

# ***Tribal Truth***

Mark 9:38-41

In the October issue of *The Atlantic*, Yale professors (and spouses), Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, wrote a thoughtful and timely article titled, “The Threat of Tribalism.” In it, they reflect on the current conflicts in our nation’s capital and elsewhere, and to how both the political right and left are undermining, if not destroying, the spirit and intent of the U.S. Constitution and American democracy. That’s a big claim to make, to be sure, but after the week we’ve been through, they make a solid case for the trouble we’re in. Let me share some of their thoughts:

When we think of tribalism, we tend to focus on the primal pull of race, religion, or ethnicity. But partisan political loyalties can become tribal too. When they do, they can be as destructive as any other allegiance. The Founders understood this. In 1780, John Adams wrote that the “greatest political evil” to be feared under a democratic constitution was the emergence of “two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other.” George Washington, in his farewell address, described the “spirit of party” as democracy’s “worst enemy.” It “agitates the Community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, fomenting occasionally riot and insurrection.”

For all their fears of partisanship, the Founders failed to prevent the rise of parties, and indeed, it’s hard to imagine modern representative democracy without multiparty electoral competition. They were right to be apprehensive, as is all too clear when you look at the current state of America’s political institutions, which are breaking down under the strain of partisan divisions.

The causes of America’s resurgent tribalism are many. They include the seismic demographic change, which has led to predictions that whites will lose their majority status within a few decades; declining social mobility and a growing class divide, and media that reward expressions of outrage. All of this has contributed to a climate in which every group in America—minorities and whites; conservatives and liberals; the working class and elites—feels under attack, pitted against the others not just for jobs and spoils, but for the right to define the nation’s identity. In these conditions, democracy devolves into a zero-sum competition, one in which parties succeed by stoking voters’ fears and appealing to their ugliest us-versus-them instincts.

Americans on both the left and the right now view their political opponents not as fellow Americans with differing views, but as enemies to be vanquished. And

they have come to view the Constitution not as an aspirational statement of shared principles and a bulwark against tribalism, but as a cudgel with which to attack those enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Has there been a better example of this than what we have witnessed over the past few years? I think not.

It's not hard for anyone, of course, to readily cite demons among the opposition—how those on the other side have acted out unreasonably, unconscionably, and immorally; but it is less likely that a person will perceive their mirror image, i.e., how their adversaries see similar behavior in them or in those they support. True to form, each side is likely to defend their own conduct as being warranted by the unfairness and extreme actions of their adversaries. That's just one of the ways tribalism convinces people they're in the right—that they are the ones who stand on the best principles and the side of truth and justice, or that they are victims of the other side's wrongdoing, as each side exploits and distorts the actions (and reactions) of their rivals.

Tribalism, of course, is rooted in loyalty to one's primary group and identity, and tribal truth is made up of the beliefs, values, principles, ideology, and worldview of that specific group or distinction—as well as the justification upon which people base their own legitimacy and, at times, the need for militant tactics. Namely, if you don't defend Truth, if you compromise your beliefs and principles, then you will lose what you ultimately value—perhaps even your identity and purpose.

Unfortunately, tribal truth is often set up to be just this—a zero-sum game, where there is only win or loss—a sense that there is only one right way, while all the rest are wrong—one truth that is now being threatened by a host of falsehoods, distortions, and heresies—an either/or binary

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, "The Threat of Tribalism," *The Atlantic*, October 2018.

conviction that views openness, tolerance, or compromise as a serious betrayal to what is held as absolute and true. When zero-sum is the only game in town, there is no such thing as fair play; instead, it's a war to be waged, where bloodshed and loss results on all sides and victory is both temporary and Pyrrhic.

None of us are exempt from being influenced in some way by tribalism. It's the basis for the human sense of identity—we all belong to a tribe of one sort or another. It usually starts with one's family or ethnic heritage (e.g., Irish, Jewish, Chinese, etc.), but fervent loyalties go well beyond that. As we might expect, religion often plays a significant role in tribal identity. When people have roots in a specific religion, denomination, or place of worship, it tends to represent and embody what they hold to be sacred and meaningful, transcending as it does the individual to create a coherent group identity.

