

A Line Drawn in the Sand

By Donne Hayden

When I was a kid, I saw *The Alamo*, a movie about the battle in San Antonio between the Mexican army and Texas revolutionaries. (You may have seen the more recent version that came out in 2004.) To refresh your memory, during the Texas revolt against the government of Mexico in 1836, about 200 Texans in an old Spanish mission (i.e., the Alamo) were surrounded by 2400 Mexican soldiers led by General Santa Anna. The young officer in charge of the Alamo, Lt. Col. William Travis, requested reinforcements, sending messages by couriers who slipped past the Mexican soldiers in the dark. But after ten days under siege, and no word of reinforcements, the Texans' situation was desperate. Knowing they had no chance to survive if they remained inside the Alamo, Travis gathered all the Texans around him in the main plaza. Then he unsheathed his sword and, dragging it in the sandy soil, drew a long line. Those "who were willing to stay and die with him," he said, should step across the line in the sand.

"To My Mother"

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is unentangled,
and all is undismayed.

—Wendell Berry

“Those who wanted to leave could do so without shame.”¹ I still remember the thrill I felt watching the movie as man after man stepped across the line, until finally only two men remained on the other side. One of those, James Bowie, sick with typhoid fever and lying on a cot, called some men to come carry him across the line. The lone man who did not step across the line in the sand, a Frenchman who had fought with Napoleon, slipped away from the Alamo in the dark. He survived and told the story throughout the rest of his life. No doubt the story grew in the telling, but the significance of “a line drawn in the sand” was established.

In recent use, the phrase is often confused with another phrase, “to draw the line,” which means to indicate a point past which one cannot go, or a point past which something is unacceptable. But “to draw a line in the sand” indicates that a person has been given a choice; in staying on one side of the line the person takes a particular position; choosing to step over the line means taking another position. In some ways “to draw a line in the sand” reduces complicated decisions to an either/or situation. For instance, in the movie *The Alamo*, long before the battle begins, the character of Davy Crockett (played by John Wayne) tells his sweetheart: “There’s right and there’s wrong. You gotta do one or the other. You do one and you’re living; you do the other and you may be walking around, but you’re dead as a beaver hat.” At the Alamo, there may indeed have been only two choices, but when a speaker or writer presents the audience with only two choices, i.e., “either this or that,” it is often a logical fallacy.

The either/or fallacy is often used by those who see the world in terms of black or white, right or wrong, good or evil, democratic or undemocratic, Christian or non-

¹ “William B. Travis,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_B._Travis

Christian, etc. “There are, of course, several issues and ideas that do involve precisely two realities—one is either pregnant or one is not—but at other times an either/or statement fails to account for all possibilities in a given situation. Those who commit this fallacy fail to account for the complexity of an idea, sometimes purposely, in order to force adherence to an agenda. ²

In my own life experience, I have most often encountered “a line drawn in the sand” in religious matters. For instance, when I was a child my great-grandmother took me to the Prince Street Baptist Church in Clovis, New Mexico. I sat beside Grandma during the service and listened to the preacher—Reverend “Hoss” T. Gamble—assure us that either we accepted Jesus as our personal savior, or we would go to Hell. The only place where it counted if one accepted Jesus as savior was in church, of course, and only the Baptist church, preferably the Prince Street Baptist Church. Those who didn’t go to church at all didn’t stand a chance. Reverend Gamble must have painted a vivid picture of hell because I remember the deep worry and anxiety I felt because my mother, whom I adored, did not go to church. Finally I got up enough courage to tell her how concerned I was about her going to hell.

She explained to me that she believed in God and that she tried to be kind to everyone and that God saw that. “You don’t have to go to church to be a good person,” she told me. And because she was the smartest, kindest, gentlest person I knew, I believed her. At six years old, I found it impossible to believe in a God who would hate my sweet mother enough to send her to hell.

² Composition course, Arkansas State University website, <http://www.clt.astate.edu/composition/fallacies.htm>

I encountered such either/or ultimatums in other churches I attended and finally gave up on organized religion. When I was in my late twenties, I became involved with a New Age group in Fort Collins, Colorado before “New Age” even had a name. The group focused on the writings and teachings of a woman named Ann Ree Colton, who combined elements from various religious practices into something she called “Niscience,” or “knowing.” Here is a description from the current website:

Niscience blends religion, philosophy, science, and the creative arts - thereby furthering man's creation through his innate love, reverence, and devotion to God.

Niscience is an initiatory school, as well as a deeply spiritual system of study, worship, creativity, research, healing, and teaching based on the teachings of Jesus, the Bible, and other sacred scriptures of the East and the West.³

That spring, I had an opportunity to go to a Niscience conference in Carmel, California. When I met Ann Ree for the first time, she said to me, “Welcome home.” Later she gave me a “life-reading” and I received her blessing. During the three days of meetings and services, it was my perception that Ann Ree was the real thing, a genuine mystic and spiritual teacher, but many of those around her seemed ambitious and worldly. At the end of the conference, standing at the back of a large auditorium looking over the crowd, I realized it felt like a *church*, and that this too was organized religion. (I was initially attracted to Quakerism in part because it is a relatively “un”-organized religion.)

