

Praise for Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White

“While reality is presented in church and our culture these days as black or white, either/or, left or right, conservative or liberal, Adam Hamilton skillfully, carefully, and faithfully helps us see the wisdom and humble way of gray. In religious and scientific questions, in the hot buttons in most denominations today (like abortion and homosexuality), in an approach to reading the Scriptures, and more, he shows ‘a more excellent,’ third alternative to the extreme polar opposites we assume are the only ones available to us. I highly recommend that all United Methodists read this important book to help us find the radical center that combines social and personal holiness again.”

—Sally Dyck, Resident Bishop Minnesota Area, The United Methodist Church

“I loved this book! Hamilton offers a solidly biblical and immensely reasonable middle ground on virtually every major issue that presently divides our country as well as the church. Of course, few will agree with every one of Hamilton’s own conclusions. But everyone who reads this wonderfully written book will be positively impacted by its humble, Christlike style. In our polarized climate, this is exactly what we need!”

—Gregory A. Boyd, Princeton Seminary; Senior Pastor of Woodland Hills Church, Maplewood, Minn.

“Adam Hamilton invites us to soulful gray space between polarities, glorious gray space that is holy, mysterious, complex, and true. Let us find within our spirits the courage and humility to live and learn in this faithful space, to see gray, to discern a more excellent way.”

—Hope Morgan Ward, Resident Bishop, Mississippi Annual Conference, The United Methodist Church

“Adam is a breath of fresh air. True to Scripture but no simple ‘god in a box’ formulas for the church to be found in these pages.”

—Mike Slaughter

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More Praise for Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White

“Reverend Hamilton courageously addresses the challenging issues of our time prophetically as well as pastorally. A stimulating book, it is an excellent teaching tool for clergy and laity alike in addressing the contemporary burning issues of church and society. It opens much needed dialogue concerning various theological perspectives and strives toward the unity of the church.”

—Sudarshana Devadhar, Resident Bishop New Jersey Area, The United Methodist Church

“*Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* is a stream of refreshing water in a scorched desert of polarization! While the religious and political extremes compete for power and dominance through coercive rhetoric and power maneuvers, Adam Hamilton provides an alternative that is theologically grounded and faithful to the church’s mission to be a sign and instrument of God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ. This is an important and timely call to the church!”

—Kenneth L. Carder, United Methodist Bishop, Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams, Jr. Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School

“The church and world have not been served well by either the Old Left or the New Right, who take partial truth and present it as the whole truth. Adam Hamilton provides a prophetic alternative voice to partisan advocates with their barren polarities and tiresome polemics.”

—Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership and Director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC

“This is a wonderful book that is sure to yield some wonderful fruit as Adam’s ideas are put into practice in the renewal of our church.”

—Will Willimon, Resident Bishop, North Alabama Annual Conference, The United Methodist Church

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Twenty - Three

The Radical Center

The best thing about the radical middle perspective . . . is that it's just beginning to be articulated, examined, refined. YOU can still affect it. And in many different guises, it's emerging everywhere.

—Mark Satin

Would to God that all party names and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world were forgot and that we might all agree to sit down together as humble loving disciples, and at the feet of our common master to hear his word, to abide in his spirit and to transcribe his life in our own.

—John Wesley

In the late 1950s and early 1960s mainline churches had reached their zenith of influence, growth, and power in this country.¹ They were the dominant voice in America. They played a key role in politics. They helped elect presidents and leaders of both houses of Congress. But their power and influence were not to last. Since 1964 mainline churches have declined precipitously.

