

# How We Make Moral Judgments:

## A look at the PCUSA Divestment Issue from a Moral Perspective

Deuteronomy 8:1, 7-10    Leviticus 19:33-34  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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I love learning new things; especially things that are helpful in understanding why people, good people, can have such diametrically opposed opinions on certain issues, especially moral issues. Haven't you wondered at times, how in the world can someone think that way? Which really translates into, why in the world can't other people believe what I believe?

This morning I'm specifically referring to learning more about **the study of moral psychology**. It began in earnest when I read an article that appeared in TIME magazine back in October 2012. At the height of the presidential election cycle **Jonathan Haidt** wrote a commentary entitled, "The New Culture War over Fairness: Obama and Romney have different definitions of what is right and just." How could this be? Isn't right, right, and wrong, wrong? Doesn't everybody, especially people of faith, have a solid understanding of what is just and unjust, fair and unfair?

I was fascinated to learn that in the arena of strongly opposing opinions there is something much deeper going on inside each of us that is guiding our own moral compass. The article mentioned that Dr. Haidt is a professor of business ethics at New York University, and the author of the 2012 book, ***The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion***. I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to know the answer to that dilemma. So I bought the book, yet had a somewhat difficult time getting through it at first. Psychology can be a bit dense at times for those of us not trained in this particular endeavor of study.

The Introduction to *The Righteous Mind* begins with the famous 1992 quote by Rodney King, "Can we all get along?" Haidt answers, "This book is about why it's so hard for us to get along. We are indeed all stuck here for a while, so let's at least do what we can to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile groups, each one certain of its righteousness."

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines **moral psychology** as "**the study of the development of the moral sense – i.e., of the capacity for forming judgments about what is morally right or wrong, good or bad.**" As it turns out, there is someone right here at College Hill whom I knew could help me make some sense out of moral psychology. It's kind of like having our own version of Cliff Notes among us. Church member **Dr. Brad Brummel**, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology next door at the University of Tulsa.

When I mentioned Haidt's book to Brad, he said that he was already very familiar with it and had even incorporated some of that material into one of his classes. Last year we visited about his leading an adult church school class. And just this very

morning we finished a fascinating and remarkably helpful 4-week study of moral psychology. Brad, your instruction in this area of moral psychology is already making a big difference in my own approach toward others, with whom I agree and disagree. And I suspect there are wide-ranging benefits for all forty of us who attended your class.

We learned that our gut level reaction and judgment as to whether something is morally right or wrong stems more from our deep-seated intuition than in our rational thought – though both play a role. So does the influential role of the communities and groups to which we belong – i.e. peer pressure. But who among us hasn't distanced ourselves from a group with which we no longer agree on any number of moral issues? Yes, there is a reason why humans tend to divide into relatively like-minded communities. Perhaps it's mainly to support our own opinions and perspectives. Again, this is no more evident than in the arena of politics and religion.

**So what's happening at a gut level that leads people to different moral judgments?** In sharing Jonathan Haidt's work, Brad walked us through the **six moral bases, or filters, that inform our moral judgment**. Depending on which is the strongest of our filters has the greatest influence over our position. Experts believe, however, that most of us filter things on a fairly consistent basis. We'll get to this in just a moment.

First, I want you to think of a divisive moral issue. For example, is it right or wrong to allow open-carry guns inside a church building? Should our country engage in drone strikes in Iraq? Should children be taught abstinence-only in sex education classes at school? Should the death penalty be allowed to continue? What should be done with the huge influx of Central American children crossing our border illegally? What moral dilemmas would you add to that list?

There is one dilemma that I want to add this morning. It concerns one of the more controversial decisions made at the recent General Assembly of the PCUSA. I want to look at **moral decision-making as it applies to the Assembly's debate of whether or not our denomination should selectively divest our church holdings in three corporations** who have been profiting from contracts with the Israeli government. These three corporations (Caterpillar, Motorola, and Hewlett Packard) have been singled out because they have been **charged with engaging in non-peaceful pursuits that further the occupation of Palestinian territories**. This goes against our previously determined policy as a denomination.

We must start by looking through the lens of why people took sides based primarily on their own filters of making moral judgments. Experts in the field of moral psychology have determined that there are **six moral bases, or filters, through which any moral decision is made**. The first involves the issue of **care**. Is someone or something being harmed or being harmful? Second, the issue of **liberty**. Is someone being oppressed or being oppressive? Third, the issue of **fairness**. Is someone cheating or being cheated? Fourth, the issue of **loyalty**. Is someone betraying the in-group or community? Fifth, the issue of **authority**. Is someone subverting or disregarding that authority? And sixth, the issue of **sanctity** or purity. Is someone degrading the system? This ties into the level of your disgust at any particular action?