When I left Carmel, I knew I was finished with Niscience. Back in Fort Collins, I told my mentor in the Niscience group that I wouldn't be coming to the discussions any more. Deeply troubled for me, he said, “But you have met your living Master. If you don't follow her, you will have to start over again. You are going backwards spiritually.” I

³ Niscience website <<http://www.niscience.org/index.html>>

heard the either/or: Either you continue to follow Ann Ree or you are doomed to losing ground and stumbling on the spiritual path. He couldn't have said anything more certain to drive me away.

Recently, a communication went out from Wilmington Yearly Meeting to ministers and clerks; it included among other things, a letter from the Executive Committee Clerk asking for our meeting's response "to the decision points that came out of the attempt to update Faith and Practice" at yearly meeting last August. Here are some excerpts from the letter:

Friends,

At Yearly Meeting last July, the updates to "Faith and Practice" were not approved by the Monthly Meetings. There were changes to the context of "Faith and Practice" the many meetings wanted to see before they were willing to accept those updates.

At that time, each meeting was provided with a list of those issues in question. Some are no different than what many Christians around the world are faced with, and others are unique to the Quaker faith.

The task of addressing these issues and attempting to find a resolution to them was turned over to the Executive Committee.

In order for us to look for that resolution, we need the input of each Monthly Meeting. The Executive Committee is asking you to prayerfully review these issues, and come to a resolution within your meeting, and submit that, along with some explanation as to how you came to it, in writing, to the Yearly Meeting office.

In order to do this, we feel that you must first determine who we are, and what do we believe. Therefore, we ask you to consider these 3 questions in beginning this process:

1. Do we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?
2. Do we believe that Jesus died for our sins and arose from the grave to redeem us, and give us eternal life?
3. Do we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God?

These issues are not easy ones to deal with, and we understand that, but we, as a Yearly Meeting must find a way, with God's help, to work through them.

Though not stated directly, an either/or argument is hidden in these three questions. All three are Yes/No questions, reducing the possible responses to two, and in essence, drawing a line in the sand, on one side of which are those who answer Yes and thus are . . . what? “True Christians?” On the other side are those who answer No and are thus . . . what? “Not Christians?” What about those of us who cannot reduce divinity to an either/or situation?

Let us consider the three questions individually. First, “Do we believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” If we answer yes, are we affirming that Jesus Christ is “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made” (from the Nicene Creed)? If we answer that Jesus Christ is not the Son of God, do we deny all divinity for Jesus? What if, believing the Inner Teacher or the Light Within to be divine, we associate it with the teachings of the Jewish man named Jesus who taught that we are all—*all*—children of our divine Father?

Second, “Do we believe that Jesus died for our sins and arose from the grave to redeem us, and give us eternal life?” If we answer yes, are we again affirming the Nicene Creed which says that the Lord Jesus Christ, “the only-begotten Son of God,”

for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

If we answer no, what do we negate with one word? What if salvation for us is not going to heaven after Jesus comes back, but living NOW in the Kingdom of God, which

we were told is “within” us. What if salvation for us is being in right relationship with God and our neighbors? What if we believe we are loved without question or quibble by the Divine that created us, unique and distinct from each other. That God’s forgiveness, acceptance, and unconditional love is like that of the mother in Wendell Berry’s poem in the bulletin today, “who perhaps [foresees] the worst that [we] might do, /and [forgives] before [we can] act,/ causing [us] to smile now, looking back, /to see how paltry was [our] worst, /compared to [God’s] forgiveness of it/ already given.”

Finally, “do we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God?” If we answer yes, what does that mean? Can the Bible be “inspired” without being the only word of God? Does answering yes to this question thereby eliminate any other divine communication or revelation? Does it freeze in time the Divine Creator and leave us all stuck with only what had been revealed to humanity several thousand years ago? If we answer no, perhaps we’re saying no to part of this question, but not all of it; perhaps we believe the Bible is not the Word of God but of divinely inspired humans, or perhaps we believe the Bible to contain divinely inspired writing as well as severely human editing. Perhaps our concept of God is too big to be limited to one and only one vehicle of truth.

To these questions, I would add a fourth yes/no question.

Do we believe that everyone must answer these questions in the same way in order to be valued and respected members of Wilmington Yearly Meeting and the Society of Friends?

Are Friends drawing a line in the sand to forever separate and deny each other? Can we not “forgive” each other for experiencing the Divine in different ways?

Where then,

is the vision of that Heaven of which

we have heard, where those who love
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where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
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⁴ Wendell Berry, "To My Mother,"