

The Call of Unity... Amidst Divided Times

Series: Engaging Politics...Together

August 2, 2020 – Brad Bailey

Intro

Good morning to each of you gathering live ...and a warm welcome to those who may engage in the future.

I know that there are so many different circumstances across our households as we navigate life during a pandemic. I thought it might be appreciated if I began with a little humor. I wasn't sure if that was okay. I'll could tell you a coronavirus joke now, but from what I hear...you may have to wait two weeks to see if you got it.

I could tell the joke about the germ? But it's probably not a good idea...I don't want to spread it around. In fact I think the only jokes allowed during quarantine are Inside jokes...so I'll just skip the jokes. It's time to switch to our topic...which is politics.

Today we are going to continue and conclude our short series and focus on "Engaging Politics ...Together." As I noted previously ... it's the "together" element that can be hard.

For those of you who may have just returned from a 30 year trip around mars... life here has become intensely polarized and politicized.... more than at any point in our lifetime. If you watch the news... you may wonder what is infecting us more... an actual biological virus or the political animosity that is injected into every issue.

As the positions of each political party have taken up more extreme tenets and tones... being seemingly furthered by one another...it's led to postures and positions quite different than anyone could have imagined just 5 to 10 years ago.... postures and positions that understandably lead some to believe that the future of our nation is on the line.

It can feel like a civil war as two sides become more entrenched... and every day our media sources can serve like commanders of the troops... to inspire us in the cause. [1]

And in the midst of this ... here we are... gathering around Jesus...with nearly unprecedented polarization at work between us.Many believe the current president represents something so morally offensive and dangerous that there is simply no way to have a relationship with those who support him....and many believe that the Democratic Party now represents positions so morally offensive and dangerous that there is simply no way to have a relationship with those who support them.

In such times... when you hear my challenge for us to learn to relate well in divided times... some of you may welcome it as a needed call to tone down the nature of conflict across opposing sides... conflict that can divide family and friends. But some of you may hear what is deemed a well-intended but superficial call along the lines of "let's all just get along... by playing like nice children." For someone who feels this is a time to stand up against evil... you may assume that I want to discourage or downplay your convictions.

So let me clarify my intent. Let me clarify the calling at hand. I don't want to discourage or downplay any healthy convictions.

I don't believe we have to give up our convictions. Now when I refer to convictions...I am not referring to all the opinions and feelings I have. I am speaking about basic moral convictions...some position or action that that God speaks of as destructive. From those moral convictions we may form political

positions about political policy or political figures. We do well to recognize there is a difference between a moral conviction and our political assessment and opinions. It's the moral conviction that we should see as most fitting to hold.

I believe that there are moral issues... which flow from God has fairly clearly shown to be his design and desire... which don't simply align with either political party or persuasion.

It's that moral dimension that I hope to stay centered in. As a pastor...I want to do my best to consider various moral convictions and God's call to serve the common good... in shaping perspective on the political sphere. I want to share what I believe are appropriate convictions that cross political lines... in hopes that you can hear that I am not dismissing convictions... I can affirm moral convictions but want to lead us to do so within political diversity.

In the past few years, as each party has become far more defined by certain ideas...I believe there are issues of the common good that each party seems to raise better and some that each party seems less responsive to.

The politically conservative or right side stand well for many values...but I believe need to face the challenges of are God-given moral imperatives regarding the nature of mitigating human greed ... the system that best serves the righteous needs of immigrants... and embracing a more serious responsibility for the planet. (Of course each of those are issues worthy of great debate...but I am simply identifying the general posture.)

The politically liberal or left side stand well for many values... but I believe need to face the challenges of are God-given moral imperatives including a moral sobriety regarding abortion ... expanding a secular worldview and increasing religious hostility. (Of course each of those are issues are worthy of great debate...but I am simply identifying the general posture.) [2]

I have significant convictions about how the current President has spoken about women, prisoners of war, disabled, immigrants, and others... notably without apology... and that which should be accepted as simply rough around the edges.

