

# A Biblical Worldview on Tribalism

## INTRODUCTION

Tribalism, or groupthink (thank you, Luther), is the instinctive human tendency to bind ourselves tightly to a group (whether political party, theological circle, cultural movement, or even a favorite set of teachers). That loyalty to the group's identity, narrative, and survival becomes the real authority over what we accept as true.

It is not mere preference or healthy belonging. It filters every fact, every policy, every Scripture, and every point or counter point through the question, "Does this help or hurt us?" The group confers belonging and security, but it also demands conformity, suppresses dissent, and treats outsiders with suspicion or contempt.

Groupthink, the term Irving Janis coined in 1972 to describe how cohesive groups can chase unanimity at the expense of reality, sits right inside this: the desire for harmony inside the tribe overrides honest appraisal of evidence, truth, evaluation, or Scripture.

The full encapsulation is this: tribalism turns the person's natural craving for community into a distortion where the tribe's identity decides right and wrong before objective facts, questions, or even the very Word of God ever get a hearing. In every age it fragments the body of Christ and blinds entire societies to truth.

Tribalism is as old as humanity, rooted in our fallen instinct to form protective clans after the fall, but the sharp, measurable rise we see today in American culture, and spilling into churches, has unfolded in distinct stages over the last fifty years.

In the 1970s the groundwork was laid. The parties began realigning after the civil-rights era and Vietnam, with Southern conservatives shifting Republican and Northern liberals solidifying Democrat. Congress started losing its moderates; where more than 160 members sat in the ideological center in the early 1970s, that number had dropped dramatically by the end of the decade. Affective polarization (the emotional gap where people rate their own party warmly and the other coldly on a 0-100 "feeling thermometer") sat around 27 points in 1978 but had already begun climbing.

The 1980s and 1990s poured fuel on the fire. In response to increasing liberal bias on television, conservatives flocked to Rush Limbaugh on radio and Fox News. Not to be out done overt liberalism became niche on MSNBC. Both sides argue that the other side only get their information from biased sources.

Culture-war battles over abortion, gay rights, and family values hardened identities. By 1994 Pew data showed the share of Americans holding consistently liberal or consistently conservative views had started its climb, and unfavorable opinions of the opposing party had begun to double. What had been policy disagreements became identity markers: your politics now signaled your whole way of life.

The real acceleration hit after 2000, especially post-2008. The financial crisis, the rise of social media, smartphones, and algorithm-driven echo chambers turned every issue into a loyalty test.

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Pew's long-term tracking shows the ideological consistency of the public doubled from 10 percent in 1994 to 21 percent by 2014, with both parties becoming more tribal. Affective polarization surged to 41-43 points by 2016 and kept rising; by 2020 the gap had reached 56 points, meaning the average partisan felt more than twice as cold toward the other side as in the late 1970s.

Divisions on social and political issues jumped 64 percent since 1988, with almost all of that increase coming after 2008. Out-party hatred now often exceeds in-party warmth, and 40 percent of partisans in 2020 gave the opposing party the lowest possible score of zero—up from just 8 percent in 2000.

You see this exemplified in groupthink experiments and interviews where people are asked about a quote attributed to a political adversary or political friend. More and more people will agree with President Trump regardless of the statement and regardless of held beliefs. The thought is that if you critique a policy or action by Trump then you are disloyal or giving the opposition ammunition.

On the other side people will be out at a protest and hold signs, but when asked why they are there they cannot answer but admit that their group organized the event and they just do what they are told to be part of the whole. It does seem to me that there is more group think on one side than the other.

What we are seeing is a modern amplification: technology lets us live inside curated bubbles, partisan media rewards outrage, and cultural sorting makes every disagreement feel like an existential threat. The United States has shown the largest increase in affective polarization.

It is important to note that I am not espousing blame or becoming political moderate. Political tribalism is a problem but there is such a philosophical divide in America and the world that it is nearly impossible not to be tribal. What I mean is that regardless of a specific disagreement I may have with my political party, it does not mean I would vote for the other side, because the alternative would promote a philosophy that is much more problematic.

All of this demonstrates that we are being conditioned to be more Tribal and there are cultural and political wars that have not been settled yet. Because our cultural and political mindset has become more tribal, it impacts every aspect of our lives if we are not aware of the problem and do not know the solution.

## BIBLICAL TRIBALISM

Biblical Tribalism is our main focus and our biggest point of concern. Within Christendom there are obvious points but there are subtle ones as well. We can identify tribalism in sects or denominations. Many Catholics will defend Catholicism and not think about the question or discuss the passage, they yield to the stated doctrine or conclusion based upon the catechisms.

But they are not unique in this, Denominations have long established doctrines that are met with “this is settled doctrine” and they have no explanation from the text, rather they let founders or leaders of their denomination answer critiques.

