

## BOOK REVIEW

***Cold Civil War:  
Overcoming Polarization, Discovering Unity,  
and Healing the Nation***

by Jim Belcher

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022, 340 pages

In *Cold Civil War*, Jim Belcher presents what is in many ways a highly pessimistic view of contemporary American politics. As our views have become polarized, we have become unable to understand one another, unable to find common ground. Worse, we have come to despise one another, to see our fellow citizens as enemies. Wherever we are on the political spectrum, it seems like our political opponents' views have become more extreme, and compromise seems impossible. And while we might expect the church to offer a source of unity, too often Christians become split along the same lines as they embrace political ideologies that pull them farther and farther apart from their fellow believers. But Belcher is ultimately optimistic, or at least hopeful, about the nation's future. He sees a way out, a way for enough of us to embrace what he calls the *vital center* of politics so that we can begin to overcome our divisions. And he believes the church can be a part of this solution.

Belcher sees the founding of the United States, and the principles underlying its government, as an achievement in balancing conflicting political ideas. Even at the start of the American Revolution, for example, the revolutionaries could have chosen to conceive of themselves as united by a common culture or instead by a common creed. Should they appeal to history, to their rights as British subjects, or should they appeal to nature, to their rights as human beings? They appealed to both, and this synthesis was later influential in combining two models of government: republicanism and constitutionalism. And while some emphasized culture, history, and the tradition of majority rule (republicanism), and others emphasized a new creed based on natural law and the protection of individual rights through law (constitutionalism), the new constitutional republic required each to make concessions.

As long as they are moored to America's founding principles, the right and left can work together, and they can temper one another. In fact, it is not just the right and left, since Belcher sees both right and left split into an *order* side and a *freedom* side. This gives us four political categories, initially, and each of them — freedom right, order right, freedom left, and order left — help to strengthen the country when they are in their centrist forms.

The problem, Belcher says, is that those who share certain assumptions with one of the four categories of the vital center often ignore the assumptions of the other categories entirely,

and as they move farther out from the vital center, they pull in different directions, threatening the nation's health. Consider first the political right. In the center are what Belcher calls *freedom right 1* and *order right 1*. Freedom right 1, which undergirds the *middle-class soul* of America, emphasizes bourgeois virtues, and relies on the spontaneous order created by individuals pursuing their self-interest in the marketplace. Order right 1, the *statesman soul*, emphasizes the need for wise leadership and the cultivation of virtue among the citizens.

Each of these tendencies, though, has more extreme versions in contemporary politics. In the *freedom right 2* category are libertarians whose support for free markets and individual rights leads to an advocacy for open border policies that would remove all, or virtually all, restrictions on immigration. And even farther from the center, in the *freedom right 3* category, are anarcho-capitalists and other radical libertarians seeking to abolish the state entirely. Likewise, in the *order right 2* category are conservatives such as Rod Dreher and Patrick Deneen, who have come to reject America's founding ideals, viewing them as corrupted from the beginning by Enlightenment liberalism, and thus doomed to failure. And farther from the center, in the *order right 3* category, are Catholic integralists, along with some Protestant dominionists, who support some kind of theocracy, and the alt-right, who support white identity politics or white nationalism.

Something similar is at work on the left side of the political spectrum. At the center are *freedom left 1* and *order left 1*, the *constitutional soul* and the *republican soul*, both essential to the country's founding, but much of the left, like much of the right, has moved away from the vital center. The constitutionalism of freedom left 1 certainly emphasizes creed over culture and history, and thus, it emphasizes individual rights and the protection of minorities from the majority, but *freedom left 2* thoroughly rejects the role of culture and history in shaping the nation. In this category are those who view the country as purely secular and advocate for a "naked public square," where religious displays are prohibited on public property, for example. And farther out still, in the *freedom left 3* category, is what is sometimes now called *wokeism* and which is rooted in the Critical Theory long popular among activist students and professors on college campuses. Those in this category view all aspects of society — including America's founding — through the lens of oppression and victimhood. The goal, then, is liberation, which in this view can only come through the dismantling of structures that are racist or otherwise oppressive.