I believe that black lives matter ...and have not been fully freed yet from white privilege... not a privilege which most consciously choose... but which exists. And I believe that the BLM organization, which is distinct from the general support of that truth, carries stated purposes that conflict with the structures which God intended...particularly the family..

I hope that what you hear is that which reflects a reasonable sense of what God declares about what is good...and they are about general moral directions...not complete judgment of political parties or policies. I have never publicly endorsed a political party or candidate for 30 years and I feel no more inclined to do so today. Like many evangelical pastors...I have tended to toward one political party on some issues...and the other party on other issues., I have not felt an absolute alignment with either political party but I have voted in every election (... though I have to make this confession... some of those measures that take days to parse in order to clearly discern... well...there's a few I decided not to vote on.) In any case... I'd be glad to expound and explain any of these convictions in our Zoom exchange that follows today. [3]

What I want to make clear...is that...I believe that there are general moral imperatives that cannot be dismissed or downplayed... and that should be rooted in what God most clearly reveals.

So if I am NOT presuming that you or I should discourage or downplay our moral convictions... what are we to seek as a community?

I am calling us to be a people whose moral convictions can welcome political diversity that serves that cause of Christ... and expressed with the love of Christ.

Let me unpack this calling.

We are to seek embrace moral convictions which can welcome political diversity that serves the cause of Christ.

I believe that we must remain centered in the cause of Christ...which welcomes all sinners like us to come accept Christ as our savior and king.

Over time there will be moral issues that anyone who begins to develop a relationship with Jesus will naturally come to engage... issues which we will openly but thoughtfully raise as we gather around Jesus and his teachings. However, as a people we will not advance all such moral understanding ahead of such a process ...nor will we align all moral understanding with political positions or parties.

We cannot allow our public witness to be coopted so that political positions become a barrier to who feels welcome into the community of Christ.

I believe that this understanding is one which should flow through us all. It is not just a matter of a pastor or leader trying to be non-partisan...it is a matter of a community actually seeing and embracing the call.

So let me mention a few related reasons.

- **We protect the prophetic witness of Christ from becoming corrupted by an exclusive association with political parties.**

Neither political party has a monopoly on morality or righteousness. We may assess that we believe that one gets the issues we think are the bigger issues right...but even those issues are rarely as all good and all bad as we would like to think.

I am confident that Jesus would never be a model Republican... but he would love every Republican.

I am confident that Jesus would never be a model Democrat... but he would love every Democrat.

And in truth...even now he is alive in us and can be expressed as one who bears exclusive truth and inclusive love.

- **We protect the grace that welcomes anyone to come begin a relationship with Jesus.**

We really have to be open about a really basic problem. A lot of people in your world do not want to have to vote the way you do. In many cases they hear how strongly you believe in your political views...so therefore they assume that your belief in Jesus includes having to vote like you do.

And the bigger problem may be that you don't care. I want to challenge us to realize that if our lives communicate that there is a political barrier other people would have to get over...it is a problem. [4]

- **We protect the diversity which God values and we grow from.**

When we can see the difference between moral convictions and political views...we can begin to appreciate the gift of diversity.

Most people don't divide over moral convictions...but over political ideas that may be related to those convictions.

Think about this. What is the conflict that is really dividing people? Is the conflict that you see between people you know which is related to racism.. between those who believe racism is bad vs those who believe racism is good? No... it's about the political ideas related to how to respond to racism. It's not the moral conviction...but the response to it. Is the conflict related to economic justice that you see between people you know... between those who believe that having people in need is bad vs those who

believe having people in need is good? No... it's about the political ideas related to how to respond to the need.

That why we can have moral convictions with political diversity.

More importantly...it is why we NEED political diversity. We need to learn from other perspectives and ideas.