The reasons for this decline are numerous. Among them were a loss of spiritual vitality as mainline churches increasingly focused on the social gospel without a concomitant effort to help parishioners grow in their personal relationship with God; an emphasis on the intellect in worship, while neglecting the emotion and the heart; a kind of “traditionalism” in worship that felt devoid of meaning and relevance for many; a shift to the cultural, political, and theological left in the seminaries without adequately preparing graduates to minister in a culture in which the pendulum was

swinging to the right; a time of social upheaval in the 1960s and early 1970s that left many in society yearning for absolutes and a clear, black-and-white faith; and (for all of these reasons and more) a failure to “connect” with younger generations.²

I believe that in many ways conservative Christianity is today where the mainline churches were in 1964. It has reached its zenith of growth, power, and influence. The movement helped elect politicians, claimed to represent American values, and successfully welcomed millions of Americans into its churches. But I believe these churches are likely to see their growth stalled, and then to watch a period of decline, unless they recognize the changes happening in society that will leave them increasingly disconnected from emerging generations.

One of the most obvious signs of this impending change is the change in political fortunes for conservatives after a period in which all three branches of government were in the hands of the conservative element of the Republican Party.³ The rise of what is called the Emergent Church within Christianity is another sign that the winds of change are blowing. Many of the voices in the Emergent Church are former conservative Christians who no longer identify with Fundamentalism’s approach or interpretations of the gospel but still maintain an evangelical faith.

I see it anecdotally in a host of places. One of the leading conservative seminaries in the United States has students and professors questioning the doctrine of inerrancy (while the school continues to officially embrace the doctrine). I hear it in the reaction of my friends who pastor large Southern Baptist churches as they express their frustration over the infighting and the narrowness of some in leadership in their convention. I heard it recently as I spoke with the pastor of a large Pentecostal church as he expressed the frustration of many of the younger pastors in his

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denomination—a denomination that saw dramatic growth in the twentieth century but that is, for the first time, facing a plateau and, in some places, beginning to experience a decline.

I sensed it in the passion of a young pastor who leads a relatively new nondenominational church. His background was in the charismatic movement. He recently led his congregation to carry signs in a crowded shopping area in Kansas City announcing that “God loves gay people.” And, on this issue, I hear it when speaking with my teenage daughter’s friends who attend more conservative churches, yet who reject their parents’ views on homosexuality.

I see it in evangelical publishing giant Zondervan Press’s publication of an inclusive-language edition of the *New International Version* of the Bible, despite the protests and boycotts of the old guard among conservatives in America. I hear it in the willingness of an increasing number of traditionally conservative churches to embrace women in leadership positions in the church, including female pastors.

I see it in the Evangelicals who are speaking out against global warming despite the fact that some leading conservatives dismiss global warming as a hoax. I hear it in the questions raised by some very thoughtful writers in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* concerning war, poverty, and AIDS. Many of these same articles could very well have been published in what has traditionally been the more left-leaning *Christian Century*.

And I’ve seen it in the ministries of two of the leading evangelical megachurches in America: Willow Creek, led by pastor Bill Hybels, and Saddleback Church, led by Rick Warren. Both of these men have moved from a ministry focused almost exclusively on evangelism, to one that recognizes the call of Christ to care for

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those in need. Both men have taken seriously their role in leading their churches, and the churches they influence, to be concerned about the social gospel even while continuing their passionate pursuit of the evangelical gospel. These men, and the churches they have influenced, are beginning to resemble the best of the mainline tradition. This is what many of America's mainline churches represented in their inception—a passionate evangelistic zeal coupled with a belief that the gospel had to be lived in social ministry to a broken world.

My point is that there is a significant shift toward the center that is happening among young people and key thinkers and leaders in the evangelical world. I believe this shift is unstoppable despite the efforts of conservatives to arrest it.

But it is not only the right that is shifting toward the center; changes are being experienced on the left as well.

Mainline churches are expressing a renewed passion for evangelism. They are embracing forms of worship that speak not only to the intellect but also to the heart. There is a renewed emphasis on church planting. And there is a recognition in mainline seminaries of the importance of spiritual formation and the spiritual disciplines in the Christian life. Many mainline seminaries have once again embraced the importance of the “apostolic core” of the gospel and are preparing students to do apologetics in a post-Christian culture.

When I speak at various conferences across the country and I talk of the mainline vision of the gospel as both authentically

evangelical and at the same time liberal in spirit, mainline people break out in applause. I meet pastors and lay leaders of mainline churches who are energized by an approach to the gospel that brings together the best of both the right and the left. They resonate with the idea of a Christianity of the center and they inherently know that the world is far more gray than black and white.

