

The Divided States of America

Choosing Sides

June 9, 2019

Good morning everyone.

As Clay said earlier, today we're beginning a brand new series called *The Divided States of America*.

Now, whenever a preacher says that he says he or she is going to talk about politics or a political issue, people always get nervous.

That's what happened a couple of weeks ago when I first pitched the idea to our service programming team. Actually, what happened was ... *they freaked out!*

What I said in introducing my idea was that I had been watching and listening to how people were reacting to the decisions of

many state legislatures (including ours – Missouri) to virtually eliminate abortion rights ... as well as how people were reacting to other states (such as Virginia, New York and Illinois) passing bills expanding those rights.

And I said “it’s been a long time since I’ve done a hot topics series and I’m thinking maybe now is the time to do one of those again. I’m thinking we should talk about abortion then maybe the gender issue then maybe the legalization of marijuana” and then a couple other issues I forget.

Their reaction shocked me.

“Don’t do it!” they said. “You’re going to run off everybody in the congregation under 30 – plus anyone who isn’t a Christian – because they’re all going to look at you as an old white guy talking up traditional values.”

“Now, we’re not saying that’s who you are because we know you – and we actually agree with the traditional values on these issues.”

“But times have changed, Rick. People don’t think the way they used to about these things. And if you go there, it’s going to be bad. You should see all the hateful things on Facebook from both sides – even from people in this church! The tension is just so high right now.”

“But we *have* to talk about these kinds of things,” I said, “because they’re 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.”

It went on like that – back and forth – for about an hour where I tried to understand their concerns and give some kind of response. By

the end of it, I had an ocular migraine which later turned into a splitting headache.

And I was really shaken.

- Maybe I shouldn't do this series.
- Maybe I'm seeing everything wrong.
- Maybe I *am* unable to be "heard" in our cultural setting and I should just do something "safe."

So, I just let all of it sit for a few days and I tried to discern what God might be saying to me through the initial burden I had felt *plus* the conversation with my team, because I trust them. I trust that they weren't just being obstinate but that they truly were trying to help me.

And through that process it finally came to me

that what was most important – what I think God really wanted me to do more than anything else in this series – is *not* to influence or change anyone’s opinion on current moral and political issues.

Instead, what came to me is that what’s most important right now in this moment is ...

To influence followers of Jesus in three areas:

1. How we *develop* our opinions on these issues, i.e. what is shaping our thinking and our convictions.
2. How we *communicate* those opinions.
3. How we *treat* those on the “other side.”

And the reason those are what’s most important is because the one thing about which there can be no debate is this: if we are Christians ...

- Before we are politically “right” or “left”
- Before we’re Republican or Democrat
- Before we’re young or old, gay or straight, black or white
- Before we’re any other distinction you can apply to yourself ...

We are first followers of Jesus.

As the Apostle Paul once put it:

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28 (NIV)

In other words “in coming to Christ, in

becoming a Christian," Paul was saying, "all the externals by which the world attempts to label and classify and define people no longer matter. They've been superseded by something – someone – much more important: Jesus himself."

And, as His followers, we are to bring light and love to a dark and hurting world. That's job number one.

So, that's what this series is going to be about.

1. How we *develop* our opinions on the issues
2. How we *communicate* those opinions
3. How we *treat* people who see it differently

And I think that will apply whether you are 15, 35, 55 or 75.

And even if you're *not* a Christian – and I know there are more than a few of you who regularly attend or watch online who are not ... if you're not a Christian, I think the things we'll be talking about in this series will help you, too. So, you're welcome to test them out.

One of the most attractive things about Jesus was that He always invited people to follow Him and get to know Him and his ways before He asked them to believe in Him. And that's what we want to do, too. And that's the kind of church we want to be. That's why we're here.

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

- *All five 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've asked this in previous "hot topics" series), would you please not get up and walk out?*

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.

Now if, at the end of the message, you still have an issue with me, please come talk to me. Maybe I'm missing something and you need to educate me.

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 as you walk out and they'll know it's OK.

