

The Divided States of America
Rules of Engagement
June 23, 2019

Good morning everyone.

In the New Testament letter known as *The Revelation to John*, John tells us of a vision God gave him of Heaven.

He writes ...

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

*"Salvation belongs to our
God, who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."*

Revelation 7:9-10 (NLT)

Would you pray with me?

Father in Heaven I thank You for this vision
You gave to John of what Heaven is like: that
there is a great multitude of diversity of
people who love Jesus and worship Him with
one voice ...

Because, Lord, in our world, in our country
and *even in this church*, Your people – not
the people of this world, not the people who
have rejected You – but *Your people* are so
divided by political, cultural and even
spiritual tribalism.

So many of us think we're right and "they" are
wrong ... which might be true but You have
made it clear: that's not the main thing.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed that we would be one as He and You and the Spirit are one; that we would love each other as He has loved us. *That* is the main thing.

And we are failing at it. And I know it breaks Your heart to see it.

So in this time that I have, Lord, my prayer is that you would wake us up – those of us who believe in Jesus and claim to follow Him – wake us up to the main thing, and empower us to live it both for *our good* and *Your glory*.

Amen.

Today we're in the third week of our series *The Divided States of America* and of all the things we've talked about and will be talking

about, today's topic is the one about which I am most passionate.

If you were here the first week you know that we saw that one of the dynamics of our cultural and political system is that it tends to pigeonhole us into black and white / "for or against" responses which then line up with various political and cultural tribes.

And we saw how Jesus handled a similar dynamic in His day – with His eyes wide open – and how we can follow His example, even if we're not Christians, as we engage in political dialogue and debate.

Then last week, I narrowed the focus directly to Christians and we talked about how it's easy for followers of Jesus to focus so much on the *second* of the two great commandments that we overlook the *first*.

The *second* of the two great commandments, Jesus said, is “to love your neighbor as yourself.”

And, these days, a lot of individual Christians and churches and organizations have taken that to heart.

- There’s a whole lot of dialogue among Christians about how to leverage whatever political and economic power we have to address injustice and suffering.
- And there are so many great “causes” these days in which Christians are involved that are intended to make the world a better place.

And that’s all good ... *unless* it begins to overshadow our commitment to the *first* of the two great commandments.

It's all good ... as long as the *second* most important love (of neighbor) doesn't take the place of the *first*: our love for God Himself, as a person ... because Jesus said *that* – loving God – was the greatest of all the commandments.

And my point last week was that when we get those out of order, things get out of whack.

I won't go back into all of that other than to say ... if you missed it – and you're a follower of Jesus – you should check out the message at our website, app or podcast.

But, today, instead of talking about the importance of our relationship in this direction (vertical) – with God – we're going to talk about our relationships in this direction (horizontal).

But I don't mean our relationships in general. I mean our relationships *with other followers of Jesus*, specifically those who are not of our tribe politically, racially, ethnically or culturally ...

Which means, obviously, that this message is directed primarily to Christians ...

Which also means that, if you're not a Christian, your takeaway from this message, I hope, will be an increase in your understanding of how Christians are *supposed* to act. And that's pretty valuable because, as I said last week, we Christians don't always act like we should.

Why This Matters

Now, I suppose the best place to begin is with the question of *why does this even matter?*

Who cares if division and even anger exists between followers of Jesus who have one conviction – for instance, pro-choice – and those who have another – such as pro-life?

And there *is* division over the issue of abortion as well as many other political issues. In fact, it's existed for quite some time. And it's been most visible when it comes to our two most recent presidents.

For instance, many Christians do not like President Trump for a lot of reasons, but his immigration and border policy is probably the greatest.

Check it out.

“... violence and oppression in their home countries.”

One of the things I hear quite often from my politically liberal Christian friends is “Donald

Trump is pure evil and I hate him.”

I’ve even heard it suggested that he might be the anti-Christ. Or, if not *that*, the fact that he is our president is surely God’s judgement on our nation.

Of course, not too long ago, in 2012, many Christians with conservative leanings had the same exact thoughts about President Obama.

Check this out.

Commentator: “He’d have to deceive himself or herself.”

Almost the same exact statements as we heard in the first video.

“Obama is the destroyer. Obama is leading this nation into the pit of godlessness. I hate

him.”