Mainline churches have teetered on the brink of division over both theological issues and, particularly, the issue of homosexuality. Yet there are signs that there is a renewed interest in holding these churches together. At the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in 2004 a proposal was discussed among some, and then leaked to the press, that would have allowed for the division of The United Methodist Church between conservatives and everyone else. But the response of the delegates to the conference was overwhelmingly to affirm that they wanted to hold the church together. And the only way to hold the two sides of mainline churches together is to acknowledge gray and to meet in the center.

There will always be Christians on the right and on the left, but there is an increasing number of Christians who are drawn to the center—Christians who are learning to appreciate what the other side brings to the table, who are humbly willing to learn from others, and who are able to say with the eighteenth-century John Wesley:

Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.⁴

Some characterize the Christian center as middle-of-the-road or wishy-washy. It is neither. A word that many in the center have often used to describe themselves is “moderate.” But I don’t believe the Christian center is moderate either. What does it mean to take something in “moderation”? When we speak of eating

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or drinking in moderation, we mean that people consume in smaller portions. But I don't want to take my faith in moderation, or encourage others to do this. I am not interested in this kind of tepid faith. I call the people of the congregation I serve to a radical faith in which they have offered themselves wholly to God, and in which they should be willing to take risks and live boldly and courageously for God.

Each morning I wake up and pray this 250-year-old prayer Wesley taught his preachers to pray:

I am not my own but thine. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing or put me to suffering. Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you. Let me be exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy power and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And this covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.⁵

This is not moderate. This is a *radical* faith. It is radical in its pursuit of truth wherever it can be found. It is radical in its commitment to love. And it is radical in its desire to follow Jesus Christ no matter what the cost.

Some in the political and social realm are speaking of a third way between the left and the right as the "radical center" that is able to hold together the best of the right and the left, and which forges something more powerful and true, and, in the case of the faith, more authentically Christian, as a result.

The "radical center" holds together the best of the right and the left, and forges something more powerful, true, and authentically Christian as a result.

The radical center within the Christian faith embraces the evangelical gospel that proclaims that human beings are wounded by sin and are in need of saving, and that Jesus Christ is God's antidote to our human condition. *And* it em-

braces the social gospel that seeks to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and recognizes the Christian's responsibility for addressing the great problems of poverty, oppression, racism, the environment, and war. The evangelical gospel without the social gospel is spiritual narcissism. The social gospel without the evangelical gospel remains afflicted by sin and holds, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "to the outward form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5a). The radical center holds that the gospel is incomplete without both its evangelical and social witness.

The radical center holds a fundamental conviction that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 145:8). God is not a small god, nor a God that acts unjustly, nor does what is evil. At the same time, it holds that God is holy, and calls us to holiness: "as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves" (1 Peter 1:15). It recognizes that grace without holiness is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." But it also recognizes that holiness without grace negates the gospel and reverts to legalism.

The radical center holds together a liberal spirit that is open-minded, searching for truth, generous, and always reforming, with a conserving spirit that is unwilling to discard historic truths simply because they are historic. It is willing to question anything but requires a very high level of evidence before setting aside what has been treasured as truth by previous generations.

The radical center recognizes in the Scriptures both the reflections of human beings as they wrote of their faith, and the self-disclosure of God to his people. It studies the Scriptures critically, analyzing the historical context, the various situations that led the authors to write the biblical texts and the complex ways in which the biblical text came together. It is unafraid to admit that the Bible has challenging passages that likely reflect the theological worldview of its authors more than the nature and character of God who came to us in Jesus Christ. And yet, the radical center recognizes the Bible is our anchor, through which God has revealed himself, and in which God converses with us. The radical

center sees the Bible as the history of a people who have sought to walk with God, and their theological insights and reflections. And yet the radical center also sees the Bible as a form of sacrament through which God's Spirit speaks and God's grace is poured into our lives. It is read, studied, memorized, meditated upon, but not worshiped or mindlessly followed.