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Evangelical, non-denominational churches are not immune to this. Here, there is more of a cult of personality rather than a denomination.

John MacArthur - His followers (sometimes called MacArthurites in online spaces) frequently treat his interpretations as the default biblical position. On Quora one commenter observed, “The first problem is that his followers so often quote him and venerate him, as if his words are the words of Jesus or the Bible.” In a 2015 exchange on [soteriology101.com](http://soteriology101.com) about whether regeneration precedes faith, critics noted MacArthur had shifted from an earlier view that demanded a clear verse (“Show me the verse”) to a harder Calvinistic line. Defenders responded not by walking through the Greek of John 1:12-13 or Ephesians 2:1-5 inductively for the original audience, but by citing MacArthur’s current stance and framing any challenge as resistance to “the system.” When his 2001 sermon on the “Curse of Ham” resurfaced and drew fire for its handling of race and slavery, supporters on social media and blogs pushed back by appealing to his overall track record rather than re-examining the historical and grammatical flow of Genesis 9. The pattern is consistent: a question about a passage is met with “MacArthur has taught this for decades.”

D.A. Carson - In debates over textual criticism or the Law in Matthew 5, critics have pointed out that Carson’s analysis sometimes leans heavily on modern critical consensus. One response in a 2021 blog post on [youngtextlessreformed.com](http://youngtextlessreformed.com) noted that Carson harshly critiqued Byzantine-text defenders like Zane Hodges while appearing to follow Metzger’s line without fresh exegetical pushback. Followers in TGC circles often invoke “the Carson Rule” (a shorthand for careful, humble engagement he models) to dismiss challenges to his positions, framing the critic as lacking Carson’s balance rather than opening the Greek syntax of the passage under dispute. The appeal is to the man’s reputation for precision instead of a fresh look at the text’s grammar and the historical situation of Matthew’s Jewish audience.

John Piper – Piperites show the Tribal reflex especially around his distinctive emphases like Christian hedonism. When critics challenge Piper’s statements on divine determinism or specific applications of God’s glory (for example, in interviews where he affirms God’s predetermination of every detail including sin), defenders respond with “Piper has shown from Scripture...” and then quote his books or articles rather than inviting an inductive walk-through of texts.

Our ilk is not immune

R.B. Thieme Jr. - “Thiemites” or “tapers,” developed a reputation for extreme loyalty that produced division. A 1978 report from the Independent Fundamental Churches of America Commission documented that Thieme supporters became “fanatically loyal to their mentor” and “spiritually dependent and psychologically bound to him.” On Reddit, one former attendee described the teaching that you must find “your one and only true pastor” (often Thieme or his tapes) because “only under them could you begin to learn and let them tell you what Bible passages mean.” When questions arose about his distinctive vocabulary or applications, the response was not “Let us examine the Greek and the authorial intent,” but an appeal to “what the Colonel taught” or the need to stay under that authoritative voice. The IFCA study noted this

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created an “us-versus-them” dynamic that fractured churches rather than letting the text itself unify.

L.S. Chafer - Proponents often treat his eight-volume Systematic Theology as the standard reference. In discussions defending dispensational distinctions (for example, on Israel and the church), the move is frequently “Chafer showed from Scripture...” followed by citations from his work rather than a fresh grammatical-historical unpacking of Ephesians 2 or Romans 11 for Paul’s original mixed audience. One dissertation on New Calvinism observed that Chafer’s approach kept logic subordinate to exegesis, yet in practice, many of his followers appeal to his conclusions as settled dispensational orthodoxy. The tribal reflex appears when a challenge to a Chafer-influenced chart or distinction is met with defense of the Chafer/DTS tradition.

Darby, Ryrie, Scofield, Zane Hodges, and others all have had their defenders, and some follow them without any question.

### Free Grace Tribalism

When I was young the “Free Grace” camp was unified, the common enemy of the false gospel of works and religion-based salvation was enough to keep groups like Dallas Theological Seminary, Grace Evangelical Society, and Florida Bible College close knit and harmonized.

Over the years, different positions began to take hold and division began.

The most public and lasting division is between the Grace Evangelical Society (GES) and the Free Grace Alliance (FGA) / Duluth Bible Church. It surfaced openly around 2005–2009 and centers on the precise content required for saving faith. The GES side, shaped by Zane Hodges and carried forward by Bob Wilkin, holds that saving faith is simply being convinced that Jesus guarantees eternal life to the one who believes in Him for it. In their view, the “Him” of John 3:16 is the Person who makes that promise; explicit knowledge of His deity, substitutionary death, or bodily resurrection is not a necessary part of the saving message, even though those truths are vital for other reasons. Critics inside Free Grace circles labeled this the “crossless gospel” or “promise-only gospel,” a term GES rejects as misleading. The FGA side, represented by Dennis Rokser, Tom Stegall, Charlie Bing, and many associated with Duluth Bible Church, insists that saving faith must include belief in the Person and finished work of Christ as the Scriptures present Him, specifically that He died for our sins and rose again. They point to 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and the progress of revelation in John’s Gospel to argue that the gospel message after the cross necessarily includes those historical facts. The split became organizational: the FGA formed, in part, to distance itself from what it saw as a narrowing of the gospel, while GES continued to publish and defend the “focused” or “promise-only” view.