So, it’s pretty clear isn’t it?

- Some sincere Christians strongly oppose *conservative* presidents and *conservative* policies.
- And some strongly oppose *liberal* presidents and *liberal* policies.

Now, to the point of why we’re talking about this and why this matters.

It would be one thing if we Christians were only against presidents and policies that we don’t like or, more importantly, presidents and policies that we believe go against Christian principles.

Quite frankly, that’s “just politics.” And that’s how it’s *supposed* to work. In a representative

republic like ours, you support the ones you believe in and oppose the ones you don't. And as long as you do it in a civil manner, no harm no foul.

But when it comes to Christians of differing political persuasions *railing against one another* personally or on social media ...

When it comes to one believer personally slandering and questioning the authenticity of another believer's love for God and for people because of a political stance ...

"How could any Christian have voted for him? How can any Christian support her? I'm so angry and disappointed with those who did and do."

"How could any follower of Jesus support *that* policy? How could any Christian vote for a person who believes that is OK? I'm so

disgusted with those who do and did.”

- When men and women who believe in Jesus and have trusted him as their savior ...
- When men and women who are sincerely trying to follow the Lord in their lives ...
- When men and women who are Christians ...

... are demeaned and degraded and disparaged by others who *also* believe in Jesus and are trying to follow Him ... when that happens, *it is simply unacceptable.*

In fact, *that behavior* is more unacceptable than being wrong on the issue.

Let me say that again.

It is more unacceptable to denigrate another Christian than it is to be wrong on “the issue.”

And that’s not *my* opinion.

- That’s the opinion of *Jesus*, the author and finisher of our faith, the Head of the body known as “the church.”
- That’s the opinion of *Paul*, the apostle and missionary who singlehandedly spread the good news of Jesus to basically the whole Roman Empire.

Let’s take Jesus. Did you know the first followers of Jesus were drawn from each of the political and social factions of His day?

- One of his disciples, Simon, belonged to the “zealots” (Luke 6:15). That was the party that wanted to stage a military rebellion and overthrow the Romans. In

modern terms, Simon was a terrorist.

- On the other hand, Matthew, a tax collector (Matthew 9:9), actually worked for the Romans. He was a traitor.
- John the Baptist, who preached in the wilderness of Israel (Matthew 3:1-4) was likely a member of the part of the Essenes, who had totally withdrawn from the world. He didn't agree with either of those two!
- And some of Jesus' followers (like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) were Pharisees who believed in strict law and order. They were the conservatives. And nobody liked them.
- Then you have Peter, Andrew and John, who were blue-collar workers. They were the deplorables of their day.

- And then there were wealthy women who supported Jesus' ministry as well as women of questionable character.

What a motley crew!

But regardless of their political persuasions or their economic status, Jesus expected them to love each other and to be unified.

In fact on the night before He was crucified, Jesus gave them a new commandment.

"Love each other in the same way I have loved you."

John 15:12 (NLT)

And He prayed to His Father that they would be

...

"... brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you, Father, sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John

17:22-23 (NIV)

And then there is Paul.

Almost every letter he wrote to first-century Christ-followers all over the Roman world deals with the same issue in one form or another:

That people who have come to faith in Jesus and joined the church from different political factions, social classes as well as differing ethnic and spiritual backgrounds should love one another and be unified in Christ. The same thing Jesus wanted!

In fact, in his letter to the Christ-followers at Corinth, it's the very first thing Paul brings up after his initial greeting. He writes ...

I appeal to you, dear brothers

and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NLT)

And the reason it's first is because he has heard through the grapevine that there is conflict over – well, let me just read it to you.

Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ." 1 Corinthians 1:12 (NLT)

They were forming little factions and tribes and trying to one-up each other because *their* Christian leader was better than everyone else's.

So Paul strongly rebukes them:

Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not! 1 Corinthians 1:13 (NLT)

Keith Giles, author of the book *Jesus Untangled*, says that many churches today are dividing over a much less noble allegiance.

If Paul were to write to us, he says, it might read something like this:

“One of you says, ‘I follow Trump’, another ‘I follow Pelosi’, another ‘I follow McConnell’ and still another ‘I follow Bernie.’

And, Giles says, the response would be the same.