The radical center holds that God gave us both an intellect and a heart and that both are essential to our faith. We can experience and know God with our hearts, and this personal knowledge of God is utterly life transforming and is the source of our spiritual comfort, joy, and hope. At the same time, God gave us the capacity to reason and think and ask questions, and God expects us to engage our minds in our pursuit of faith. We don't "check our brains at the door" to the church. Furthermore, we recognize that scientists, whether they recognize it or not, are instruments of God's self-disclosure as well. As they help us see and understand the universe, they are helping us understand the God who created all things and sustains them by his power and will. Science is not antithetical to faith but a partner in understanding God and God's creation.

The radical center avoids lambasting either the right or the left, though those in the center may be attacked by both extremes. They will not be conservative enough for the conservatives, or liberal enough for the liberals. But two defining characteristics of the radical center will be a willingness to find what is good and true in others, and a commitment to practicing love. The radical center will seek to take seriously the words of Paul who said, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

A friend recently passed on to me the words of Lucretia Mott, written in the 1860s:

**The radical center seeks to build
bridges rather than walls and refuses
to be the wedge in anyone's theological
or culture wars.**

It is time that Christians were judged more by their likeness to Christ than their notions of Christ. Were this sentiment generally admitted we should not see such tenacious adherence to what men deem opinions and doctrines of Christ while at the same time, in every day practice, is exhibited anything but a likeness of Christ.⁶

Mott could have been writing about the contemporary church. But her personal sentiments reflect those of the radical center. The radical center seeks to build bridges rather than walls, and refuses to be the wedge in anyone's theological or culture wars.

I wonder if this radical center resonates with you? I'm not concerned with whether you agree with every single position I've staked out in this book. I'm certain that with time I will come to disagree with some of the things I've written here. But do you have this sense, deep down inside, that the world is not nearly so black and white as many would paint it, and that the greatest truth is found somewhere in the center? If so I want to encourage you to speak up, and let your voice be heard. Do so, not belligerently but firmly; not with arrogance, but with conviction and love.

I'd like to end this book where I began, reiterating these words from the closing paragraph of the introduction:

Christianity is in need of a new reformation. The Fundamentalism of the last century is waning. And the Liberalism of the last fifty years has jettisoned too much of the historic Christian gospel to take its place. Christianity's next reformation will strike a middle path between Jerry Falwell and John Shelby Spong. It will draw upon what is best in both Fundamentalism and Liberalism by holding together the evangelical and social gospels, by combining a love of Scripture with a willingness to see both its humanity as well as its divinity, and by coupling a passionate desire to follow Jesus Christ with a reclamation of his heart toward those whom religious people have often rejected. This reformation will be led by people who are able to see the gray in a world of black and white.

An Invitation

Interested in joining the discussion? Log on at www.seeing-gray.org where you can read Adam Hamilton's blog, offer your insights, and find other resources for people who see gray.

Notes

1. "Mainline" is a term that typically is used to distinguish the established mainstream Christian denominations that are generally considered more centrist to progressive among which are the United Methodist, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and some Presbyterian denominations, among others.
2. This is a very cursory assessment of what happened to precipitate decline in the mainline. There are many other factors. It is commonly noted that mainline churches slowed the rate at which they were starting new churches as evangelical churches put a greater focus on new church planting. Some have suggested that a more "liberal" orientation among mainline seminaries reduced the urgency for leading people to Christ. Some have even suggested the mainline embrace of birth control meant they were having fewer babies!
3. By 2006 President Bush's appointees to the Supreme Court gave it a conservative majority, alongside conservative control of Congress and the White House.
4. "Catholic Spirit," one of John Wesley's most famous sermons, first published by Wesley in 1755. This quote is from *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Thomas Jackson (1872).
5. My slightly paraphrased version of the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition, which is found in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 607.
6. *Christian Believer: Knowing God with Heart and Mind, Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 215.