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### Footnotes: Wicked Problems and Churches + Amy Chua on Political Tribalism

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# Footnotes<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Curated Resources for Ministers

Hey friends,

*Sports Illustrated* was [recently sold in a \\$110 million deal](#) that included staff cuts and an announcement that the weekly magazine would become a monthly. I've subscribed consistently since I was six (*SI for Kids* then). I arranged back issues in chronological order in the top of my closet (foreshadowing?). It wasn't just me; my parents enjoyed the subscription more than I did. When I was twelve they beat me to the mailbox, swiped the swimsuit issue, and used a Sharpie to draw full bathing suits on all of the models. I haven't asked, but I suspect this was one of their more enjoyable days of raising a tween boy.

While \$110 million might seem like a lot of cash, it's pennies for the intellectual property of what was the signature vehicle of sports journalism for a half century. *SI* will be missed.

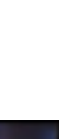
Last week our VP Jim Martin came in and asked me about the future of print journals. He talked about how much he enjoyed walking into libraries and seeing current magazines. I agreed. Despite our shared sentiment, the print periodical's future is in jeopardy. While digital journal databases provide near-infinite access to all kinds of information, the databases have embargoes that delay the appearance of new articles for six, twelve, or eighteen months. It's not very enjoyable to browse a database on your phone while waiting for the dentist or the hair stylist. These databases are also password protected--so only people who pay tuition get access. And they aren't very pretty. And what about Wi-Fi? And my phone's battery? Okay, you get it.

Like newspapers, print journals and magazines seem to be nearing an inevitable demise. Some need to go (I'm looking at a few of the academic publishers who charge libraries \$300 *per issue*). But I hope that others stay.

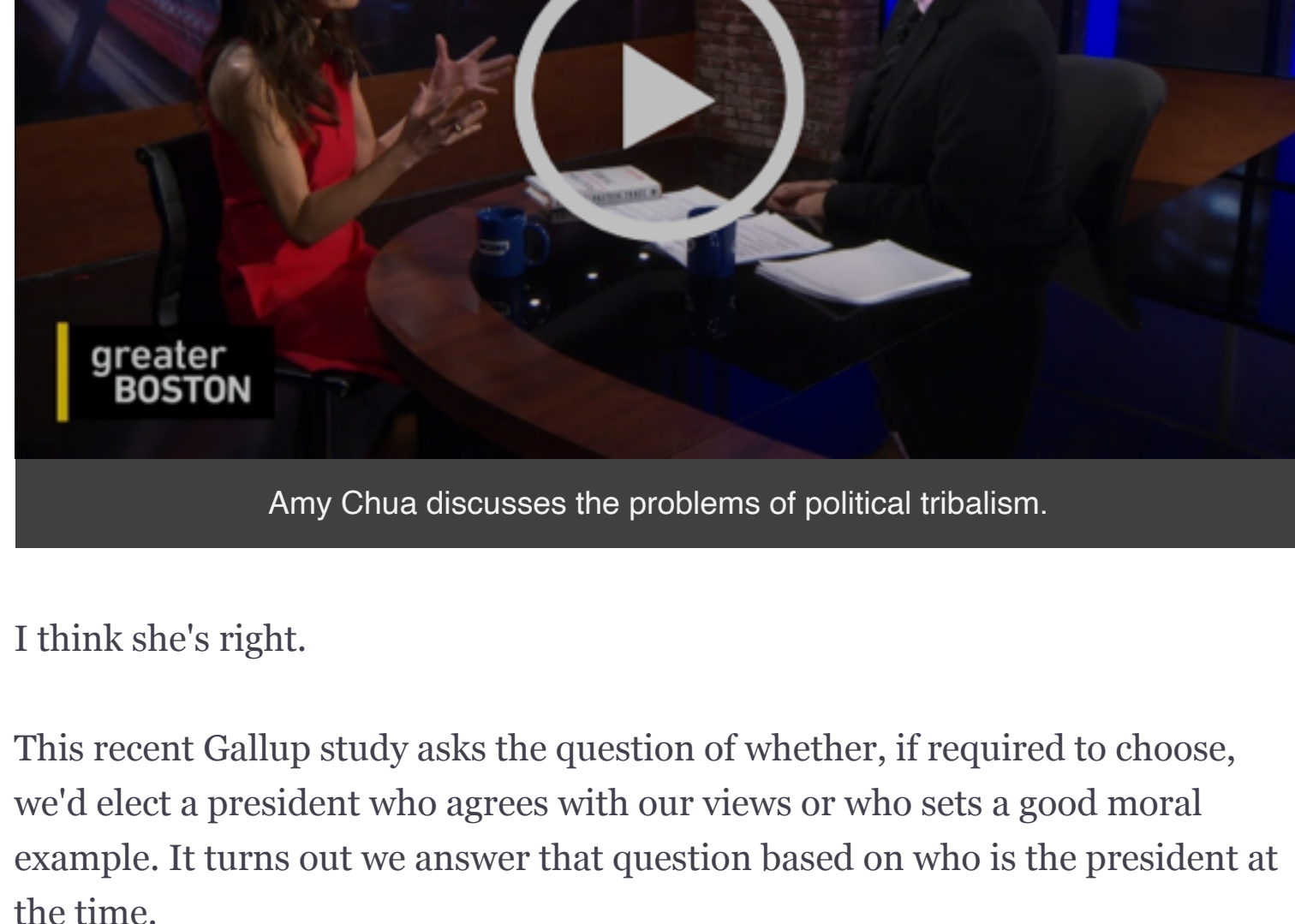
I'd love for the future to be different, but I don't have any solutions. Today I'll spend some time thinking about [Wicked Problems](#). These are complexities that require creative thinking because they don't have answers that are easy or simply right/wrong. Scientists say that solving Wicked Problems is not something that can be automated, but requires a combination of wisdom, creativity, and broad knowledge. It's not like chess, where a computer can be programmed to win games. One scientist said that while computers have been great at winning at chess and solving for Jeopardy, they aren't as adept at finding cures for cancer. Simply: the computers are only good when the answers can be programmed into them. What about situations where we don't know the answer? I have a few pieces below that relate to Wicked Problems.