Is Christ divided? Was Donald crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Hilary?"ⁱ

Point being ... the thread between Jesus and Paul – the vision that connects them – is unmistakable.

And – and this is important – it runs all the way to the end of time where a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language – every political persuasion, every economic background, every social class – will stand before the throne of God worshipping Jesus with one voice.

That's what it's supposed to be like between followers of Jesus: love and unity.

Stop Condemning

Now, I know some of you are thinking “but wait a minute, Rick. I get what you’re saying about that. Love and unity matter to Jesus.”

“However, *you said* it was worse to denigrate another Christ-follower than to be wrong on a particular issue. That’s saying a lot more than just ‘be unified.’ So where do you get that?”

Great question. Let me show you.

While Paul was having to deal with factions within the church in Corinth, over in Rome there was a different issue: great differences of opinion and division over two practices.

- Some believers felt it was OK to eat meat; some believed they should be vegetarians. (We don’t have time to talk about why that was an issue but it was).

- Some believers thought it was important to celebrate the Jewish festivals and holy days, while others did not.

Here's what Paul told them. It's amazing that God saved this for us to read:

He starts out by saying ...

Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him.

And those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating.

And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

Romans 14:5-6 (NLT)

Now, what's Paul saying here?

He's saying even though there are some major differences of opinion, everyone involved *really* does want to do the right thing. Everyone *really is* trying to please God and honor God.

That's their heart. That's their motive.

Now, you and I don't have those same controversies. Instead, you and I are trying to figure out things like ...

- Should we support the rights of unborn children? Or can we support the legal right to abortion because we believe that policy might actually reduce the number of abortions?
- Should we prioritize caring for the immigrants who are crossing our borders illegally – many with good

reason? Or caring for the communities negatively impacted by the overwhelming burden of caring for so many people?

- Should we own a gun? Or should we completely trust the Lord for our physical safety?
- Should we support the political, moral and economic vision of the Republicans ... or the Democrats ... or the Libertarians? Should we even participate at all in the political process?

At some point, all of us have to make a call on those questions.

And so does everyone around us ...

Some of whom are sincere Christians, men and women who are striving to love God first and most, and then to love those who are not

like them like they love themselves – that’s their heart.

They *really* do want to do the right thing. They *really* are trying to please God and honor God.

But their choices are not the same as ours. They might even be wrong.

Now, what Paul is going say to the first century believers about *their* disagreements with one another over *their* controversial issues is going to apply to us about ours.

**They’re trying to honor God and please God
Paul says ...**

*So why do you condemn
[them] another believer? Why
do you look down on another*

believer?

Remember, he says ...

Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other.

Romans 14:10,12-13

(NLT)

Let's stop denigrating each other.

Specifically, let's stop saying things like, "how can any good Christian have voted for Trump?"

Easy – the choices sucked! And they honestly before God believed he was the lessor of three evils.

And let's stop saying things like, for instance,

“how can any good Christian ever think socialism is a good idea?”

Easy – because some of the stated goals of socialism sound like stuff Jesus said! And some Christians honestly before God believe that system is the best way to get there.

That doesn't mean they're “right.” In fact, socialism is no better than any other –ism and in many ways it's worse.

And it doesn't mean that people who voted for Trump were right. In fact, Trump is a worldly narcissist who desperately needs to meet Jesus. And I mean, in this life – not being sent on to the next one.

My point – Paul's point, Jesus' point – is that people who love God and care about doing what's best for everyone (loving their neighbor as themselves) could rationally

come to conclusions different from our own about controversial issues without them being heartless, cruel, evil, demon-possessed – or whatever label you want to put on them.

In fact, let me show you something fascinating that I came across while preparing for this series.

An economist by the name of Arnold Kling has developed a simple framework for understanding why there are political divisions in America.

He says it's like there's a three-channel equalizer we all have where we can slide the level up or down on each channel according to how we value it compared to the others. And where we put the slider determines the tribe we're in.

Here's a little video that explains it.

(B) Voice: "Channel One is sensitive to values ..."

(E) Voice: "... you likely identify as a conservative."ⁱⁱ

So, do you see why you are a liberal (if you are)? Or why you're a conservative? Or a libertarian? Or why you sometimes waffle between them?

You value some things more than others.

