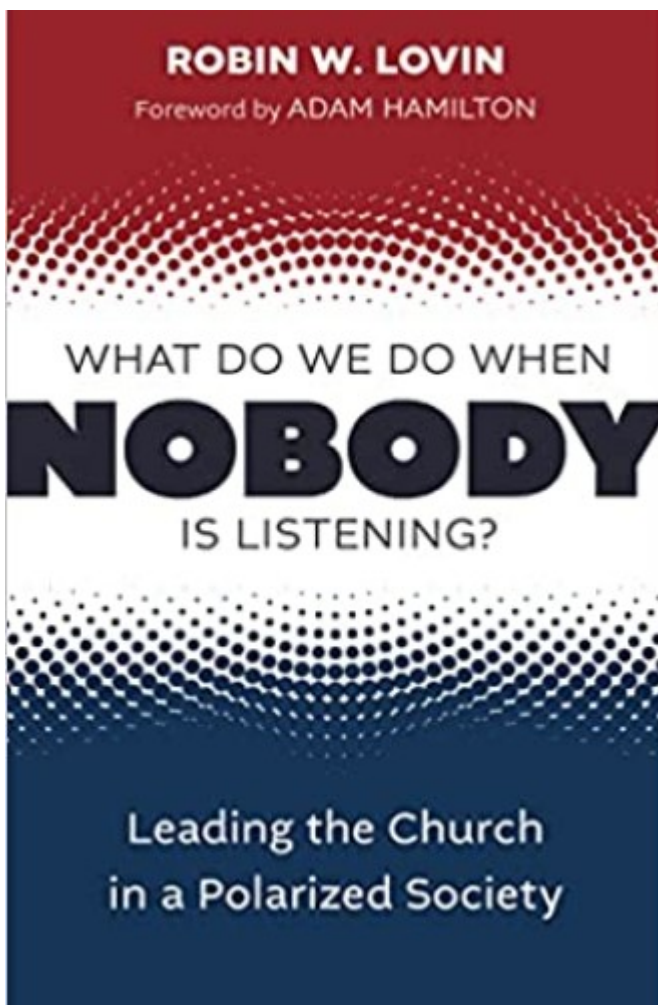


Why are we so polarized?

An ethicist, a pastor, and two podcasters weigh in.

by [Russell P. Johnson](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



What Do We Do When Nobody Is Listening?

Leading the Church in a Polarized Society

By Robin W. Lovin

Eerdmans

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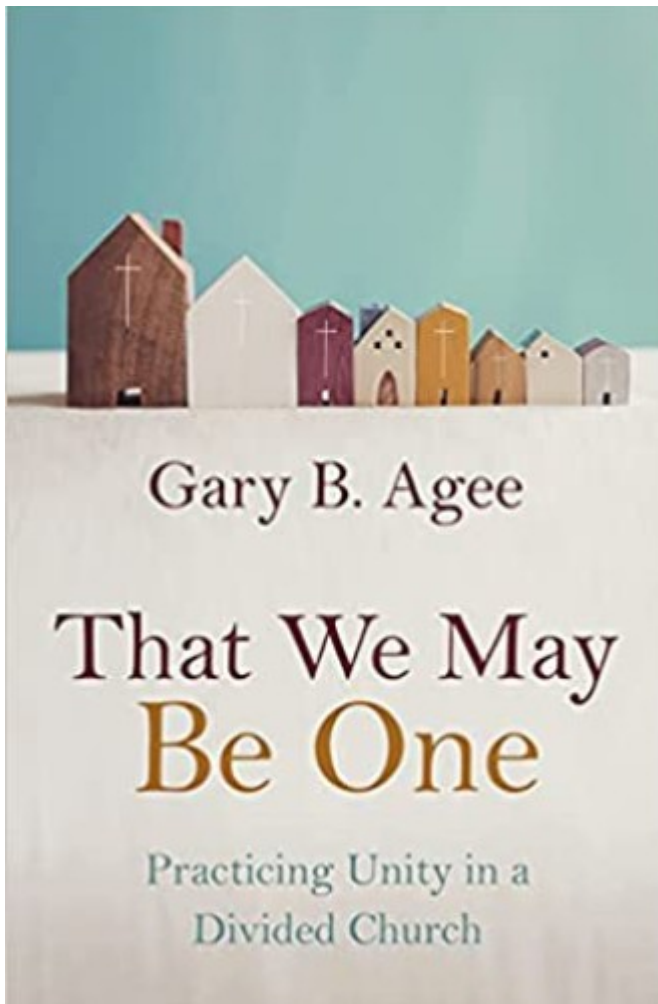


Now What?

How to Move Forward When We're Divided (About Basically Everything)

By Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silver
Revell

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That We May Be One

Practicing Unity in a Divided Church

By Gary B. Agee

Eerdmans

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In polarized societies like the contemporary United States, it sometimes seems like the only thing we can all agree on is the fact that we're polarized. Consensus is emerging that our country is more divided now than in recent memory, and across the political spectrum many are concerned that the fabric of American society is tearing apart. Yet even among those who agree that polarization is a problem, there is disagreement about what kind of problem it is. What is the nature of this widespread division, and what sort of remedy is called for?