Also:

- Amy Chua's work on political tribalism.
- A new feature: Footnotes Mail. Real email from real readers.
- A Few More Footnotes

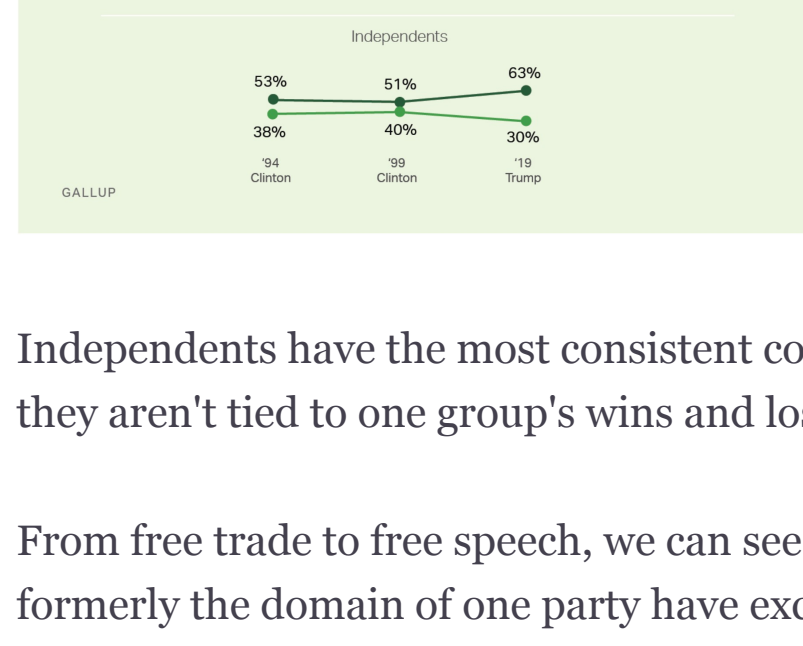


## Political Tribalism



I think she's right.

This recent Gallup study asks the question of whether, if required to choose, we'd elect a president who agrees with our views or who sets a good moral example. It turns out we answer that question based on who is the president at the time.



Independents have the most consistent commitments. This makes sense since they aren't tied to one group's wins and losses.

From free trade to free speech, we can see how particular topics that were formerly the domain of one party have exchanged hands.

If politics and religion are too sensitive to think about tribalism, maybe start with sports. If the only people who appreciate any of our perspectives just so happen to know the words to the same fight song, we're probably more tribal than we think. I recommend [Krisler Stendahl's Three Rules of Religious Understanding](#):

1. When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for "holy envy."



## Bonds and Bridges with the Poor

Jean Norman, "Social Capital of Last Resort: How People with Low Socio-Economic Status Rely on God When Social Resources are Scarce," *Journal of Communication in Religion* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 76-92.

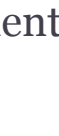
Social capital is a word that gets thrown around in the work of Robert Putnam ([Bowling Alone](#)) and recently Eric Klinenberg ([Palaces for the People](#)). This capital refers to resources we have or share that cannot be quantified using financial language, such as trust, healthy families, friendship, shared values, social networks, common language, etc.

Many who work with the generationally poor have observed that the poor lack social capital as much (or more) than they lack financial capital.

Jean Norman shows how the poor often speak of God and their faith in God in terms of their source of social capital. This is significant because most middle-class Christians will view their relationship to their church as their social capital. In church we find opportunities for social capital-building: friendships, networking, education, mentoring, dating/marriage, financial planning, etc. (I've purchased four used cars in my life...every one has been from someone in the Churches of Christ). As Malcolm Gladwell reminded us nearly a decade ago when Twitter was in its infancy, [some of our networks are strong](#) (like the bonds of the Civil Rights Movement), while others are weak (like social media friendships).