Now, here's what I want you to notice about those three channels. And this matters especially if you're a Christ-follower; if you're a person concerned about loving God and your neighbor (even the ones who aren't like you and don't like you).

- Does God care about channel 1 – the

freedom and liberty channel?
Absolutely.

You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13 (NLT)

- Does God care about channel 2 – oppression and justice? Absolutely.

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. James 1:27 (NLT)

- Does God care about channel 3 – that our world is civilized instead of barbaric? That there is order instead of

chaos? Absolutely.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. 1 Corinthians 14:33 (NLT)

He called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT)

Friends *all* three channels are important to God.

And if you're a Christian, you need to set the sliders according to your conscience and what you think God wants you to emphasize. And I need to set the sliders according to mine and what I think God wants me to focus on.

And *neither one of us* should look down on the other because of the channel we prioritize.

Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other.

Romans 14:10,12-13

(NLT)

And let's not go round acting like our channel is more special or important than any of the others: "I'm a follower of channel one. Or two. Or three."

And even though there are tribes around each channel, let's not try to one-up each other over which one is best. Jesus isn't divided into channels and it's not our channel that saves us or justifies us.

Let's love one another as Jesus has loved us ... which, by the way, means that He loved us when we didn't deserve it. That's what it means to love one another like Him.

And let's strive for the unity in the Spirit that He prayed for.

Getting Practical

Of course, the question is, how do you actually do that?

- How does a pro-life believer love and fellowship with a pro-choice believer?
- How does a Christian who didn't vote for Trump love and fellowship with one who did?
- How does a follower of Jesus who supports sanctuary cities love and fellowship with one who believes in building the wall?

How can we be *unified* in heart and mind

about Christ without having to be *uniform* (thinking the same thing and having the exact same convictions) about every single issue?

Two suggestions I would make.

1. Become a better listener.

James the brother of Jesus wrote “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a guy who had done an experiment (and has now written a book on it called *Reforming American Politics: A Christian Perspective on Moving Past Conflict to Conversation*).ⁱⁱⁱ

Basically what he did was to arrange conversation partners where two Christians from opposite sides of the political spectrum

agreed to talk about issues while following specific rules of engagement that were spelled out in advance.

And after enough of these dialogues had taken place, he began to notice a pattern.

“While a particular partner’s overall perspective on the issue at hand may not have changed significantly,” he wrote, “his/her perception of the ‘other’ often changed dramatically.

“Rather than viewing the other as an enemy to be demonized, a mutual understanding emerged that each of them aspired to be ‘faithful’ to their understandings of their faith commitments, with their disagreements often reflecting their differing Christian pilgrimages and other particular aspects of their respective social

locations.

“Most importantly, it soon became apparent that each of them was fully committed to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, with their disagreements often reflecting different interpretations of some biblical passages.”^{iv}

If you’re interested in his rules of engagement and want to give it a try, you can buy the book or check out his website: www.respectfulconversation.net.

The second thing I would suggest is to ...

2. Focus on what unites us in Christ.

I’ve never heard a better description of what that looks like than the one provided by John Wesley.

I love his approach to so much of the Christian life but nothing so much as the way he approached handling differences of opinion among Christians ... which was a real crisis in his day for reasons we don't have time to go into.

In any case, I want to share with you part of a sermon he delivered almost 350 years ago (and I'll be paraphrasing so it makes sense to our modern ears); a sermon in which his concern was the same as ours: "what does it mean for people of different opinions to be united in Christ instead of divided by their labels?"

Wesley begins by asking ...

Where are the Christians who love one another as [Christ] has commanded?

How many hindrances lie in the way!
The two grand, general hindrances are,
first, that we cannot all *think* alike and, in
consequence of this, secondly, we
cannot all [*act*] alike.

But ... 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 doubt, we may. In this [*love*] all
the children of God may unite, even
though they retain these smaller
differences.

To illustrate his point, Wesley quotes an
obscure passage from the Old Testament
that describes an interaction between an
Israeli king by the name of Jehu and a man by
the name of Jehonadab.

Now when he [Jehu] had departed from there, he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him; and he greeted him and said to him, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?"

And Jehonadab answered, "It is."

Jehu said, "If it is, give me your hand." 2 Kings 10:15 (NASB)

First, Wesley says, let's consider the question proposed by Jehu to Jehonadab, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?"