Likewise, while the republicanism of order left 1, which emphasizes majority rule, is moderated by its concessions to constitutionalism, this is not true of *order left 2*, which seeks the redistribution of wealth. The welfare state that began under Franklin Roosevelt and expanded further under Lyndon Johnson, according to Belcher, was sold as way of trading freedom for security, but has instead just tied people to the state. Even further out, in *order left 3*, are those who, much like those in the freedom left 3 category, often draw from Critical Theory, and would orient the government and other authorities toward the pursuit of equity.

And though there is much overlap, where this group differs from freedom left 3 is in their certainty about right and wrong. They are not just challenging society's narratives and dismantling its structures, they are providing a new metanarrative and imposing new structures, and seeking through government and other institutions to punish dissent.

Belcher writes for two groups, first "for pastors and Christian leaders in all walks of life . . . who see this polarization tearing apart their congregations and organizations," and second, "for all those who care deeply, whether on the left or the right, about the best of America" (16). Belcher acknowledges the dangers for Christians in addressing politics. One error we make is accommodation, where we read our own political views into Scripture. The other error is inflation, taking aspects of Scripture that do address political or moral issues in some way and exaggerating them, perhaps blowing them up into a complete political theory. But the danger of misusing Scripture in these ways does not let Christians off the hook, Belcher says. It does not free them to ignore politics; instead they must look beyond what God reveals in Scripture, though this *special revelation* should inform their views. They must also use reason, and they must look to God's *general revelation* in nature, as they try to develop a public philosophy.

Belcher believes that an understanding of the vital center can form the basis of a public philosophy that Christians can embrace. He also believes Christianity can play a special role in acting as "the undercurrent of our culture," and that by doing so it can "help restore the synthesis at the heart of our democratic republic" (255). He is clear that he is not calling either for a watered-down civic religion nor for Christian nationalism, which we can avoid by keeping in mind the difference between special and general revelation and rejecting accommodation and inflation, whether coming from the right or left. Christianity, based on special revelation, can ground the vital center derived from general revelation, but Christians should not confuse Christianity with politics.

*Cold Civil War* is the product not only of Belcher's many years of curiosity about and careful study of diverse political and moral views, but also of his search, since his days as an undergraduate, for his own public philosophy. In this he has succeeded, and he has given a clear account of the ideologies that are dividing the country and where he thinks they have gone wrong. And while he may not have given as clear an idea about how we can get back to the vital center, he has at least sketched out a view of what it might look like.

Where Belcher goes wrong, I think, is in attributing motives to those behind the various contemporary political ideologies. Some chapters, for example, have a "Who Benefits?" section, explaining, for example, that those in freedom right 2 support unlimited immigration because it increases the wealth of "our bipartisan ruling elites" (138), or that the goal of those in order left 3 "isn't really antiracism. . . . It's actually something much greater—the quest for power, influence, and control" (121). Of course, I would not dispute that people often pursue moral causes that further their own interests, and on occasion they perhaps do so deliberately. But one result of polarization is that we believe this is the case of our opponents much more than

we believe it of ourselves. We find their views either so absurd or so noxious that we cannot believe they hold them in earnest. Usually they do, however, and they believe them for the reasons they say they do. Belcher's own framework would even suggest this, since the views away from the center come from exaggerating one political ideal and ignoring another. Zealousness rather than guile is likely at work.

This does not detract from the strengths of the book, but I mention it partly because many readers, particularly those on the left of American politics, might find these parts off-putting. They might also be put off by the fact that Belcher places much of what has long been mainstream in the Democratic party, such as support for the welfare state, on the fringes, outside the vital center necessary for renewal. The vital center Belcher describes would normally be thought of as a conservative vision for America. It is centrist in its attempt to balance opposing ideals, but it would seem to be well to the right of the median voter. This points to another potential weakness: Belcher's hopefulness about the future of American democracy. If he is right, as I think he generally is, about the ideological forces polarizing the country, and if he is right that we are in a cold civil war, it is hard to see how it ends any time soon. If people are to embrace the new vital center, many would have to abandon their current ideologies, to abandon what they see as their pursuit of justice, equality, freedom, security, or virtue.

While the book will likely appeal most to Christian conservatives who will find congenial the defense of America's founding and the role of religion in public life, I hope it will find a broader audience as well. Whatever your politics or religion, if you are concerned about the current divisions in our country, and if you believe overcoming these divisions requires learning from diverse perspectives, even if you end up rejecting Belcher's public philosophy, you should find his insights useful in helping you to better form your own.

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