Norman shows how the poor/homeless lack the resources for building social capital through organized religion in the same way that others might. The person who lacks social capital feels so awkward in organized religious systems that they simply cannot function. So what do they do? Rather than investing in organized church, they focus on God, not church. My experience is that most of the homeless population we serve through church is *spiritual* but not *religious*. They experience God through trust, prayer, mentions of God in their language, and other expressions, but not necessarily through church. Before we get condescending, think about how infrequently we reference God or trust in God in conversations with our middle and upper-class church friends.

This article is not really targeted toward church leaders who are thinking about engaging the poor in their communities. But there is a Wicked Problem tucked in here, particularly when church leaders wonder why the poor they serve are so reluctant to engage in more formal offerings of the church (like worship services, Bible classes, etc.). Since forming close bonds (social capital) with the poor is difficult, churches must start by forming bridges. There is no easy answer or simple solution here; otherwise everybody would have done it. We'll need creative solutions from a variety of viewpoints to full appreciate the complexity here.



## David Epstein's Range and Population Decline in Churches of Christ

You might enjoy David Epstein's [Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World](#). He makes the case for a type of creativity and problem-solving that cannot be gained by only doing one thing (no matter how proficient one is at that thing). While reading the book, I couldn't help but reflect on church leadership and our population decline.

Steve Gardner has recently invested considerable energy studying the population decline of Churches of Christ. [He links this decline to the lack of opportunities for women](#). This is surely a factor (though I think there are more).

I find the population decline of Churches of Christ to be another example of a Wicked Problem. There are many complicating factors, and I'm not sure there is some correct answer out there that everyone is ignoring. One of the first steps to solving a Wicked Problem is to acknowledge that it is not like a math equation, where there is one answer--and the goal is to teach everyone how to get that correct answer every time.

Most church leaders are specialists in church. They aren't generalists at all. Most elders I know have been a Christian for more than 80% of their life...and not many are adult converts. Preachers aren't much different. We attend regularly, know the traditions, like the people (mostly), understand historic issues and debates, and have defined positions on all kinds of topics. That said, I'm not sure such a gift mix is best for solving Wicked Problems, which require a whole different set of assumptions. I'm hopeful that we can bring voices to the conversation on population decline that aren't simply reworded presentations of things we've all been saying for decades...while we've been hemorrhaging members.



**Q: This year I've read 16 books so far in Christian circles, from pastors to bloggers to commentaries. Several authors (Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels, and others) are getting caught up in scandals. To what extent do you let an author's sin/relationship with the press impact your choice to read or not read their books?**  
---Caleb in Ohio

**BT:** I might distinguish between scholarly authors and popular ones. I doubt most people care if the author of their dry encyclopedia article was a serial womanizer, or if a peer-reviewed article on their desk was written by someone who tips less than 10% at Bob Evans. I know of one major commentary that was published by a scholar who had earlier served time for child pornography charges. Popular-level and devotional books are another matter, since they rely on a different type of trust. They aren't written for their literary or scholastic merit as much as they are for the ethos, charisma, and personal narrative of the writer. Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and T.D. Jakes routinely put their faces on the cover of their books. No academic publisher has ever suggested that a scholar put their face on their newest book on the atonement or the synoptic problem. You mention Bill Hybels, who was dismissed from Willow Creek in after [allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse of power](#). He didn't just write books about Jesus or the church; he wrote a book on integrity called *Who You Are When No One's Looking*. I might still read him. But I doubt the book would influence me the way it would have a decade ago. I don't want to bury an author for the rest of their life for their sins, but it is critical to remember that their persona, not their content, is the reason we've heard of them in the first place. Bestsellers like Anne Graham Lotz and Franklin Graham (children of Billy Graham), Priscilla Shirer (daughter of Tony Evans), and Shana Niequist (daughter of Bill Hybels) didn't need diplomas to launch their careers as writers; they had birth certificates. There is a strong (probably unhealthy) cult of personality in the Christian publishing subculture that deserves some reconsideration for sure.



## A Few More Footnotes

1. [Decline of Christianity in the U.S.](#)
2. [Positive review](#) of Chris Altroek's newest release on Esther.
3. Not a fan of cancel culture: [Barack Obama](#).
4. [Embarrassing Grammar Mistakes](#).
5. [Havarrasians become less racist since the election of Donald Trump? Some researchers say "yes."](#)
6. Lifeway Research studied 1,000 Christian congregations to determine what they were doing on Wednesdays. The findings were reported in a recent *Christianity Today*:

**Adult Bible Study:** Churches of Christ: 75%; Protestants: 57%;  
**Youth Group:** Protestants: 45%, Presbyterian and Reformed: 29%;  
**Prayer Meetings:** Protestants: 45%, Baptists: 74%;  
**Music Practice:** Methodists: 49%, Protestants: 45%;  
**Worship Service:** Pentecostals: 62%, Protestants: 33%;  
**Nothing:** Protestants: 10%

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