

Separation of Church & Hate
What Matters Most
April 3, 2016

PRELUDE – King of Love

**Worship 1 – “King of Love” / My Worth Is Not In
What I Own**

**Announcements – Video
Feature – Uprising**

Good morning everyone.

The first chapter of the New Testament book of
Acts tells us that ...

*After his suffering, Jesus presented
himself to [his disciples] and gave
many convincing proofs that he was
alive. He appeared to them over a
period of forty days and spoke about
the kingdom of God.*

*On one occasion, while he was
eating with them, he gave them this*

command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. Acts 1:6-10 (NIV)

Let's pray together.

Lord, thanks for leaving us this record of what happened to the very first followers of Jesus after his resurrection of Jesus. May it prove to be helpful for those of us who try to follow Him today. Amen.

If you've been paying any attention at all to the news or if you have a Facebook account, you're aware that we are in the middle of one of the most bizarre and most contentious Presidential election seasons in the history of the United States. We haven't even gotten to the conventions and official nominations and debates and mudslinging that's going to take place between the two major parties, yet there is already a great uprising among people all along the political spectrum, from far left to far right; a widespread and very public expression of opinion that runs anywhere from amusement to genuine interest and concern to alarm to anger to disgust and sometimes even hatred.

It's no exaggeration to say that it's a mess out

there these days and it will get even worse between now and November ... which is why we're going to bring it here for the next "however long" and talk about it. We're going to talk about how Christians – how the church – can and should be part of this political process without getting sucked down into the sludge along with everyone else. Hence, the title of our series, *The Separation of Church & Hate*.

Now, before we get into it, I think it might be helpful to lay my cards on the table so that you know where I'm coming from on this.

- First of all, *I am aware that some of you are uncomfortable with us talking about this subject in church*. After I mentioned that I was going to do this series last Sunday, more than a few of you expressed that to me face to face or through email.

So, you just need to know that *I am as uncomfortable and nervous about this as*

you are. In fact, after some of the conversations I had last week, I actually thought: “oh my gosh, I am going to kill the church by talking about this!” I wondered if anyone would even show up today. So thanks for being here.

But even though it makes us nervous, we have to talk about it because it's part of life in the real world. And if Jesus isn't relevant to life in the real world – to life in a *highly-politicized world* like ours – then He isn't relevant to anything. We're just playing a game here and we should turn out the lights and go on home.

Fortunately, Jesus *is* relevant to our politicized world because He *lived* in a politicized world. Christianity *began* in a politicized world.

- Second, you need to know that *I do have a political preference (or leaning or bias) and I am*

aware that it does color my thinking.

I will try my best to keep that out of this series. And when I can't keep it out, I'll let you know that it's in the mix.

Of course, having said that, I should also say that over the years as people have heard me talk about political and cultural issues, I have been accused at times of being an ultra-conservative and, at times, of being an ultra-liberal. People have actually left NHCC because they think that I'm a right-wing conservative. And people have left because they think I'm a bleeding heart liberal.

And quite frankly, I'm happy about that. Not that people have left the church but that people are a little confused because my goal as a pastor is not to be politically conservative or liberal. My goal is to be *biblical*. My goal is to be *like Jesus* who often

angered both liberals and conservatives of His day.

- Finally, you need to know that *this election season is affecting me* just like everyone else. And I don't like how it's affecting me. So, you should know I am preaching as much to myself in this series as anyone else. *I need this series.*

So, that's where I'm coming from.

Now, two other things about this series itself, very briefly, and we'll be ready to jump in.

- *All three messages in the series are important and go together.* There's no way to say everything that needs to be said in one week and if you don't hear all three, you will probably have some misconceptions. So, I want to challenge you: if you miss a week, take 30-35 minutes to listen to, watch or read the message which we will post on

the media tab of our app or website. It usually goes up by Sunday evening.

- *If I say something that bugs you during a message (and I'm nervous about even asking this), would you please not get up and walk out? And I don't ask that because I expect you to just sit there and agree with everything I'm saying. I ask because that kind of behavior is exactly why we're in the mess we're in. People are so reactionary about politics. It's all become so personal and personally offensive. That's the sludge that we're creating in this culture. So, could we try to rise above it, if only for 30-35 minutes?*

And, if at the end of the message, you still have an issue with me, please come talk to me. Maybe I'm missing something. More importantly, if you're a Christian, I'm your brother.

And, according to Jesus, we're not

supposed to be storming out on each other when we are offended.

“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense.”

Matthew 18:15 (NLT)

Of course, having said all that, if you have to get up and to go to the bathroom, everybody’s going to wonder what I said to tick you off. Just wave and smile when as you walk out and they’ll know it’s OK.