Ok, let's get into it.

A Destructive Dynamic

Today I want to talk to you about a particular dynamic that exists in our culture which, in my opinion, makes the tension much worse than it needs to be.

That dynamic is, for lack of a better phrase, *having to choose a side*; the cultural pressure which pushes us into either/or, for-or-against responses.

For example:

- Are you pro-choice or pro-life? Pick a side.
- Are you for "traditional marriage" or for "marriage equality"?

- Are you for “the wall” or illegal immigration?
- Are you for saving jobs or for saving the planet?

There’s a tendency to define almost every issue down to some sort of black or white, for or against response.

I think part of that comes from the fact that our news these days is reduced to 30-second soundbites and our dialogue is constricted to a 280 character “tweet.”

But part of that – maybe the larger part – is that it makes it easier to define who is in our tribe and who is not.ⁱ

And that makes us feel safe. It makes us feel like we belong somewhere.

But, if you're a Christian, you *already* belong somewhere. You belong to Jesus and to every other person who believes in Him. You are a citizen of God's Kingdom and a member of His household.ⁱⁱ And so you don't need to be pigeonholed into choosing a side.

In fact, one of the unique aspects of Jesus' ministry was that He *refused* to be pigeonholed.

We saw one example of that in the last series. The religious leaders of Israel came to Him and asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

And the reason they did that was that there were two factions in that day – two opposing parties – who had opposite opinions. And the leaders who asked the question knew that if Jesus took a side, it would cause His popularity to decrease by half once word got

out of which side He was on.

But Jesus saw what they were doing so He didn't answer the question. Instead, He took them back to Genesis 2 and said, "Here's God's idea of what marriage is supposed to be. Here's what He intended all along."

On another occasion, they came to Him and said:

"What is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

Now the reason this mattered was that the Romans claimed that whoever held the position of Caesar was divine.

So, if Jesus said "yes" they could accuse Him of encouraging people to worship someone other than Yahweh, which is idolatry. And that would have ended His ministry.

On the other hand, if Jesus said that it was wrong – idolatrous – to pay the tax ... that would put him at odds with the Romans. And that would end His ministry, too.

It was the perfectly devised trick question. But, again, Jesus saw through what they were doing.

He said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax."

So they brought him a denarius, and he asked them ...

"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Matthew 22:16-22 (NIV)

Jesus takes the typical either/or, black and white thinking and turns it on its head.

He says, in essence, "this isn't an either/or question. You can give to Caesar what belongs to *him* and is made in *his* image – the coin of the realm ... while also giving to God what belongs to *Him* and is made in *His* image – you."

And there are other examples of this strategy we could look at if we had the time, but I think you get the point. *Jesus was born into and forced to navigate a polarized factionalized culture like ours.*

- But He refused to be baited into giving yes/no, either/or, black-and-white responses.
- And He refused to be pushed into choosing a side or a tribe ... other than the Kingdom of God.

Now, next week, we're going to look more at the example of Jesus and how it might give us some direction in how we think and act with respect to political issues but, for today, what applications might we draw from how He saw through the tribalism of His day?

Eyes Wide Open

First of all – and I've already made this point so I won't dwell on it – if we're Christians, we need to remember that we are not defined by labels and tribes.

We might hold some opinions that line up with various groups but, we are not fundamentally defined by those opinions or labels. We're defined by our relationship to Christ and His people first and foremost.

But, beyond that, I think there are several things that could be said when it comes to living in such a polarized and divided time. And, again, these are especially important to Christians but, even folks who are not would benefit from them.

Now, when I share these with you, it might sound like I am saying that followers of Jesus should avoid political involvement altogether. But I want to be clear that is *not* what I am saying. We are blessed to live in a country that allows us to participate in the process and we can choose to do so if we wish.

But we should do so with our eyes wide open

to reality. That's what allowed Jesus to stay above it in His day.

Well, what does that mean? I think it means at least five things.

First, "eyes wide open" means ...