My friend Jim Henderson... formerly a pastor of a Vineyard in the Northwest...has spent the recent years developing the process of helping people create positive dialogue. His recent book and movement is entitled: 3 Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide. They invite people to join in circles to engage a question that reflects different viewpoints. And a central part of the practice is this:

"I will stay in the room with difference."

This is so vital...because the underlying and unspoken question people wonder inside is this: "When you discover I voted for the wrong person, does that mean we can't be friends...or family?"

As Jim writes...

If The 3 Practices had to be reduced to one idea it would be *Staying in the room with difference*.

Even a glance at the cultural landscape is likely to make people feel a little unsteady on that proposition. Staying in the room with difference is what folks are learning to avoid in the isolation of made-to-order social media echo chambers and narrowcast media. Somehow it just seems safer to seek the company of our own kind.

But, inevitably, that safe feeling passes ... replaced by suspicion, anxiety, fear, anger.... It doesn't take much imagination to see that being divided isn't safer at all.

Not seeing something that appears obvious to someone else is not, in and of itself, a moral failing.

While listening to another person describe what they see, it may dawn on us that, just as they're not seeing what we see, we're not seeing what they see. Which is a useful reminder that what two individuals see depends in part on where they're standing. In effect, what that's saying is, "Let me come stand where you're standing, and see if I see the same thing. And then we'll talk about it." [5]

This isn't easy. It involves some major shifts for some of us.

Some of us will need to shift from the mode of critic to student.

When we say:" I don't know how anyone can believe that..."...we aren't just saying something about them...but about us... because there are a lot of people who do believe that because of where they sit...and we are preferring not to understand.

Everybody's view make perfect sense to them.

When we can see the difference...we can find more freedom to have what some refer to as "intellectual hospitality." Intellectual hospitality doesn't engage others merely as people to win...but as people to understand. [6]

Some of us wonder if this is really possible. We may wonder if we have a heart for this.

And that may be exactly what we need... a heart for this.

When Jesus came to the end of his ministry... his disciple John tells us what he prayed. At this final juncture before his arrest... as his own life would be given and that life carries on in his disciples... what did he ask the Father?

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. John 17:21

Jesus has one primary prayer...something he realizes everything is dependent on... the ability for this team to be united. To be united in the dynamic of sacrificial love that exists between the Father and Son.

And lets not miss who he was praying for...in the previous verse.

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message." - John 17:20

Who is he praying for? Us. We are those who have come to believe through their message. Jesus prayed for us...for you.

He prayed that we would be united...not in politics...but in purpose.

We have to stand in the light of his prayer. We may want to say it's impossible. Jesus says it's imperative.

We may want to say it's impossible. But we are here because those who went before us proved that it wasn't. They united in purpose. And now that responsibility is up to us.

So some of us may have to ask ourselves... Is our contempt for the current president more important than the purpose for which Jesus gave his life?

Is our contempt for the Democratic party more important than the purpose for which Jesus gave his life?

There is nothing simple about those questions. Many of us are afraid...and angry.

Do we have a heart for unity? That is what Jesus wants to give is... a new heart...his heart for one another... even for our enemies... those we may view as our political enemies.

When Jesus prayed... he was asking his Father to nudge us toward what he commanded us to do earlier that same evening. Earlier that evening Jesus said...

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." - John 13:34-35

And that leads to... the second part of what I believe God calls us to even as....

We seek our moral convictions to be expressed with the love of Christ.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

This was a new command, not a new suggestion.

Love is not an option.

"The person you disagree with is more precious to God than your potentially flawed view."

We should never burn a relational bridge over a political view.

So... We cannot become self-righteous unloving judges ... because we think we decide who and when basic respect and love applies.

Some of us may think that love is just an ideal...something optional.

It is actually the ONE THING REQUIRED.

The Apostle Paul refers to this as the law of Christ... which is the law of love... that is the ONE law we must fulfill.