A second, quieter division concerns the future experience of believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ and in the millennial kingdom. Teachers such as Zane Hodges and Joseph Dillow (often aligned with GES) teach that not every believer will reign with Christ. They interpret passages like Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30 (“outer darkness” with weeping and gnashing of teeth) as

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describing a temporary punishment, loss of reward, and privilege for unfaithful believers during the thousand-year reign. Faithful “overcomers” (defined by continuing in faith and obedience) will inherit fuller kingdom blessings; carnal believers will still be saved but will be excluded from those joys. Many in the FGA orbit and independent Free Grace voices reject this two-tiered destiny for the saved, arguing that every believer will participate in the kingdom in some positive way and that “outer darkness” language points either to hell for the unsaved or to loss of reward without literal exclusion from reigning.

A third area of tension, though less sharply organized, involves assurance, repentance, and the nature of saving faith itself. Some emphasize that assurance is of the essence of faith: if you believe Jesus’ promise you know you have eternal life at that moment, period. Others insist that while works do not secure salvation, the New Testament still calls believers to examine themselves and that ongoing faith will normally produce some fruit, even if minimal. Debates over whether repentance (a change of mind) is a necessary component of saving faith or simply part of the gospel presentation also surface regularly. These questions rarely split churches outright, but they surface in podcasts, journal articles, and online forums as loyalty tests: “Are you with Hodges/Wilkin on this, or are you drifting toward lordship language?”

### BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

The biblical call is for clarity and unity. Philippians 1:27 speaks about this and Acts 17:11 sees Scriptural verification as noble. Believers need to come to unity, but these divisions are deep and some of the questions are difficult. So how do we fix our issues and struggles? The first thing we need to do is to examine everything and belief carefully and ask ourselves, are we following men, a system, or Scripture?

Scripture is the authority in all matters especially doctrine. But great men who take the Scriptures seriously come to different conclusions. This is where we discuss hermeneutics, the method of how we understand Scripture.

Many have attempted to describe better what this method is. Here is my summary of these efforts.

Literal – I think Paul Miles described this to me with a better term, “literary.” We read the Bible like we read any book. Where it is narrative, we read in that manner; where metaphor is being employed, then we consider how the picture depicts the main point. Regardless of the genre, we read it naturally and do not force spiritualization or allegory upon the text.

Grammatical – We understand that language follows rules of the language being used. We look at the text understanding that words have definitions and how those words are put together to convey meaning (syntax). We can do this using English translations, but that will have limitations. For us to investigate fully and be sure of both translation and understanding, we must use a verified original language text.

Historical – If there is a significant weakness in our combined hermeneutic. It is in the way we consider the historical context. We must recognize the importance of the times and the context in

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which the words were originally written. If the text records a discourse, then we must also recognize the importance of the times and the context of the conversation. Cultural concepts also can (and often do) play a significant role in our understanding of Scripture.

With specific regard to the Historical consideration. We must renew our standing that the Bible was not written to us, but it was written for us. Most of the Bible is history. The main point of history is to inform the readers of what happened. The Bible's historical accounts tell us about the nature, character, and activity of God. It is informative, not prescriptive.

I believe that many of our divisions in the Free Grace Camp are due to a lack of understanding that the Gospels and Acts are to be first understood as historical.

Those who are on opposing sides of an issue and wish to resolve differences and regain solidarity must agree to the method of interpretation, including the weight of the historical significance of a text. If that is done, the conversation can renew, and differences can be resolved because the source of truth and the method of understanding that truth is agreed upon.

We need to renew our humility before the Lord, His Word, and with each other. As stated before, theological disagreements usually end up in conflict (I was a major contributor to this error). But when we began yielding to the Word of God and being more consistent with the prescribed biblical method of understanding and not looking to win a fight but simply desiring the truth, then we will be able to change our positions and have our beliefs be more biblical.

We must desire to mend, not destroy. We must all to come together in unity. We must understand and expect that beliefs, interpretations, and tenants will be challenged. We also can be and are most likely to be wrong in various areas. But if we all can agree to a consistent, correct biblical hermeneutic, our differences will be few, and we can join together under the banner of Jesus Christ and His love.