth, that means that there are not some kinds of people who are likely to be followers of Jesus Christ and other types of people who are not likely to become followers of Jesus Christ. Instead, Romans one through three teaches every human being is hiding from the presence of God, hiding behind all sorts of things, including sometimes a nominal form of cultural Christianity.

And instead, the only difference maker is the grace of God. And the grace of God intervenes often without any predictor cataclysmically and suddenly in the life of a person. So a Christian who really believes in the new birth is going to be a Christian who understands that the next Billy Graham might be passed out drunk in a frat house right now.

And the next Augustine of Hippo might be managing a Planned Parenthood abortion clinic right now. And the next great leader of the Christian faith might be someone who is railing in hostility against Christianity right now. God has worked that way repeatedly in the past and they work so again, even in this particular case.

So the person who is objecting to me and the person who is hostile to me cannot be treated as an enemy, but has to be treated as someone who very well could one day be my brother and sister in Christ and may well be the person who will one day leave my future children or grandchildren or great grandchildren to faith in Christ. And the next new birth ought to create that. Also a sense of the objectivity of truth.

Sometimes one of the most controversial things about evangelical Christianity is a sense

of, well, you think that the truth is universal and the truth is objective and they're objective moral norms. Actually, I think the evangelicals that are the most problematic are not those who believe in the objectivity of truth, but those who do not. Those who would say that there are objective moral norms, but who change and shift those moral norms to fit whatever the context is at the moment.

If evangelical Christians believe that the truth is objective, that there are real moral norms, what that ought to do is to cause us to reshape from the culture around us that says as the author Marilyn Robinson put it, that sometimes loyalty to the truth means disloyalty to the tribe. And so when we live in a time when every truth claim is suspect to simply being a vehicle for power and the default is cynicism, there ought to be a kind of humility but a kind of confidence that comes with people who believe that they have actually experienced the truth in the person of Jesus Christ, a gospel that is in fact true. What that should lead to is actually a kind of tranquility and a refusal to participate in the kind of frantic outrage machine that we see in every sector of American life, and in many cases global life right now, which evidences a lack of confidence in one's own claims.

Jesus is remarkably calm throughout the gospels, and when he is not, it's at moments when no one can predict it. Everyone else is calm at those moments. He sees something different than they see.

Evangelical Christianity should lead to that as well. And so when we're gathering together in a culture that ought to be less polarized, that doesn't mean that we should have fewer disagreements. It means that we ought to have the kind of freedom to recognize that your disagreement with me is not a personal statement that I am stupid or evil.

And my disagreement with you is not because I believe that you're stupid or evil. But instead, we're talking with one another with respect about things that are ultimate. If Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, which I believe he has, if this same person is going to return to judge the living in the dead, as the Christian tradition has taught for 2000 years, then that means that is the most important claim that could be made.

And if that is not true, that likewise is the most important claim that could be made. So we need to have those conversations as people who are able to listen to one another and even to love one another, while those of us who believe what I do are insisting, you must be born again. Thank you.

Good to be with you tonight. [Applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

(gentle music)

[buzzing]