Religious identity is a form of tribalism. Religious teachings and practices, literally or symbolically, express what is sacred to each tribe; fidelity to a particular expression of religion, reinforced over time, becomes its own echo chamber—you hear and experience only one theological perspective and set of views. This becomes the primary filter through which one's sense of divine truth is understood and known—tribal truth, as it were. Evangelism is a mission to make what essentially is tribal truth, universal truth, by convincing others to believe exactly what you believe.

Yet, even though world religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, etc.) are sources of tribalism, they are also in many ways pan-tribal, in that they extend beyond borders, cultures, and language groups, and include within each many smaller communities, identities, and tribes that are joined by their mutual loyalty to a belief system that provides an identity that

transcends their particularities and brings them together as one. For that reason, religion has always possessed the remarkable potential to rise above tribal differences to bring the world's diverse populations together in unifying fashion.

However, as we know, religion also has shown the darker side, especially when defined by dominant tribes, to the point that it is used as a political “cudgel” to bludgeon and divide the world. It's not hard to understand why. If you combine family, ethnic, racial, and cultural loyalties and wrap them into religion, it becomes a potent mix for each individual and the tribe as a whole. Religion becomes the overarching purpose behind defending one's family, race, or culture from whatever it is that appears to threaten those very things. Defending your nation or culture becomes the highest form of religious commitment and expression of faithfulness—a religious nationalism, as it were. This has left its painful legacy throughout Europe and the Middle East for centuries, as well as among certain populations in Africa; more recently, it's the root of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar (Burma).

Frankly, religious nationalism is what we're seeing throughout segments of White Christian America—a militant defense of a tribal identity that is declining from its majority influence and status and trending toward becoming a minority, as it will within a decade or two. Many people are frightened by that prospect (Robert Jones describes it, “homesickness for a lost parochial world”<sup>2</sup>), so they rise up as a strong conservative force to defiantly resist change that marginalizes them from the mainstream in American culture, proclaiming, as they do, a righteous rebellion against secular humanism and liberalism. This has been going on for a number of

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<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, Simon & Schuster, 2016, pg. 231.

decades and is now feeding the fierce partisanship we are witnessing today. The effects are as evident as the generational contrast between Billy Graham and his son, Franklin.

Interestingly, tribalism was also a divisive factor in Jesus' community among his disciples. Like many tribal battles, it was a little more than a turf war, but was perceived to be a defense of truth—the truth and spiritual authority of Jesus himself. As we can see from our short text for today, Jesus immediately refuted that notion.

Let me read these four verses again, so you might sense the tribalism inherent to the disciples' concerns: "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'" "He was not following us"—a common complaint of tribal truth. John served it up as if he were merely informing Jesus about some false imitator or imposter, when what it was, this other guy wasn't a part of their tribe, plain and simple. He wasn't one of the Chosen so they wanted Jesus to condemn him as a fraud—as an inauthentic disciple.

As I said, this is far more common than we realize, except we hear it more along these lines: This guy isn't a Noanker; he doesn't come to our church; he doesn't worship like us; he isn't Baptist; he isn't Protestant; he isn't Evangelical; he isn't Christian; he isn't American; he doesn't speak English; he isn't white; bottom line, he isn't one of us! We might not own or defend all these points of identity, but I imagine everyone of us subscribe to at least some of them. It's only natural. It is what tribes do to ensure trust and loyalty.

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is

for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

In other words, don't worry, they are allies, even if they aren't followers. To speak of God isn't tribal truth; look outside of the tribe for divine activity in the world. For Jesus, what's at stake is not how others define who they are or who they follow, but what they do that serves the purpose of his mission. Build alliances, instead of viewing others as rivals.

I'd love to think that building alliances is only common sense, but unfortunately, it's not—not when tribal interests are at stake. For one thing, historically, it's not the norm for religions and how many of their followers view rivals. Religious tribes are usually quite parochial and critical of those outside their tribe. We are more apt to get snide assessments and stereotypes like: Do liberals really believe in God? Do evangelicals have a genuine faith that isn't just about condemning homosexuality or decrying abortion? Can Jews be saved if they don't worship Jesus? Do Muslims receive divine grace if they don't accept Jesus' death, let alone as an atonement for human sin? Do Hindus have any hope for eternity if they believe in reincarnation and karma?