Ok, let’s get into it.

What’s at Stake?

So why is there so much stress and frustration and anger and hatred being expressed over this election? If you really want to know, just type “2016 most important election of our lifetime” into your favorite search engine. (But please don’t do it now while I’m speaking!)

That query will generate hundreds if not thousands of links where every special interest group in the country, countless political pundits and multitudes of supporters of each of the top four candidates (Hillary and Bernie; Donald and Ted) go into great detail of what is at stake from their perspective: the wonderful future that will soon appear if their guy or gal wins; and the terrible horrible no good very bad days sure to come if they do not.

- Donald Trump and his supporters say “what’s at stake is the security and respect of our country. We need to stop ISIS. We need to close the border to illegal immigrants. We need to start winning trade deals. We used to win all the time, now we lose all the time. We’re going to make America great again.”
- Bernie Sanders and his supporters say “what’s at stake is fairness and the future of

our young people. The big corporations and Wall Street have far too much power. They've rigged the system and we need to limit their influence. Young people can't get ahead because of so much debt from college and we need to fix that.”

- Hillary Clinton and her supporters say “what’s at stake is equality for women and minorities and jobs for the middle class. We don’t need to make America great again. America never stopped being great. We need to make America whole again.”
- Ted Cruz and his supporters say “what’s at stake is our Constitutional form of government. We need to get back to the original intent of the framers because all these extras are killing us: Obamacare, the EPA, the IRS, the Departments of Education, Commerce and Energy. All of them have to go.”

Now, you and I might doubt the merit and seriousness of all of those claims but there are a lot of people we all know and love who buy in. They're convinced if Hillary doesn't win, if Ted doesn't win, if Bernie doesn't win, if Trump doesn't win, this country is going (as they say) "to hell in a handbasket."

As for me – and I will warn you that this is where I'm going to interject my own perspective ... so take a deep breath and don't go to the bathroom right now – personally, *I don't like any of these candidates*. And I'll tell you why for each of them. But before I do, I want you to understand that my purpose in this is not to say I'm right. I just want to illustrate something for you *about me*.

OK, here goes:

- Hillary ... I think she is trying to be something she is not in order to defeat Bernie. More importantly, I am among the overwhelming majority who do not believe

she is trustworthy. The thought of her being president scares me.

- Bernie ... I think Bernie's heart is in the right place but socialism – even democratic socialism – does not stand up to rigorous intellectual critique. Beyond all of its failures historically and currently, philosophically it places far too much trust in government officials who run everything to not be corrupted by power ... which is a massive problem we already have (see Hillary Clinton). Logically, though I like a lot of what Bernie says, I don't see how the answer can be *even more* of what we've been doing.

The thought of him being president doesn't really scare me. It just makes me think we'd be wasting time.

- Donald oh Donald ... let me try to put this nicely. If the goal was to elect an emperor

(which is a contradiction in terms because emperors aren't elected; instead, they manipulate, cajole and bully their way to the top) ... if the goal was to elect an Emperor, he might be OK. But we're not electing an emperor.

Plus, and this is the part that's makes me yell at the TV – he rails against the political establishment which fires up all the people who feel like the government doesn't listen to them, *but he helped to build that establishment* (both sides of it, Republican and Democrat) for the past three decades. He *is* the establishment. And I think he's selling snake oil to the masses. The thought of him being president really scares me.

- And Ted ... I can't be too hard on Ted because he's an evangelical Christian like me and his daddy is a pastor like me. But he just seems too ... "churchy." The way he talks ... I'm a preacher and *I* don't even talk

like that when I'm preaching.

More importantly, I'm uncomfortable with the way he tries to marry Christianity and politics. Not that a person's faith shouldn't influence their life including the way they think about political issues (it definitely should), but I fear that the way that he goes after the so-called "evangelical vote" isn't helping the way church and Christianity appears to people who are not believers. Right or wrong, to a lot of those folks, it feels like a religious power play.

So, the thought of him being president doesn't bother me so much politically as it does spiritually.

So, that's my deal. That's where I'm at. Anybody need to go to the bathroom right now?

Now, again, I'm not telling you all of my deepest darkest thoughts on this because I believe I'm

correct in all my assessments. I might be missing something. I might be totally off somewhere.