1. Recognizing that our tribe tends to minimize and horribilize the other side.

One social commentator writes that ...

We have segregated ourselves into tribal groups where we tell ourselves: "We have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the issue at hand. And, if anyone outside our tribe dares to talk about this issue? We know they clearly *don't* have the truth. So, we don't need to listen to them."ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, a lot of times, we can't even hear them.

We can't appreciate that there might be some validity to their position.

Of course, how could there be? By merely having their position they confirm that are horrible people. And horrible people should not be listened to.

It's a circular argument that gets us nowhere.

There was a great example of this that I came across while preparing for this message. Chris Cuomo was interviewing Christine Quinn, a pro-choice organizer, and former Sen. Rick Santorum, a pro-life supporter about the recent decisions by state legislatures concerning abortion laws.

The discussion – though it's a stretch to call it that – went on for over nine minutes.

I'm only going to show you about two-and-a-

half minutes of it but, as we watch, pay attention to how both Quinn and Santorum and even Cuomo minimize and horribilize each other.

It's pretty sad.

Here we go.

Video – Abortion Debate (2.5 mins)

That is a microcosm of the entire debate in our culture. And there are just so many things wrong with it.

For one, neither side is listening to the other.

For another, Quinn never addresses Santorum's passionate concern about babies who are killed. Santorum never addresses her passionate concern about women's rights.

And both accuse the other of not caring.

It's clear – both sides think the other is horrible and, again, horrible people shouldn't be listened to. In fact, they should be gotten rid of figuratively or literally which is why the win in politics these days is so often *not* about policy but defeating your enemies.^{iv}

But let's be clear. Despite the heated accusations coming from Santorum, "pro-choice" voters are not in favor of killing babies. And despite Quinn's accusation, "pro-life" voters are not in favor of oppressing women!

That's not the issue.

The real issue – which no one talks about – is that we do not have a broadly shared consensus about how to weigh the rights of

the mother against the rights of the unborn.

We have no shared consensus about when personhood begins, what the metaphysical status of the unborn is at various stages of development, and whether the government or women should have the power to decide these issues.

Point being, this is not a matter of *good* people fighting against *evil* people. Rather, this is an issue about which good people fundamentally disagree, even after all the information is on the table.^v

So, question: if you're amped up about political issues these days, where are you not listening to the other side? Where are you minimizing their argument to "you only care about one thing?"

And where are they asking good questions

that you're avoiding because you're so quick to be right about your side?

"Eyes wide open" means realizing and admitting that our tribe tends to minimize and horribilize the other side.

2. It also means accepting that politics by definition requires *moral* compromise.

This is where tribalism is probably the most deadly because compromising means risking being booted from the tribe. "You're not truly committed. You're a sell-out."

So, we want to stand our ground and not give an inch, like we just saw in that interview.

But the reality is that politics requires compromise because what makes an issue political is that it *divides* the *polis* (which is Greek for "city-state"). And political solutions are attempts to *unite* the *polis* around a

particular resolution.^{vi}

Furthermore, because politics is trying to decide “what is the *right* thing to do about X?” it is inherently *moral*, which means both sides have to compromise their morals when it comes to policy.

Now, this is hard for a lot of Christians to deal with because we’re very uncomfortable with separating our *personal* moral position from our *political* moral position. And that’s probably not a bad thing.

But, in a pluralistic society *where not everyone has the same moral foundation* – times have changed – in a pluralistic society, when politics works, that’s *why* it works. That’s *how* it works. People compromise their positions.

And you have to get comfortable with that.

You have to understand that the line you're willing to go along with in terms of policy does not have to be where you draw it personally.

One of my favorite writers and thinkers on the relationship between Christianity and politics, Greg Boyd (who is also a pastor who describes himself as "pro-life to the core") illustrates it like this:

It's conceivable that a pro-life Christian politician could in good faith decide that attempting to overturn *Roe v. Wade* is simply not feasible in our pluralistic culture and that embracing this all-or-nothing approach is actually contributing to the killing of unborn children.