For “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) I have found I have to really stop and consider these words. They are telling me...this is what the Spirit of God has come to do in you. And many believe that this is best read with the intent of how we would place a semi-colon after the word love...in other words... the fruit of the Spirit is love...and these are the qualities that flow from love...that love reflects.

Joy... do I let my spirit be controlled by the temporary frustrations at hand...or do I seek that which is in God and no one can take away...and bring that to others.

Do I bring peace in the way I relate... or strife?

Do I relate with patience ... the kind of patience God has with me...willing to bear hardship for the sake of the process that may be involved?

Do I speak with kindness and goodness...that which reflects genuine care even for those I disagree with?

Do I communicate faithfulness... a willingness to stay in the same room amidst differences?

Do I relate with gentleness and self-control ... or do I let my words and social media posts fly without thought?

If we seriously embrace these qualities as that which we welcome God to develop in us... the way in which we communicate with others is going to mature in the right ways. So stop....and read those qualities again... “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” ...and let them become your goal and guide for relating to others.

This is what it means to express ourselves with love.

So here we are. We're all here. We have the whole political spectrum in our church, and I love that.

And I want to call us to be a people who have moral convictions...

We have an unprecedented opportunity to model for our community and our country what it looks like to...Disagree Politically and...Love Unconditionally

A lot is at stake in this upcoming election. And here is what we need to understand. As someone put it...
“Your favorite candidate will win or lose based on how our country votes this November. However, your savior’s will for you and his church will win or lose based on our behavior between now and then.”

I am inspired by these words that someone shared from John Wesley... a powerful figure during the 1700s in England and America.

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.” — John Wesley

PRAYER

Notes:

1. A [new Cato Institute/YouGov national survey](#) (July 22, 2020) of 2,000 Americans finds that 62% of Americans say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. This is up from [2017](#) when 58% agreed with this statement. Majorities of Democrats (52%), independents (59%) and Republicans (77%) all agree they have political

opinions they are afraid to share. Some research says the church's witness is crushed... because the character of Christians on both sides has come out.

Christians appears among the least civil. Pastors that are not simply champions of one party have become bound within the tension between two sides.

As the report from Kelsey Dallas describes...

Since the election of President Donald Trump, it's become harder to unite politically diverse congregations.

"I'm pushing 40 years in ministry and I've never experienced such inner conflict and turmoil," the Rev. Klemz said.

Faith leaders described carefully writing out every word of sermons to avoid misinterpretation. They noted that conservative and liberal members of their congregations increasingly speak past one another, drawing totally different conclusions from the same event.

"I spend more time these days stating what's actually happening," said the Rev. Daniel Robertson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Fairbury, Illinois.

Amid increasing political polarization, faith leaders are searching for a way to proclaim religious values without tearing people apart.

"When a hot-button topic comes up, even if you just say the words, people will react before they listen," the Rev. Dehler said. Even Bible readings can lead to pushback, the Rev. Klemz said, citing [Leviticus 19:33-34](#), on loving "the alien who resides with you," as an example. "In these days, something like that from scripture becomes a political statement," he said.

In addition to some political issues feeling too hot to handle, pastors struggle with rising partisanship, which interferes with lessons on religious values. People who will stick with their political party no matter what are less concerned about [lying](#), adultery and other immoral acts, according to recent research.

For example, white evangelical Protestants, who show strong support for Trump, are now more accepting of elected officials who commit immoral acts in their personal lives than religiously unaffiliated Americans, [Public Religious Research Institute reported](#) in 2016.

In 2011, 30 percent of white evangelicals and 63 percent of religious "nones" said an elected official who behaves immorally in private can still be an ethical leader. Five years later, that figure had jumped to 72 percent for white evangelicals, while the share of religious "nones" who held that view (60 percent) was almost the same.

"That's a particularly strong indication of how partisanship has bent political ethics," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute.

Surveys like these trouble religious leaders, who aren't sure how to combat rising partisanship. If they condemn political leaders who are caught in a lie or accused of sexual harassment, they risk ostracizing congregation members who would still vote for them.