Care, liberty, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. We base our moral judgment through the intuitive nature of whether something is right or wrong, then, primarily through the filters of harm, oppression, cheating, betrayal, subversion, and degradation. So which of these, for the most part, is strongest for you? What has the strongest impact on your sense of what is morally right and what is not? In other words, **how would you rank these six filters in their amount of influence over your moral**

**decisions?** Brad gave us a short questionnaire in class to help us figure that out. There are copies of that questionnaire on our Information Table in the narthex if you would like to take that for yourself. Let me repeat them.

1. Desire for compassion and the well-being and care for those being harmed.
2. Desire for freedom for those being oppressed, dominated or bullied.
3. Desire for fairness and justice for those being cheated or deceived.
4. Desire for loyalty, cohesive coalitions, even pride, toward your group, team, or larger community.
5. Desire for obedience, deference, and respect for those in positions of authority.
6. Desire for temperance, chastity, or cleanliness in order to avoid contamination. And in this category they have included such sources of contamination like racism, sexism, and all the other 'isms.'

Each and every one of us, of course, considers all of these things, almost subconsciously, when gaging our moral response to any given issue. What really gets exciting is when two or more of these moral bases seem to be in conflict with each other, making moral decisions even harder to make.

Through much study, moral psychologists have looked at how these moral filters have particular influence over liberals and conservatives from a political perspective. They refer to this as Progressivism and Orthodoxy. They have learned that when it comes to moral issues, **progressives/liberals have a much stronger influence from the filters of whether someone is being harmed, oppressed, or cheated.** Therefore, these considerations will have a stronger impact on whether something is right or wrong, rather than say whether someone is being disloyal to the group, or not falling into line with authority (including the Bible), or not aligning with determined criteria for purity within the system.

Interestingly, they have also learned that **conservatives have a more equal and balanced level of influence from each of these six filters or moral bases.** But in the marriage equality debate, for example, conservatives primarily argue against it because it violates their sense of the authority of scripture and church tradition. Added to that is a high level of sheer disgust that leads them to the conclusion that it's simply impure or unclean.

The **divestment** issue at the General Assembly, however, wasn't as easily predictable across the progressive/conservative spectrum. In fact, divestment was approved only by the very narrow margin of 310-303. That count indicated that there were several strong moral influences at play.

**The primary filter for some was that by participating in the ongoing efforts of occupation by Israel, Palestinian people were unfairly suffering harm and oppression**

**The primary filter for others was concern over being disloyal to Israel, and the fear that divestment would hurt our relationship and subvert our status and authority as a denomination.**

Given the strong support for both of these approaches, the vote was incredibly close. It was a hard moral judgment for many because most of the commissioners could see the validity of both sides of the argument for or against divestment.

By the way, I attended a monthly pastors' luncheon hosted by recently retired Rabbi Charles Sherman at Temple Israel just a few days ago. I asked for his opinion

concerning the divestment issue. He generously shared with the group that Jews are just as much all over the map on this one as we Presbyterians. That surprised me.

Rabbi Sherman then graciously added that he accepts the claim that the decision was made in good conscience and not meant to be interpreted as anti-Semitic and/or anti-Israel. But the reaction to the final decision to divest, which has reached international proportions, has been so strong (both pro and con) that the national leadership of the PCUSA just released an open letter to our American Jewish Interfaith Partners, trying to put this decision into proper perspective and interpretation. For more insight into all of this, I have placed copies of this letter on the Information Table in the Narthex, along with "Frequently Asked Questions" papers on both the marriage equality and divestment decisions. You'll also find information on the six moral bases.

My primary hope and goal for this sermon is that we all have a better understanding of why good and faithful people can be so divided, especially on moral issues stemming from politics and religion. **So the next time you hear yourself saying, "How in the world can that person believe that?" remember that we all process things differently through a set moral filters, bases, or perspectives. And this happens primarily at a deep intuitive level.**

**Ultimately, therefore, maybe it's not so much a matter of being right or wrong, but simply a matter of being different. And perhaps we will all be a bit gentler with others when their moral judgments don't match with ours.**

And Brad, I realize that I've been teaching this morning more than preaching, so next time you teach here, feel free to preach.

Amen.