Instead, what I want you to see and hear as you listen to the junk in my heart and mind is the sadness, disappointment, frustration, anger and disgust that eventually comes when you invest so much time, energy, and hope in the political system *as I have done this year*. I don't normally get this involved but I think the Trump thing sucked me in ... kind of like passing a car wreck on the side of the road. You know you shouldn't slow down to look but you can't help yourself. And now, I'm a mess emotionally and spiritually. Just like a lot of you. *What's at stake for me in this election is my heart and my soul.*

And I know that some of you are thinking "Oh no Rick, I'm not a mess because *my candidate really will* fix things. If we just go with Bernie, if we just go with Donald ... it just might work out."

Look, I get that. This isn't my first rodeo. I've

voted in 10 presidential elections ... each with a diminishing level of expectation. And eventually, that *will* happen to you, even if your guy or gal wins.

I say that because my guys have won a lot through the years and, yet here we are today. And again, this is my perspective (and you don't have to agree), but our country is rapidly moving away from the values and principles behind our Constitution; values and principles which produced by any objective measure the greatest country the world has ever known based on illogical arguments such as this one being promoted in colleges and universities:

“The founders of this country held slaves, so their ideas on freedom were all jacked up. That's why we're in the mess we're in. So, we need to reject ideas like free markets and limited government and Judeo-Christian morality ... and replace them with other political philosophies and ideas. So,

let's see. What else is out there?"

Now, I don't want to whitewash the Founders. They were sinners just like the rest of us.

But the ironic thing is that the "other suggested philosophies and ideas" being promoted aren't new. They've been around for a while and not only have they *proven* to be failures, they've given rise to totalitarian regimes that have murdered 170M people worldwide in the past century.¹ I won't argue that there is inequality and injustice in this country that needs to be addressed, but let's have a little perspective. This isn't Stalin's Russia. This isn't Mao's China. This isn't Saudi Arabia or Syria or North Korea.

Now, again, the reason I'm saying all this isn't because I think I am 100% right. I just want you to see why, to me, hope in the political system is so empty. Even if your guys and gals win it might not be very long until the country is on a path that, to you, seems *insane*.

Two Ways of Power

And I'm sure some of you at this point are thinking "my goodness, I hope this guy is taking anti-depressants or something. He sounds so discouraged."

Oh, but I'm not. Well, maybe I am about the political system but, overall, I am most definitely not discouraged.

See, what I've tried to illustrate for you so far in this message – and I hope if I've stepped on your toes you will forgive me because I am really not trying to be offensive. I know your heart is in the right place about what you believe is best for our country ...

What I've tried to illustrate is *the political way of thinking about power* that we see modeled for us over and over again on TV and on the Internet so that I can contrast it with a *Christian way of thinking about*

power.

And the reason I want to do that – and I’m speaking specifically to those of us who are Christians – the reason I want to do that is that no one has ever really taught us *how* to think that way about power.

And that’s not meant to be critical of previous generations of Christian leaders. See, because you and I live in a representative republic in which we get to vote (which is most certainly a form of power) *and* because for the first 185 years or so there was very little argument with the moral and religious foundations of our country, there’s really been no need to think differently. If I’m a Christian and I want to see what I believe to be God-honoring values and practices promoted, part of my power to bring that about is the ballot box. That’s how so many of us – especially those of us over 40-45 – were taught to think because that’s how it worked.

By the way, when I say the U.S. had moral and religious foundations, I know that idea is questioned more and more these days but, clearly we did. Otherwise there would have been no need for the first 16 words of the First Amendment which prohibits the government from establishing or prohibiting religion. Religious freedom only mattered because religion was a huge cultural reality.

But it's becoming less and less that way. That's why we see increasing antagonism to any legal maneuvering to bolster religious freedom. That's why Disney recently threatened the state of Georgia. That's why the NCAA is threatening the State of Missouri over the proposed amendment to protect clergy and churches and other "wedding businesses" from being penalized if they refuse gay weddings on religious grounds.

Now, here's the deal: if you're a Christian who thinks about power in terms of politics, that kind of thing is not only scary to you and

discouraging, it makes you angry. And if you express that anger, you come off as hateful to people who are not Christians, even though you aren't because you really do love people – even LGBT people. You just don't want them messing with your rights. That's all.

That's power in terms of politics. That's how it works. And that's the reaction it gets in a culture that's becoming more and more secular as ours is.

“Ok, Rick, I get it. I get it. So what's the other way of thinking about power? The Christian way?”

Jesus & Political Power

The disciples of Jesus have spent 3½ years with Him. They've traveled all over Palestine watching Jesus do miracles, listening to him teach the multitudes about the Kingdom of God – the rulership of God over an individual's life; the transforming power and presence of God in that

person's life – and then getting to sit with Him afterwards as He goes into a deeper explanation of the Good News “that the Kingdom of God has come and that they need to repent (change their way of thinking) and believe it.”

