



COMMENTARY

America is divided and broken — so is my church. Is there hope? Absolutely

For my own family, the church I believe in and our country, these are dark times. Maybe that's what we need

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American Flag And Bible (Getty Images/ehrlif)

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It is easier to hate than to love. It is easier to cut someone off than to work on a relationship.

This has never been more clear to me than in my own family this year. Suddenly people are not speaking with each other, vitriol is shared back and forth, and "I'm never talking to ..." has been uttered. It's crazy, and I believe my family is only a small reflection of the current state of this country. At the same time, I have also experienced tremendous unity, love and the good feelings of family this year. As I discuss the brokenness of my religious world in the evangelical church, I will share the unity that I have found all around me.

As I think about how to help my own family heal, I worry outwardly about my fellow evangelicals as this election approaches. I listened all last week to the Rev. Tony Evans speak about what he calls "**Kingdom Politics**." Evans is a big deal in evangelical circles and his message is absurdly and blatantly misleading. Evans leaves anything relating to the blue-collar, working-class values that I believe sustain this country out of his message. Listening to Evans preach this divisive doctrine, I realize that not only the evangelical leadership needs to be ignored but so do all the political talking heads, and most of our political leaders. We must start listening to each other — and being with each other.

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My first unity story is about seeing my old high school football coach, a wonderful man with a wonderful family. He was turning 90 and many of his old players came to see him at a VFW hall. Coach was and is a unique individual. He's a former Navy SEAL who used to do push-ups on his fists at practice, and was both intimidating and incredibly kind at the same time. As a player you felt his love for you, and we loved him. As we gathered for his birthday we laughed together and shared stories of getting into trouble. We talked about our kids and the daily struggle of paying our bills. We talked about working hard and maintaining relationships. There was no politics, no division, just the unity of our shared experiences growing up in a blue-collar town. Of course there were political, class and racial division found within that VFW hall, but none of that was on display. Only the fellowship of sharing the difficult and wonderful parts of real life. That is the America we seem to have lost — and the America we can find again.

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I'd like to issue a challenge to Tony Evans and his fellow evangelical candidates: Just back your chosen candidate — and start paying taxes. After all, Jesus told you to.

Pastor Evans seems intent on preventing that unity. He pretends not to favor a political party but then preaches about voting for the candidate who values "life" and "family" and, believe it or not, voting for a candidate who believes in more freedom and less regulation. He said that and still tried to claim that he favors neither party. People write me some pretty nasty emails in response to my articles in Salon, but at least I don't hide who I am. I'm also not trying to save my nonprofit status. I'd like to issue a challenge to the church, and especially to Pastor Evans and his fellow evangelical leaders: Just back your candidate — and start paying your taxes. It might mean you can't fuel your \$12 million private jet this week, but I think you can afford it. Jesus did say, "Pay your taxes," as you may remember.

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While Evans and the evangelicals divide us, real life brings many of us together. My second story is about visiting a church where I used to pastor, in Bristol, Rhode Island. It's a gorgeous old New England town, home to the oldest Fourth of July parade in the country. The families there are hard-working, good people, giving and kind. Their political views range from far right to far left to straight down the center. Yet there we all were, laughing and crying, and sharing about all the things happening in our lives. We remembered friends that have passed. We talked about people who are struggling, we talked about the joys and difficulties we find in our families. Love and unity are possible when we listen to each other and engage, work on what is similar and put aside what we find different, wrong and even evil about each other in favor of fellowship.

It's clear to me that evangelical leaders like Tony Evans would prefer division. They value nothing above their own fame, wealth and glory. Evans is currently offering a good deal on his new book (also called "Kingdom Politics"), but you need to act fast. He made it clear this past week that his followers had better buy the book before they accidentally vote for the wrong side and end up going to hell. That would suck.

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I noticed some prominent issues missing from Evans' sermons last week. Not a word for the working class, for the poor, the sick, the foreigner, the prisoner or the importance of peace. Instead, it was all about deregulation and the importance of marriage between a man and a woman — assuming, of course, that the man and woman stick to their proper biblical roles. Any guesses what those roles are? Feel free to read my [previous article](#) about the evangelical ideals of sex and marriage. Spoiler alert: It's a sin for the wife to say no to sex with her husband. Sorry, ladies. Lastly, Evans made sure to mention that abortion is murder and that if you devalue unborn life during pregnancy, then God will devalue your life and the life of this country.