A pro-life Christian politician could also conclude that, since almost all Americans agree that the fewer the abortions the better, the main reason abortion rates

remain constant is that the two sides have become polarized at the extremes.^{vii}

In this light, [he or she] could argue that the best political solution right now – the one that would save the most unborn lives – isn't the uncompromising one: it's the one that finds common ground among the differing parties.

It may be that while it *feels* more righteous to hold an uncompromising line on the abortion issue, doing so actually contributes to unborn babies being killed! At least you could see how a good and intelligent person might think this (or think the opposite!)^{viii}

Now, again, Boyd is a conservative on this issue and he's describing what political compromise requires from his side, but the same principle would apply to the liberal side

of the argument.

“Eyes wide open” means accepting that and understanding that your *personal practice* can be different from your *policy preference*.

3. It also means being aware that laws work by coercive power which is not God’s “plan A.”

Reality is that government gets what it wants through external power and pressure: laws, punishments, incentives, and things like that. And if your side wins on an issue, that’s what you’re accomplishing.

And that’s OK.

But don’t forget that Jesus never told his followers to advance His cause in that way. In fact, He said just the opposite.

“You know that, among the Gentiles, those whom they

recognize as their rulers lord it over them. And their great ones are tyrants over them. Not so with you."

Mark 10:42 (NIV)

Now, that said, we have to have laws. That's just a reality in a sinful fallen world.

But let's be clear: lawmaking is not the ultimate win. It's not what Christians liberal or conservative should be most interested in and committed to.

After all, if Jesus wanted to set up a government system that guaranteed, for example, economic equality for everyone, He could have accomplished that with ease. He could have exerted his divine authority in the political realm and established a system that would have perfectly balanced the economics of every earthly society.

This, in fact, was the point of Satan's greatest temptation in the desert: "Jesus, bow down to me and I will give you control over all the kingdoms of the earth" (Matthew 4:8-9).

But Jesus rejected that path. Instead, He called people to follow Him and to experience an internal transformation that compels and empowers them to *willingly* live the way they should.^{ix} God's kingdom works from the inside out and not the outside in.

And *that* – not coercion – is plan A.

Having our "eyes wide open" means we don't forget it.

4. It also demands humility (meaning "admitting our limitations and our moral inconsistencies.")

Because we watch the news as presented by our side... and listen to talk shows and podcasts from our side ... and we read blogs

and Facebook posts from our side, we tend to think our side perfectly understands all the issues and our way is the best way.

But, in truth, the complexity of our politics and our nation is gargantuan. It's beyond anyone's comprehension. Every action will create a reaction and none of us is wise enough or smart enough to know with precision exactly what that will be.

For example ...

- It certainly *feels* wise and even righteous to insist on higher wages for workers. But are we sure this won't force many small business owners to fire workers, thereby harming the poor more than helping them?
- And it certainly *feels* wise and righteous to insist, for example, that we support

tariffs on China and other nations that are “cheating.” But are we sure this won’t result in higher prices that will again, disproportionately affect the poor?

Of course, in the long run, getting our trading partners to play fair over the long term would actually be best for the poor, so maybe tariffs are a great idea. Maybe?

- And it certainly *feels* wise and righteous to insist on, let’s say, preserving a pool for inner city kids, but what if the money for this has to be taken from classrooms, requiring that some teachers be let go, resulting in a poorer education for these kids? Is a pool more important than education?

My point is that it’s arrogant to think of

ourselves and our tribe as people who are smarter at spending public funds and solving tough issues, plus being more righteous in caring about the needy than “them” – the other side.^x

And maybe it will turn out that we are. But, let’s be honest – we don’t know for sure because we can’t see the future.

In addition, while we regularly accuse the other side of being morally inconsistent ... for instance, have you ever heard anyone say ...

- If you’re pro-choice on abortion, why aren’t you also pro-choice on education? Why don’t you support vouchers so parents can send their kids where they want?
- And if you’re in favor of protecting defenseless animals from cruelty, why

aren't you also in favor of protecting defenseless children in the womb?