And at the end of this 3½ years the disciples see Jesus unjustly accused, tried, convicted and then crucified on a Roman cross. It's a crushing blow. Or so it seems until Sunday morning when Jesus is alive, raised from the dead by the power of God.

And in his writing which we call *The Book of Acts*, Luke tells us (as we read earlier) that Jesus hangs out with his disciples – his inner circle – for 40 more days talking with them about ... what else? The Kingdom of God, going over with them again the basics.

- It's here. It's now.
- You can't see it out there. It's inside of you.
- It's going to start out very small like a

mustard seed then it's going to become huge like a tree.

The disciples have seen all of this and experienced all of this – the most amazing comeback in history (even better than what the Royals did last fall) – and Jesus then goes over everything one more time before returning to His Father.

Now here's what's fascinating. Of all the stuff that Jesus and the disciples talked about during that 40 days, the only thing Luke records for us ...

... is them asking Jesus this question:

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”
Acts 1:6 (NIV)

Now, Luke doesn't say this but I can imagine Jesus just pausing for moment and maybe putting his face in His hands. And I can imagine one of the disciples, maybe Peter saying

something like ...

“And Jesus before you answer, remember how much we hate what the Romans have done and how much we hate what they stand for. Remember that the Romans have set up a system of government that puts Caesar in the place of God which violates the very first of the Ten Commandments Moses gave to us and on which our entire existence as a people rests. Remember that they are very much against the establishment of new religions.

“So, Jesus, are you going to get rid of these oppressors and establish a political system that is completely fair and just to everyone which, of course, puts our people in power at the top of the heap? Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

See what they're asking? They're asking political power question.

And Luke tells us that ...

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” Acts 1:7-8 (NIV)

Well, what does *that* mean?

It means there is a day coming when the Kingdom of God, the authority of God is going to become *the* political power structure in this world.

“But,” Jesus was saying, “not today. And not any day soon that you need to know about. However, since you’re concerned about power (and that’s not an unreasonable or illegitimate concern), here’s how it’s going to work.”

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8 (NIV)

“And that will be enough until I come back. Power from the Spirit of God working in you and through you as you go all over the world and tell people what I’ve done for you. Yep, that oughta’ do it.”

And then, Luke tells us, Jesus is gone, hidden by a cloud.

And the disciples, he says, are so stunned by what they’ve heard and seen that they just stand there, dumbfounded, looking up at the sky. No one says anything but I can imagine them thinking, “uhhhh, so, *that’s it?* The Holy Spirit and our testimony? That’s all we have to work with? Okaaaay ...”

And as they’re watching, Luke tells us that two angels appear in their midst and say to them, in essence, “why are you guys still standing here? You have your orders. Get going.”

And if you read the rest of the story as it's told in the Book of Acts, that's exactly what they do. They go back to Jerusalem where they wait until the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes. And on that day, they are empowered and they begin talking openly about the Risen Jesus right there in Jerusalem (where weeks before they had feared for their lives). And their message eventually spreads all over the Roman world *during their lifetime*.

And in every village and every town and every city where the message goes, little communities of believers (called "church") spring up. And even though the original disciples are eventually martyred, those churches all survive and continue to grow as more and more people keep believing and joining.

And just as Jesus promised, the movement starts small (like a mustard seed) but eventually, his followers are everywhere in great number. And things change *massively* all over the Roman

Empire, all over Europe and Northern Africa westward to the Americas, even to this land which you and I live in today; things change massively in all the positive ways that we talked about last week. Not that there aren't failures, but the overwhelming net effect is the forward advancement of civilization and an exponential increase in human flourishing.

And all of it begins (and continues for three centuries) with *no political power whatsoever*; just the power of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of people, transforming them to be more like Jesus ... and their testimony: "here's what Jesus has done for me. Here's what I'm doing for Him. Would you like to know more?"

And this is why, even though I am pretty much without hope concerning the political process, I am far from discouraged because political power for Christians has been extremely rare throughout the course of history. The fact that we had it in this country for a little while is an

anomaly. It was a luxury and a bonus. But it was not a necessity. It never has been.

Three Implications

So, what does all of this mean, practically speaking? Let me quickly give you three implications of everything I've just said and then we'll draw this to a close.

And this first one is not very spiritual. But that I mean you don't need to be a Christian for it to apply to your life.

Implication #1. You still have the incredible opportunity to create a good life for yourself no matter who wins.

That's one lesson from the first three hundred years of Christianity. Christians had no say in the political system. The Emperor didn't really care what they thought (emperors are like that). But it didn't matter. They went on about their

business in spite of the Emperor (and sometimes in the face of his direct persecution) and they created such winsome lives that other people wanted to join them.