"The very first thing we see in these words is that there is no [discussion] concerning Jehonadab's *opinions*."

There is only that single question: "Is

your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?"

But what is implied by that question? I do not mean "What did Jehu imply by it?" but "what should a follower of Christ understand by the question when he proposes it to any of his brothers?"

[And I want you to listen very closely to how Wesley answers this, because he so clearly and eloquently describes a vision of unity for all believers regardless of their opinions on political or cultural issues.]

The first thing implied, he says, is this: *Is your heart right with God?*

Do you believe in his being and his perfections, his eternity, immensity, wisdom, power, his justice, mercy, and truth? Do you believe that he now

“upholds all things by the word of his power,”

Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he revealed in your soul? Does he dwell in you and you in him? Is he formed in your heart by faith?

Having absolutely renounced all your own works ... are you “found in him, not having your own righteousness, but the righteousness which is by faith?” And are you, through him, “fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life?”

Is your faith filled with the energy of love? Do you love God “with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength?”

Are you employed in doing, “not your

own will, but the will of him that sent you."

Do you point at him in whatever you do, in all your labor, your business, your conversation, aiming only at the glory of God in all, "whatever you do, either in word or deed, doing it all in the name of the Lord Jesus?"

The second thing implied by Jehu's question is ... *Is your heart right toward your neighbor?*

Do you love as yourself, all mankind without exception? Do you "love your enemies?" Is your soul full of good-will, of tender affection toward them?

And do you show this by "blessing them that curse you, and praying for those that despitefully use you, and persecute

you?"

Do you show your love by your works? As you have time and opportunity, do you in fact "do good to all men," neighbors or strangers, friends or enemies, good or bad?

If you are thus minded [towards God and your fellow man], if you are sincerely desirous of [these things], and following on until you attain, then "your heart is right, as my heart is with your heart."

And in the words of Jehu, "If it be, give me your hand."

By this – give me your hand - I do *not* mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. I do not expect or desire it.

Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion."

You keep your opinion and I will keep mine, and as firmly as ever. You need not endeavor to come over to my way of thinking, or bring me over to yours. I do not desire you to dispute those points, or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Leave all opinions alone on one side and the other: only "give me your hand."

By this I *do* mean first of all, love *me*.

Love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother, as a brother in Christ, a fellow citizen of the [kingdom of God], a fellow soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same Captain of our salvation.

Love me so as to think no evil of me. Love me with a love that covers all things, is always willing to think the best, to put the

[most positive interpretation] on all my words and actions.

Secondly, by "give me your hand" I mean *commend me to God in all your prayers.*

Wrestle with Him on my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is lacking in me. Beg of him that my heart may be more as your heart, more right both toward God and toward man.

Thirdly, by "give me your hand" I mean *provoke me to love and to good works.*

Follow up your prayer by speaking to me in love whatever you believe to be for my soul's health.

Encourage me in the work that God has given me to do and instruct me how to

do it more perfectly. O speak and spare not, whatever you believe may assist, either to the amending of my faults [or] the strengthening of my weakness.

Finally, by “give me your hand” I mean *walk with me*.

So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions, and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God.

And let us go hand in hand.”

Communion

Now, there’s more to this sermon ... including Wesley’s repeated clarification that what he’s advocating does not require abandoning our personal convictions and beliefs.

For, in spite of all our differences, we believers have in common so many deep realities. We can offer one another so many life-giving blessings that have nothing to do with the political or cultural issues of our day.

And these things – what we have in common and what we can do for one another; these are the things that unify us and the things to which we should give most of our attention and energy.

So this morning we're going to close with a time of communion – a time of remembering that what binds us together isn't our opinions; it's our common experience of grace through what Jesus did on the cross for us. That's why we take the bread and the cup – they remind us of his body and blood that atoned for our all of sins.

So, let me pray and then as you're ready

come and take communion and then you are free to leave.

We'll receive the offering at the door.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/keithgiles/2019/03/how-do-we-heal-our-political-divide/>

ⁱⁱ Note: Full video can be found here. I trimmed and added music.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzjLO_GHImY

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.respectfulconversation.net/>

^{iv} <http://www.respectfulconversation.net/musings/2019/2/17/a-christian-perspective-on-the-political-divide-in-america.html>