While we regularly accuse the other side of being morally inconsistent, let's remember that the mirror goes both ways. For example ...

- If you're pro-life, how does that square with supporting the death penalty?
- If you're pro-life, what will you do about supporting women who now can't get an abortion because your side "won" and now they have to raise that child or give it up for adoption?

Point being ... no one is morally consistent. All of us are selectively moral. We all choose the morality we like and that we want to abide by.

Having our "eyes wide open" when it comes

to our political involvement demands that we're humble enough to admit that.

5. Finally, having our eyes open also means not equating political activism with “doing something.”

Posting a link or clicking a “like” button isn't “doing something” ... other than maybe increasing the intensity of the echo chamber of our side.

And, if you're a Christian, attempting to influence government with your biblical convictions – while a legitimate exercise of your freedom in our democracy – is not a distinctly Kingdom activity.

See, the question isn't whether followers of Jesus are called to radically affect society. We are.

The question is *how*.

As Boyd puts it:

“Nothing in the New Testament tells us to do this by thinking we have any special wisdom on how to fix government.

“Instead, we are to simply imitate our Lord and Master. Everything about Jesus’ radical lifestyle, and certainly his death on Calvary, was an act of social activism. This is the social activism Christians are to be engaged in.”^{xi}

“The Kingdom,” he writes, “is about sacrificing one’s own time and resources (and life when necessary) for the sake of all other people, including our enemies.”

So the question for Christians, individually

and collectively, is how do we do this?

That's a question each one of us has to answer for ourselves. That's a question our church has to answer ... which is why we support a half-dozen organizations in our community that do good in ways we cannot.

And I'll just throw this in for free. If the abortion restrictions actually do become law in Missouri, Christians who are pro-life must put time and financial resources into supporting women who will be forced by law to carry their baby to term.

And I say that not just as the pastor of this church but also as a member of the board of Directors of the Parkville Women's Clinic which openly encourages women to make that choice and then supports them whether they do or not.

But the resources PWC currently has today will not be enough then, so followers of Jesus will need to step up in an even greater way.

Conclusion

Well, there you go. Hopefully, I haven't offended you all too much today.

Hopefully, I've increased your awareness of the constant pressure to choose sides politically as well as the challenges – and, quite frankly, the danger – of political involvement and political power.

And hopefully, you'll come back next week as we talk about how we form our political and moral convictions and opinions which then shape our perspectives on how our government ought to operate.

Let's pray.

Jesus, I praise you that ...

- You refused to be baited into giving yes/no, either/or, black-and-white responses.
- You refused to be pushed into choosing a side or a tribe ... other than the Kingdom of God.

Help us to be like you.

Help us to have our eyes open wide to the fact that ...

1. Our tribe tends to minimize and horribilize the other side.
2. Politics by definition requires moral compromise.

3. Laws work by coercive power which is not God's "plan A."
4. We need to admit our limitations and our moral inconsistencies.
5. That political activism isn't "doing something."

Give us a spirit of peace and unity in our state and nation but even more so in our families and in this church.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/reforming-american-politics-harold-heie-christians-moving-from-conflict-to-conversation/>

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 2:19

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/reforming-american-politics-harold-heie-christians-moving-from-conflict-to-conversation/>

^{iv} <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/03/politics-liberal-democrat-conservative-republican/>

^v <https://reknew.org/2008/01/william-wilberforce-and-the-possibility-of-christian-politics/>

^{vi} <https://reknew.org/2012/10/qa-what-is-your-stance-on-abortion>

^{vii} <https://reknew.org/2008/12/colsons-god-government-a-review>

^{viii} <https://reknew.org/2012/10/qa-what-is-your-stance-on-abortion>

^{ix} <https://reknew.org/2019/03/jesus-was-not-a-socialist/>

^x <https://reknew.org/2012/08/shouldnt-preachers-rally-christians-to-fight-political-injustice-2/>

^{xi} <https://reknew.org/2008/12/colsons-god-government-a-review>