You and I can do the same thing. Despite all the theatrics and handwringing, our daily lives and our immediate future will be far more impacted by what we do than by who wins or loses.

Here's the second implication – and this one is obviously for those of us who are Christians and have an interest in doing what Jesus says.

Implication #2. Because of the rising level of disappointment with our political system, Christians and churches have an incredible opportunity to share “the Gospel.”

The more that people become disenchanted with “the system” the more openness there is to other ideas.

“Exhibit A” is Bernie Sanders. Just four short

years ago, it was unthinkable that anyone who would openly label themselves as a socialist would merit serious consideration as a presidential candidate. But, here he is, giving “the Establishment” a run for their money (literally).

Now, maybe somebody else will come riding in on a white horse at the last minute for the Democrats or the Republicans that we’ll all like a lot better. Or maybe the Libertarian candidate (most likely Gary Johnson) will finally get a hearing and beat Hillary and Donald in the fall. And it will all feel better for a while but it won’t be long (for reasons we’ll discuss in the message two weeks from today) until that disenchantment returns. (“Exhibit A” on that one is Barack Obama).

And the more that people become disenchanted with “the system” the more openness there is to other ideas which is why Christians and churches are going to have incredible

opportunities to share the good news about Jesus, that “the Kingdom of God is near to you and accessible through faith in Him. Change your way of thinking about that and believe it.”

And I would argue that, of everything that’s at stake in this election, this opportunity is what matters most if you’re a Christian – regardless of which side of the political spectrum you’re on. I think what Christians and churches do with this opportunity matters far more than who becomes President.

And I will tell you that as a pastor and a follower of Jesus I have become so convicted about this in recent days because I have sensed the Holy Spirit saying to me, “Rick, you’re so agitated about the political process and you’re so burdened about the country moving away from its foundational values. And that’s OK. But why are you not as concerned about what’s happening in the church? Why are you not as concerned that Christians aren’t living as light? You say you

believe that the hope of the world is the church and the Gospel but you *act* like you believe the hope of the world is political. What’s up with that?”

And, friends, I have had to answer to God “yes sir. You are right about that. And I am sorry. And I am so thankful that Jesus has already forgiven that sin on the cross.”

And I suspect that some of you may need to say the same kind of thing ... which leads the third implication.

Implication #3. Christians and churches must reject the political way of thinking about power and begin to embrace God’s way, which is the transforming power of the Spirit and our testimony.

Now, please don’t hear what I’m not saying.

- I’m not saying “don’t vote.”
- I’m not saying “don’t be concerned at all about politics.”

- I'm not saying you shouldn't have an opinion about immigration or ISIS or climate change ...
- I'm not saying you shouldn't pursue legislation to protect religious freedom and other rights.

As citizens of this country we have the privilege to do those things and we *should* do those things. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" Jesus said. And we'll talk more about that in a couple of weeks.

What I am saying is ... if you're a Christian do not allow yourself to be deceived: the real power to transform people and the world for the better is not in those kinds things. It's in the Gospel.

Now, it's true that sometimes the Gospel works itself out in politics (Exhibit A: The end of slavery in England; Exhibit B: The Civil Rights Movement in this country), but politics itself is not where the power lies. The power lies in the Holy Spirit

of God and our personal and collective testimony

...

... which is why the Apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the first century who had zero political power ...

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky as you offer them the message of life. Philippians 2:14-16 (GNT)

We're going to talk about that a lot over the next few months – what it means for Christians to shine like stars in the sky in this world. I don't think we've ever spent an extended amount of time on that in messages before, so, that's what we're going to focus on. It's going to be a great time because we're going to learn how to make a difference in our world regardless of who wins. It's going to be great. Believe me.

And we're going to begin with next week's message: *avoiding election infection* – how to keep the toxic political environment from poisoning our lives and, more importantly, those around us.

But for now, let's pray.

Prayer

- Pray for people discouraged to look to Jesus.
- Pray for Christians to repent of what we believe about power.
- Instead of being drawn into the sludge of the divisiveness and hatred we are seeing, may this election season become the catalyst of a renewed vision and commitment among believers and churches everywhere ... including right here in this one.

Amen

Closing comments

Ok before we leave this morning ...

- A. As I said next week, avoiding election infection.
- B. Also, I know I've covered a lot of ground and you might want to hear this again. Check out the media section on our app or our website.
- C. During this next song, receive the offering then we'll be done. Guest, no need to participate. Just listen to and enjoy the song. Not guest ... this is a tangible way you support the good news.

Feature – Learning to be the Light / Offering

Dismissal – Nathan Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/COM.ART.HTM>