

A Both/And, Not Either/Or Church

**Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor**

**Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston Salem, NC**

www.knollwood.org

February 9, 2020

Isaiah 58:5-9a; Matthew 13:52

In Jim Collins' best-seller, *Built to Last*, he explores eighteen companies that have thrived over time. These are companies that perform above their peers, decade after decade. And one of the qualities that makes these companies great companies is that they avoid either/or thinking.

According to Collins, highly visionary companies liberate themselves from “the tyranny of the or” to embrace the “genius of the and.” They find a way to hold both ends of a spectrum together rather than choosing one or the other: profit *and* ethics, cost controls *and* customer service. “Instead of choosing a or b,” he writes, “(the best companies) figure out a way to have both a and b.”

If both/and thinking, rather than either/or thinking, is the sign of a great company--or a great country--then our country is in trouble. This side of the president's State of the Union speech and impeachment acquittal, our country is deeply divided. According to the president's detractors, the State of the Union speech was a thinly-veiled and sometimes divisive MAGA stump speech, positioning Mr. Trump for re-election.

And according to the Democrats' detractors, Speaker Pelosi's tearing up the president's speech in full view of God and everybody, was a shameful, deplorable act. Meanwhile, half-the-country views the president's acquittal as a cause for celebration while the other half sees his acquittal as the triumph of partisan politics over the constitution.

In such a context, at such a time, a church that is more both/and, than either/or has a unique and sacred vocation: To bear witness to a mysterious power and shared mission that unites people despite their differences. Such a church is a sign of hope, and not just for the Christian community but for the nation. I believe Knollwood is that kind of church.

A year or so ago at a new members' lunch, one of our newer members shared what drew her and her family to Knollwood: "As I was trying to put a few reflections into words, it occurred to me that many of the things that we appreciate about Knollwood may be described with the words 'both/and'; both appreciation for tradition *and* progressive ideas; both spiritual formation *and* outreach/social justice; both young *and* old; both distinctly Baptist *and* open to other faith traditions; both pastoral *and* prophetic; both small enough to experience community and large enough to offer thriving ministries and diversity; both language that both proclaims the gospel *and* embraces mystery."

If you were compiling your own list of Knollwood's both/and qualities, what would you include?

In Jesus' brief parable of the wise scribe, he commends a both/and approach to his gospel and movement: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52). Here Jesus calls for honoring the hallowed scriptures and traditions of Judaism, the *old*, while hearing how those truths *anew* in light of his life and ministry.

But beyond avoiding the tragic either/or of making Christianity good and Judaism bad--as the church has done far too often in her history--I believe this parable is suggestive of another truth, namely, that Jesus' teaching and ministry are always characterized by a both/and embrace. Jesus brings a new brand of truth and love that no longer divides the world into us against them. As Anne Lamont has famously said, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Instead, Jesus ushers in a kingdom where the outsiders are invited in and the insiders are challenged to see their own need for grace. Thank God, Knollwood is a church where the grace of Jesus and the truth of Jesus are held in creative tension. And that's one of the reasons why so very often, this church reminds me of Jesus.

What are some of my favorite both/ands about Knollwood? One is that steady, beating pulse of freedom--the Baptist witness at its best--complemented by openness to our other brothers and sisters in the faith. For example, we practice believers' baptism by immersion, celebrating a full-bodied immersion into the welcoming waters of God's grace. And yet in the 1970s, Knollwood decided to become one of the few Baptist churches in the south to respect and welcome *all* Christian baptisms.

For us, baptism is a both/and expression of Christian unity instead of an either /or expression of denominational division. We recognize that infant dedication complemented by believers' baptism, as we do at Knollwood, is very similar to an infant baptism complemented by confirmation as practiced by other Christian churches.

Infant baptism and infant dedication both affirm that God's grace precedes any choice on our part, while believers' baptism and confirmation both affirm that in order to be a Christian, one must choose that faith for oneself. Hence, our practice of welcoming all Christian baptisms

allows folks from non-Baptist churches to join without being re-baptized and thereby renouncing--or seeming to renounce--the church of their youth.

One of our charter members joined this church in 1957, coming as a Methodist. Upon learning Knollwood required her to be baptized again, which was Knollwood's practice in 1957, she was hopping mad. In a tense meeting with Dr. Jack, our founding pastor, she declared, "Sir, I *have* been baptized. But I will do this for my family, if not for you!"

Another both/and quality I cherish about Knollwood is its intergenerational character. In an era when more and more churches are defined by niches, for example, a church full of older folks or a church for the younger set, Knollwood is a church for all ages. Thanks to our vital children and youth ministries--from Sunday School to music to missions--Knollwood is a good place for families. As another KBC newbie confessed, "One of the reasons we (came to Knollwood) was . . . we wanted more opportunities for our sons. KBC certainly gives them that from cub scouts to choir and bell choir and all of the activities planned around the WCC. Now (my son) can't wait for Passport camp this summer!"