Three new books take up these questions, offering insights for Christians who want to love their enemies in these tense times. Ethicist Robin Lovin draws upon Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism to reexamine political advocacy in a pluralistic state. Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers, cohosts of the popular podcast *Pantsuit Politics*, offer more anecdotes than footnotes as they invite readers to reflect on their relationships and reframe the conflicts in their own lives. Pastor and historian Gary Agee expounds biblical narratives in which people courageously find community with diverse others.

You can open to any page in one of these three books and immediately identify whether it's the book written by an ethicist, the book written by two podcasters, or the book written by a pastor. But the differences between them are more than stylistic. Each offers its own diagnosis of what is dangerous about polarization. For Lovin, polarized America suffers from a lack of *arguments*. For Holland and Silvers, polarized America suffers from a lack of *connection*. For Agee, polarized America suffers from a lack of *unity*. These three diagnoses are not mutually exclusive, and together they give a more comprehensive understanding of polarization's effects on American culture.

Lovin offers a word of hope for people worried that the United States is heading toward civil war. For all its unpleasantness, polarization is remarkably stable—a “new normal” we will simply have to keep adapting to. But it has two major downsides.

First, though polarization is not in itself a major crisis, it does weaken our ability to prevent and ameliorate major crises. Passing laws that promote the general welfare becomes more difficult in polarized society, not because our disagreements are so fierce but because our disagreements are so hollow. Lovin not only calls for but exemplifies the theologically rich argumentation that is needed in a polarized society.

Working within the pragmatist political tradition, Lovin explains: “Democracy is supposed to be an ongoing argument that moves by reasoned steps to specific policy proposals to larger, shared public goals and then back again from those shared goals to further refinements of policy.” Politics is the art of reaching enough of a consensus on a solution that is good enough for now—and then listening to voices that point out flaws in this provisional solution and revising accordingly. A healthy democracy runs on disagreement, persuasion, and compromise, with

today's compromises often sparking tomorrow's disagreements.

This is how it is supposed to be, but polarization has atrophied our ability to disagree well. Instead of making arguments, we shout slogans at one another. Our speech is fragmented beyond coherence, our political philosophies are fragmented beyond consistency, and our society is fragmented beyond cooperation. Public discourse in 21st-century America is devolving into a barroom dispute between Red Sox fans and Yankees fans. Even if it doesn't turn into an all-out brawl, this is a far cry from the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Politicians are neither able nor incentivized to govern well; all we ask is that they carry the banner for their party and win symbolic victories over the opposing party.

For Lovin, following the Niebuhr brothers, whenever humans dethrone God from the position of ultimacy, we inevitably imbue something else with a false ultimacy. Politics tends to take on a mythic quality, and we become increasingly Manichean while losing sight of the messy, imperfect power of political efforts to meet human needs. Narratives of a grand battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness interfere with the never-ending task of addressing concrete problems in a diverse democracy. If nothing else, a theocentric ethic at least keeps political conflict in perspective.

A second downside to polarization is its tendency to commodify Christianity. Rather than having substantive arguments about policies, we rally around identity markers. We're more interested in proving we're one of the good guys than ensuring that people's needs are being met, and we use Christian symbols merely to signal our own virtue. Take, for example, President Trump's infamous photo-op holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church. This spectacle has nothing to do with Christianity but everything to do with Christianity™. The Bible remains closed. Only the facade matters.

Christians, Lovin rightly insists, must not remain neutral on matters of justice, but they must not align the meaning of the gospel with a political party or cause, either. When we turn "Christian" into another identity marker that precludes serious reflection about how to care for the poor, we empty Christianity of meaning and absolve ourselves of responsibility.

This is a valuable warning, though Lovin perhaps errs too much on the side of caution. Christian ethics is, after all, not just theocentric but Christocentric. The God

we worship does not merely relativize other claims to ultimacy but offers substantive guidance on how humans ought to live together in light of the teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. While facile gestures of Christian identification are easily swept up in polarization, Christian identity nonetheless offers a vantage point that challenges the presuppositions of liberals and conservatives alike. Lovin's book is at its weakest when it criticizes a caricature of Hauerwasianism and at its most promising when—working with Howard Thurman and others—it points the way toward a politics responsive to the voice of God from the margins.

In Lovin's diagnosis, polarization threatens to erode our ability to have the kinds of arguments that sustain democracy. It also threatens to turn Christianity into a badge we wear to distinguish ourselves from the neighbors we should be working with and for.

