

## **Make Us One, Lord**

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October 2006*

When I was a kid I was jealous of my classmates who had the big 64-color box of Crayola crayons. I had to make do with a smaller array of colors, but that only made for greater creative challenges. By necessity, I learned in kindergarten about combining primary colors that would result in other, more exotic shades. Coloring with a yellow crayon over red produced orange, a red crayon over blue resulted in purple. And that's where we are in contemporary American politics. Oversimplified, we are told we live in red states or blue states. But just like the blending of one crayon with another, the fact is we live in purple states. Some may be a little bluer, others a little redder, but lovely shades of purple nonetheless.

Our red state and blue state distinction is just one example of our human need to classify and separate ourselves into categories that divide us rather than unite us. I remember when it was fashionable dinner party conversation to compare one's Myers-Briggs personality type with dining companions. "I'm an ESFJ, what about you?" You didn't want to have an ENFP sitting next to an ISTJ; that would have spelled trouble. We are conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, Catholics and Protestants, lefties and righties, Gators and Seminoles and 'Canes, oh my!

One of the latest examples of classification comes from the Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion. Sociologists there conducted a national survey with 77 questions and 400 answer possibilities that examined beliefs, practices and religious ties. It turns out, according to the Baylor researchers, that Americans, 92% of whom profess to believe in God, actually worship four different versions of the same God. And those beliefs about God, say the researchers, can predict a lot about a person's moral, political and social views.

The four versions of God have been dubbed Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical and Distant.

People who believe in an Authoritarian God (31% of the American public) say God is deeply involved in contemporary human events, that God is responsible for natural disasters and economic trends, and that he (or she, but probably he) is very angry and capable of "meting out punishment" to those who are "unfaithful" or "ungodly."

Believers in a Benevolent God (25%) agree with the Authoritarian believers that God is actively involved in their daily lives, but they are less inclined to think of God as angry with the world. Rather, the Benevolent God is "mainly a force of positive influence" and is less willing to "condemn or punish individuals."

Believers in a Critical God (16%) believe that God is not especially involved in the day-to-day activities of the world. But they do think God is a keen observer of what's going on and they think their God is unhappy with the state of human affairs. God's unhappiness "will be felt in another life" and "divine justice may not be of this world."

Finally, believers in a Distant God (23%) see God as not particularly involved and not particularly angry. Their God is a cosmic force who set the universe in motion. Their God does not "do" things in the world and "does not hold clear opinions" about what we do.

The remaining 5% represent other religious beliefs or none at all.

There are some interesting geographical and demographic differences among the four groups. Women tend to view God as more engaged in their lives (Authoritarian and Benevolent) while men tend to view God as less involved (Critical and Distant). Southerners are the most likely to view God as Authoritarian; Easterners tend towards a Critical God; Midwesterners believe in a

Benevolent God; and Westerners think of God as Distant. More highly educated and higher paid persons tend to view God as Distant.

That's all very interesting, isn't it? However, what's most interesting to me is what's *not* in the study. This is a column about stewardship, and what is notably missing from the study is any analysis of how one's view of God affects one's stewardship. I find this encouraging. Perhaps a subsequent study may point out differences in how one's view of God affects one's stewardship practices, but for now, all we can say is that we're in the same boat when it comes to how we practice stewardship. But the news is not all good on that front either. The average United Methodist household gives only about 2.5% of its income to support the mission and ministry of the church. That's a long way from the Biblical standard of the tithe, which means giving 10% of one's resources to God's work.

So we've got some work to do – together – when it comes to stewardship. Whether we view God as Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical or Distant, my hope and prayer is that we can all agree that God is the source and sustainer of all that we are and all that we have. Together, focusing on what unites us rather than what divides us, let us focus on encouraging ourselves and others to respond generously to God's call on our lives through our unity in Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite tunes from "The Faith We Sing" says it like this:

*Make us one, Lord, make us one;  
Holy Spirit, make us one.  
Let your love flow so the world will know  
We are one in you.*

Jesus is a uniter, not a divider. He deserves our very best.

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to comprehensive Christian stewardship. For more information please call, click or write us at 1-866-363-9673 toll-free; [www.fumf.org](http://www.fumf.org); or PO Box 3549, Lakeland, FL 33802.