"As parents, we want the most for our boys," she continued, "and KBC provides just the kind of influence we've always dreamed for them. And an added benefit is that KBC is perfect for us too!"

Last year, at Carol VonCannon's memorial service, her daughter, Michelle, offered a moving tribute. In speaking about her mother's legacy, Michelle quoted Susan Bosak of *The Legacy Project* as saying legacy is "learning from the past, living in the present, and building for the future."

Then, citing ecological studies, Michele asked, "So where would a seedling have the best chance to thrive? In an open grove or in a forest?" The answer is in an area with older trees because the seedlings' roots can follow the pathways already created by the older trees.

“Over time,” Michelle observed, “these roots may actually graft themselves to one another, creating an intricate, woven foundation hidden beneath the earth.”

That’s the power of being a multi-generational church. The young are supported and encouraged by seasoned members of the congregation--their Sunday School teachers, pew mates, and other leaders--while the older members of the church are energized and challenged by the young. To me, that is one of Knollwood’s most endearing attributes: the both/and of young and old worshiping and growing together.

And then there’s a third integration Knollwood keeps working at in creative, life-giving ways: and that’s the vital connection between worship and witness, spirituality and service, justice and love. As the prophet Isaiah cries, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6). This is a note sounded again and again in the prophets and in the teachings of Jesus: that any faith that doesn’t bring real change in the world, is no faith at all.

Right now, some in our congregation are embarking on difficult conversations about race in America. In fact, last Wednesday night, two racial equity trainers invited us to “wade into the waters” of racial injustice. For a lot of white folk like me, this is a nettlesome, aggravating invitation. We haven’t done anything to keep people of color down, so why is someone trying to guilt us about this?

But what if our black and Hispanic neighbors face barriers we don’t even see? Like landing in our poorer, underperforming schools in disproportionate numbers or serving more prison time than whites for the same offense? If the prophet Isaiah, let alone Jesus, is to be believed then God cares passionately about the plight of prisoners, the poor, widows and orphans, and all in distress. As the great missionary-evangelist, E. Stanley Jones said, “The

personal gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body; the social gospel without a personal gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost, the other is a corpse.”

From welcoming blacks in the 60s, to welcoming all baptisms in the 70s, to welcoming women as ministers and deacons in the 70s and 80s, to welcoming our gay brothers and sisters in the 2000s, Knollwood has long been a fellowship lurching after Jesus, as best she can, in both the church *and* the world.

Of course, none of this means we agree about everything. Or that following Jesus into new ventures of his justice and love come without a cost. But as a both/and congregation, Knollwood always strives to find a way forward where most people can continue journeying together with one another and with Jesus.

In the 1980s, Knollwood went through a brouhaha about purchasing a pipe organ. Until then, the church’s worship was accompanied by an electric organ. For many missions-minded members of the congregation that was good enough. But others, knowing the sanctuary was designed for a pipe organ--and missing the grand music only a pipe organ can provide--thought a pipe organ was long overdue. The congregation was evenly divided, mostly along generational lines: the old guard versus the young Turks.

Now in many congregations, that’s when you take a vote, declare the winners and the losers and then often, the losers leave. But after much spirited debate, extended consideration, and not a little prayer, Knollwood hit up a both/and solution.

Donors were given two options: they could give to purchase the pipe organ or they could give to start the church’s mission endowment fund. And if their gift was not designated, it would be evenly split between both.

In the end, Knollwood got both a magnificent pipe organ and the Celebration Fund, our church’s major mission endowment that generates about \$30,000 a year for mission causes

without touching the principal. Granted, a few people left, angry and disappointed, but most stayed and continued growing Knollwood into the thriving church it is today:

Yes, great companies and great churches find their way to both/and solutions whenever possible. And at the center of Knollwood's wide, welcoming embrace is not a dull, deadening sameness but a spirited, Jesus-style love. Because time and time again, we discover that what holds us together is far more precious than what might drive us apart. And someday, pray God that will once more be true for America too.

Recently, a KBC member shared a conversation with some friends. The friends were commiserating about how most churches have wandered far from the way of Jesus, settling into bureaucratic or ideological ruts. But for some reason, one of these disenchanted friends had recently visited Knollwood's Wellness and Community Center.

This is what she said: "I was amazed. There were people of all colors. People with hajibs. All kinds of people. Nobody was handing out a tract or fussing at anyone. It looked like the kingdom of God."

Savoring the memory, our KBC sister wrote, "I am so grateful for the witness of this congregation."

I am too, aren't you? Because in our angry, fractured, either/or world, people desperately need to believe we can be better, bolder, and more loving than this.

Jesus helps me believe we can. And Knollwood helps me put his love into practice.

And that's why I am so profoundly grateful for the witness of this congregation.

* * * * *

Thank you, gracious God, for a church so vibrant and alive as this. Now in the power of your love and Spirit, grow us into more adventuresome and faithful disciples of Jesus.

In his name we gather and pray and hope to live, Amen.