How in the hell can a country survive with divisive language like that? It is no wonder if liberals and progressives sometimes use divisive language themselves. We are not in a good place in this country.

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Here's my last story: I recently had the pleasure of officiating my father's wedding. He and his lovely bride had a long journey before meeting each other. My father, a career plumber, has brought his knowledge and hard work to Haiti, to a few countries in Africa, to rural Mississippi and beyond. He has done nothing but work his tail off and help every person that has crossed his path and continues to do so in his 70s. He still works full-time and makes it to work every day by 5:15 a.m. His wife, a lifelong social worker, has brought her heart and love and service into every case she has come across. Those blue-collar values I was talking about have carried them through their entire life. She is also not retired at age 70. Here's a picture of my father and his wife on the day of their wedding, just after they got out of his pickup truck.



(Nathaniel Manderson)

During the service they allowed me to share a brief message about love, family and the personal pathways that led them to each other. This was an emotional service, which ended up with an entire room of weeping people caught up in the idea of loving in all the shattered parts of who we are. I discussed how both of them had been broken by some of the most difficult things life has to offer. My father's bride is Jewish and to honor her tradition they broke the glass at the conclusion of the service and the room filled with people of all different faiths yelling out, "Mazeltov!" The glass is broken not to remember something good or glorious but to honor the Jewish temples that were destroyed. It is to remember the impermanence of life, of relationships, of family and even of love.

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We are all broken, hurt, wounded and weak, yet we carry on. We still love, and if love fails we hope to love again. We still forgive, even those who will likely hurt us again. We still fight, even in a losing cause.

Some might think that's an odd thing to celebrate, but not me — and not anyone who has lost in this life. We are all broken, hurt, wounded and weak, yet we carry on. We still love, and if love fails we hope to love again. We still forgive, even those who will likely hurt us again. We still fight, even in a losing cause. We still serve each other, even if our service is not returned.

Many are afraid to look at how broken they are, how broken their families and their country are. But not those of us who know that love, true love, is found in the brokenness.

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This country, my family and certainly my Christian church are as broken as I have ever seen. That means it's the perfect time to come together and discover the truth. It is time to turn away from anyone who stands before a microphone to tell us how evil the other side of the political, religious and cultural divide is. It is time to come together, have a few drinks, share a meal, go on a date and make fellowship with people of all races, all faiths, all backgrounds. You might be surprised at what people say. We all have struggles in our families, our careers, our personal lives. We all struggle to finding our place, find our purpose. Perhaps we are broken and divided, but that does not mean we need to be separated. The truth of this country is found in our national motto: *E pluribus unum*, "Out of many, one." **Nelson Mandela** may have said it best: "It is not our diversity which divides us; it is not our ethnicity, or religion or culture that divides us. ... [T]here can only be one division amongst us: between those who cherish democracy and those who do not."

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Nathaniel Manderson was educated at a conservative seminary, trained as a minister, ordained through the **American Baptist Churches USA** and guided by liberal ideals. Throughout his career he has been a pastor, a career counselor, an academic adviser, a high school teacher and an advocate for first-generation and low-income students, along with a paper delivery man, a construction worker, a FedEx package handler and whatever else he could do to take care of his family. Contact him at nathaniel.manderson@gmail.com.

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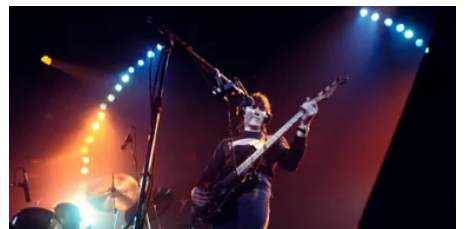
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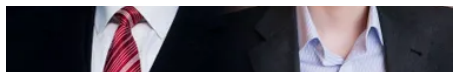
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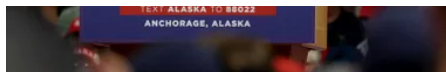
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