Holland and Silvers offer a different diagnosis. For them, polarization is an interpersonal problem more than a legislative one. It leads to estrangement and loneliness, since we find it increasingly difficult to spend time with people on the opposing side. In our hyper-politicized context, politics no longer lives only in the newspapers and voting booths but also in the mask requirements at our workplaces and the signs outside our churches. "From cable news to social media feeds to politainment," they write, "all of us—including our kids—are inundated with everything from global issues like climate change to the latest political Tweetstorm." Politics is now as inescapable as it is divisive, and this reality threatens our ability to sustain meaningful relationships with other people.

The question at the heart of *Now What?* is, "How can we strengthen our connections when politics threatens to tear us apart?" Holland and Silvers write both for liberals who are dreading going to Thanksgiving dinner with their Trump-loving relatives and for conservatives who feel alienated by their woke colleagues. They offer useful reminders about keeping our disputes in perspective so that we might engage with others as unique human beings made in the image of God and not merely as dangerous representatives of the opposing side.

Now What? begins at the family level and gradually expands its scope to deal with polarization in workplaces, online communities, and local politics. At each level, the authors encourage readers to reframe their disagreements and adopt more constructive approaches to interpersonal conflicts. The second chapter, on polarization in romantic relationships, shows their approach: "When our partners

don't agree with our opinions," they observe, "it can feel like they don't agree with who we are." Instead of distancing ourselves from our partners when this happens, we might remind ourselves of the core concerns we share, appreciate how their perspective complements our own, or turn to personality psychology to help us get beyond our conversational impasses.

Across all levels, the argument of the book remains the same. Once we realize that it's usually fruitless to try to convince people to change their political stances, we can begin working to ensure that our political differences do not cause unnecessary relational damage. Instead of fleeing from political conflict, we can build connections with other people and discover opportunities to appreciate and cooperate. Perhaps surprisingly, this constructive and committed approach to conflict is more transformative than digging in our heels in an anxious effort to win the fight.

"We don't think most of us are looking for victory," write Holland and Silvers. *"We're looking for connection."* For readers skeptical of this claim, the book might not take seriously enough the urgency and severity of the issues that divide us. But for those who share this intuition, the book will be a welcome and worthwhile conversation starter.

Gary Agee offers a third diagnosis. In contrast to the other two books, Agee is seeking unity among Christians—a more ambitious goal than cooperation or connection. Reading *That We May Be One* feels like reading two familiar types of book at the same time.

First, the book is a pastoral exhortation to overcome the boundaries that divide Christians from one another. It begins with an autobiographical story of a young evangelical couple driven apart by their churches' different worship styles. (Picture a King James Version-only *Romeo and Juliet*.) This formative experience led Agee to conclude that

something was lacking in the way the church navigated diversity. At times it felt as though the Body of Christ was divided against itself. Rival factions viewed each other as enemies while well-worn Bible passages (often taken out of context) were used as ammunition.

Agee encourages his readers to visit churches they have never attended, partner with members of other denominations, sustain dialogue about divisive doctrinal and

moral issues, and celebrate differences instead of retreating into exclusivity. The goal is to become the body of Christ who “by its practice of unity would give credible witness to a divided world.” This book seems tailor-made for an adult Sunday school group that has chosen reconciliation as its annual theme.

The second book, as it were, is about antiracism. Agee implores White Christians to remove the blinders of Whiteness that prevent them from seeing the realities experienced by their brothers and sisters. Raised on a distorted gospel of White nationalism, many believers willfully ignore the marginalized, crossing over to the other side like the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan. As the book goes on, Agee grows increasingly explicit about the dangers of privilege for the mission of the church. Evangelical support for Donald Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric, Agee suggests, demonstrates how easily Christians can prioritize their own comfort over the boundary-crossing love of Christ. This book is written for a church group taking its first steps to confront the realities of racism after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Agee’s overarching argument is that this is not two different books but one. Though he’s more sermonic than argumentative, he makes the case that these topics belong together. “My goal is unity,” Agee writes. “For us to get there we must avoid rationalizing the inequities around us.” Any serious reckoning with ecclesial diversity and political polarization in America has to take systemic racism into account. Xenophobia and White supremacy contribute to a siege mentality among White Christians, making us less capable of embodying the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17. Alternatively, the same practices that can help overcome polarized church conflicts—listening, humbling ourselves, stepping outside our comfort zones—can contribute to the dismantling of privilege. People who yearn for an end to the culture wars and people who yearn for justice can thus find common cause in the search for unity.

Though Lovin, Holland and Silvers, and Agee approach polarization differently, they all agree that seeing the world through an “us versus them” lens is harmful for our government, our relationships, and our churches. Narrating political conflict as a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness may work to mobilize people in the short run, but in the long run we are all better served through humble, local, cooperative action to address concrete problems and forge meaningful partnerships.

They also agree that our primary goal should not be uniformity of opinion. Division ceases to be intractable when we create an environment where disagreement is generative and where differences become learning opportunities. Depolarization involves challenging the ideologies that prevent people from expressing their authentic selves. When we stop seeing ourselves as part of a monolithic “us” and stop seeing our opponents as part of a monolithic “them,” we may end up arguing more. But we will also argue better. And the American church could use some good arguments.