Instead of valuing and affirming the things people of faith hold in common, tribalism tends to magnify distinctions and highlight problems with other views, rendering them as inferior to one's own understanding of truth. That's what tribal truth does. It creates firm boundaries and calls it "orthodoxy."

Another problem with tribal truth is that it mistakes personal judgment and convictions as being divinely revealed Truth, when they are only true from that perspective and at that time. If we're honest with ourselves, our understanding of any truth will evolve over time (hopefully

for the better) with additional perspective, insight, and knowledge. Constant education is essential for gaining greater wisdom and understanding. Some of the convictions I held earlier in my life I no longer do, as I've broadened my knowledge and expanded my perspective with more experience and study. This is how I think divine Truth comes to us, as well. That if we seek insight and Truth from God, then God will constantly force us to think outside of our limited tribal boxes and expand our intellectual and emotional boundaries, rather than narrow them. Narrow-minded thinking usually limits our ability to discover anything new, let alone to express grace and love toward other human beings. Narrowmindedness rarely gets us outside of tribal truth, i.e., beliefs that merely serve our own interests or that of our tribe.

With this in mind, it's interesting to me how much the Christian missionary enterprise throughout the centuries has demonstrated this by engaging other cultures. Today's missionaries typically don't reflect earlier generations, at least from mainline denominations. In the past, there is no question missionaries have gone out to evangelize the world with a presumptuous sense of tribal truth and, more often than not, tried to transport western culture and worldviews into another setting. That was at the heart of European and American colonialism that is still hard to overcome in various parts of the world. As much as that has been a form of tribal dominance and hegemony, at the same time by divine grace something else has also occurred.

David Hollinger, Professor Emeritus of American History at Berkeley, recently explored how the missionary movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century often altered American culture itself. But not in the way we would expect. Namely, by engaging other cultures, the missionaries themselves were

frequently spiritually transformed from their inherent tribal biases. With his compelling title, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*,<sup>3</sup> Hollinger notes how, for mainline Protestants especially, evangelists soon became ecumenists once they were removed from their home turf and saw the world's cultures in their diverse beauty, philosophies, and challenges. Whereas at home in the U.S., it was rather late before ecumenical relations were forged, it occurred early on the mission fields. Ecumenical and interfaith partnerships developed on mission fields to cooperatively improve the welfare of local populations. Beyond that, many who were sent realized how much cultural baggage they carried into their work, from the vestiges of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism to the imperial dominance of American foreign policy. Religiously, they became exposed to other faith traditions which, in their native settings, seemed as spiritually enlightened and morally conscientious as missionaries presumed themselves to be, forcing them to rethink the parochial claims of their own Protestant orthodoxy. Their ignorance of other faiths while evangelizing “heathens” created for many missionaries a crisis of faith and eventually led many of them to embrace pluralism and religious tolerance. The differences between faith traditions were not battle lines for divine Truth that their sending churches and denominations believed they were.

By virtue of our text today, we might deduce that Jesus probably would be in the same company, largely because his claim for righteousness moved beyond tribal truth; his was a divine mission to transform society and social relationships—to restore human lives, while delivering people

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<sup>3</sup> David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

from all that enslaved them in this life. In so doing, he repeatedly resisted the zeal of militants, on the one hand, and the loyalty tests of Pharisees on the other. Jesus' gospel proclamation was at least pan-tribal, if not altogether non-tribal. There was no one who remained outside of the love of God.

As we've seen by the events of this past week and year, the threat of tribalism, as Chua and Rubinfeld note, is alive and well in our time. Its zeal and appeal is powerful and impressive, but ultimately destructive. Somehow, as Americans and as Christians, we have to lift ourselves from the rancor of these days enough to see that zeal and loyalty for one's tribe cannot be substitutes for wisdom, mutual respect and pluralistic understanding and cooperation. Life is not meant to be a zero-sum game—at least the life that Jesus envisioned and died for.

Most of all, we must acknowledge the need for genuine humility and grace, because as life often shows, our human grasp of truth will always be limited to our particular perspective and time and that we see only part of the whole—that there is a larger world out there than our place in it will fill and far more love and grace that needs to be expressed. Hopefully, when all is said and done, we will become wise enough to realize we humans need one another to know the Truth of life more fully, just as our amazing God always intended it to be.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
30 September 2018