From **Faith leaders describe the 'inner conflict and turmoil' they've experienced since Trump took office** By Kelsey Dallas@kelsey_dallas Nov 9, 2018

2. [Cory Booker Joins Kamala Harris in Questioning Religious Faith of Nominees](#)

February 06, 2019 by Michael Graham

[Kamala Harris' Crusade Against Freedom of Religion](#)

3. It should be noted that we are in a time in which everything is so politicized that even the most general God-given moral imperatives are deemed to be political positions. Pastors across this whole country are having to face that they can no longer state anything without one side feeling that they have suggested favor for the other side. To affirm that God endows every life with value is deemed a political position. To affirm that black lives matter is deemed a political position. To affirm that we should value religious freedom for all is deemed a political position. To view the current pandemic as a valid public health concern is deemed a political position.

4. It's helpful to consider what happened in the earliest stage of the work of Christ spreading. The central disciple Peter has a dream... and then led to a man's house who is a gentile... all of which was outside of acceptability. Through a profound process... it is revealed to Peter that the good news of Jesus is for ALL people ...including gentiles. So he struggles to explain this to the other leaders. And this created an enormous tension. They had some ability to understand that a gentile could convert to being a Jew of sorts... and so they had various steps one had to take... including all men being circumcised. But as they came to see.... the gentiles didn't have to become Jewish...and circumcision was not only a barrier... but not even vital to anyone being right with God.

5. As Jim also quotes...

"I don't have the time to get to know every person I encounter in the course of my daily life. So thank goodness I have a handy little device at my disposal that helps me know how to deal with just about anyone I come across: stereotypes. Yes, stereotypes are a real time-saver!"

— The Onion

6. Intellectual Hospitality by Diana Pavlac Glyer, Ph.D.- <https://www.apu.edu/articles/intellectual-hospitality/>

For those seeking to explore more about the challenges of Christian Faith and Politics...

Articles:

[Politics Between the Earthly City and the City of God in Christianity](#), by John von Heyking; JUNE 9, 2006

The Rise of Post-Religious Right, Post-Religious Left Harming America, Says David French

By [Michael Gryboski](#), Christian Post Reporter

Dialogue Resources:

3Practices - <https://3practices.com/> / [Explainer Video](#)-

They call the spaces 3Practice Circles because they are shaped by three practices:

One: I'll practice being unusually interested in others — out-listening another person.

Two: I'll stay in the room with difference — we can disagree without having to break up.

Three: I'll stop comparing my best with your worst — no playing gotcha.

A 3Practice Circle isn't a debate or even a discussion, really, It's a safe space for seeking clarity and understanding — with no obligation to agree.

National Institute for Civil Discourse <https://nicd.arizona.edu/about/>

In 2011, the University of Arizona created NICD after the Tucson shooting that killed six people and wounded thirteen others, including former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

The On Being Project <https://onbeing.org/our-story/>

Harold Heie - website, www.respectfulconversation.net

[Reforming American Politics](#): A Christian Perspective on Moving Past Conflict to Conversation by Harold Heie (Author), Richard Mouw (Foreword) Spirit Books (June 4, 2019) – No Amazon reviews

Books:

[Scandalous Witness](#): A Little Political Manifesto for Christians Eerdmans (March 10, 2020) by Lee C. Camp - Lee Camp argues that the American church today has earned itself the curious distinction of having largely 'destroyed its own witness.'

[Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History](#) (Cascade Companions) Paperback – August 6, 2010 by C. C. Pecknold

170 pages... full history... traces each era and it's most notable shifts and voices.

Five Views on the Church and Politics (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology)

[Five Views on the Church and Politics \(Counterpoints: Bible and Theology\)](#) by J. Brian Benestad
237 pages... good presentation of 5 views and contentions between them... critique is that each is rooted in their respective influencers more than Scriptural arguments...