

The Great Culture War  
*The Tragedy of Friendly Fire*  
June 23, 2013

**PRELUDE – Before the Throne of God Above  
Worship – We Are / Beautiful Things**

**Video – “Fireworks 2013”**

**Feature – “We Just Disagree” / Offering**

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said we are continuing in our series, “The Great Culture War,” and this is the third message in that series.

In the first message, we talked about the fact that our culture is rapidly moving away from what once was a firmly- and widely-held conviction that morality is defined *externally and eternally* (by God and revealed not only in the Scripture but through Natural Law as well) to the belief that it is *relativistic* –

defined by each individual as they see fit. And we saw why that shift is taking place and its consequences and that, in the end, each one of us bears some responsibility for it.

In the second message, we talked about how Christians can and should respond to this shift. We discovered why many sincere followers of Jesus opted to pursue a political solution over the past 30 years and how that strategy has failed to accomplish little more than making the evangelical church appear to be unloving, antagonistic and judgmental. We also talked about the far-more-effective strategy adopted by the very first Christians who, in less than three centuries, with no power to change the system (which at that time was the Roman Empire), no platform on which to stand as “culture warriors” turned their world upside down *by creating a counterculture within the culture* so attractive that people wanted “in.” In other words, so many individuals were transformed

by a personal encounter with Christ and the church that, eventually, the entire culture was transformed. And we looked briefly at what a similar kind of counterculture and strategy might be like in this day and time.

If you missed either of those messages, you can listen to, watch or read them online in the media section of our website.

Of course, one of the difficulties with the counterculture approach is that, in order to be the city on the hill and the light in the darkness that Jesus talked about, you still have to *live* within the existing culture. You still have to engage with and interact with it.

- You have to pay taxes.
- You have to be aware of what's going on in the world around you (at least, to some extent).
- You have accept that your kids are going to be influenced by media and

friends and schooling (none of which have any obligation to support a biblical viewpoint).

And because you have to engage and interact, even though you belong to a countercultural community of Christ-followers (the church), *you're going to have opinions about things that are part of culture around you.*

- You're probably going to have opinions about *politics* – who should be President? Governor? Which party has the best policies for our nation?
- You're going to have opinions about how *your tax money is spent* – should we have a stronger military or stronger welfare programs or neither? Is federally-mandated health insurance a good idea? Should KCI be replaced with a newer more modern version?
- You're going to have opinions about

*laws* – should recreational marijuana be legalized? Should the state allow for gay marriage? How should the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment apply to the right to own an assault weapon?

- If you're a serious Christian, you're going to have opinions about the ethics of common cultural practices – Is it OK to gamble or drink alcohol? Where should a woman draw the line on her attire (what's "trashy" and what's not)? What level of consumerism is acceptable – where's the line between "enough" and "too much"?
- And then, to top it all off, if you're a sports fan, you're going to have to decide between MU and KU. I mean, this is tough isn't it?

Even though you are a follower of Jesus and you belong to a community of Christ-followers (the church), you're going to have

opinions about things that are part of culture around you ... which means that it is almost guaranteed that *you have a significant difference of opinion with the people sitting near you this morning*. In fact, if I went back through that list I just gave and said “show of hands – how many of you believe this about whatever issue and how many believe this?” we would see quite a bit of division right here in this room.

In fact, let's just do a quick test right now: MU or KU? MU ... KU ... Neither.

## **When Differences Become Deadly**

Now, the fact that there are differences of opinion among us isn't that big of a deal if all you do is show up and take a seat from time to time. But *if you become involved* with other believers beyond this experience – if you serve together in ministries or take part in a small group or even if you just get

together socially or recreationally with people – these differences of opinion on cultural matters (to say nothing of differences we typically have on spiritual matters) can become divisive, destructive and deadly.

One of the saddest (and, quite frankly, most infuriating) things I've seen in my years as a pastor is the “friendly fire” that takes place when followers of Christ get so passionate about our political opinions or our cultural preferences or even our particular slant on biblical doctrine that we mow each other down ... just like people in the world do. We criticize, we demonize and we marginalize.

*Sometimes, we do it intentionally and directly and personally.* We call one another out and start verbally shooting.

I woke up yesterday morning to a Christian talk show where the two hosts were naming pastors who they felt were not orthodox

enough in their teaching and they started talking about Andy Stanley, who is pastor of Northpoint Church in Atlanta, a great and godly leader and one of the clearest, most compelling preachers in America. They played a sound-bite from one of his sermons and proceeded to pick it and him apart. It was just ridiculous ... and reminded me again why I don't listen to many Christian talk shows.

Sometimes, we mow each other down intentionally and directly and personally and *sometimes we mow each other down without even realizing it*. We spout off our opinions and talk about “them” – the people “out there” who we disagree with – without realizing that some of the people who are “in here” right next to us, our brothers and sisters in Christ, hold the same opinions!

I'll never forget the first time I became aware of the reality of “friendly fire.” I was in my late 20s and had come to the conclusion that



God wanted me to change careers – to leave the world of software development and go into full-time vocational ministry. My pastor at the time strongly advised me to go to seminary, so Jetta and I visited three schools in various parts of the country to see what was out there.

Around that same time, I also discovered that there was a huge doctrinal controversy in our denomination (SBC). I vaguely remember going to a conference and hearing all the speakers get fired up against “the liberals.” So when we visited the three seminaries, I wanted to know about the impact of the controversy among their students. I discovered that all three were feeling the tension from the students up to the highest levels of leadership. In fact, at one of those schools, the Vice President of Admissions actually said to me in a very snarky tone, “every once in a while we get these conservative students who think this one

issue is worth dying over.”

Now, again, at the time, I was a software engineer and I didn't know enough to be on either side of the controversy *but I did know* that if I went to any of those schools and wound up on what they considered to be *the wrong side*, it would be very uncomfortable.

Long story short, that's how we ended up in KC. We decided against all three of those schools and eventually heard about Midwestern (on N. Oak). When we visited, we found that while the students and professors were very aware of the controversy and there were strong opinions on both sides of the question, there was no division. There was no demonization or marginalization going on. They were there to train and be trained for ministry. And that's exactly what I experienced in my time there.

And that had a profound effect on me

although, at the time, I didn't really understand why. Later, I came to realize that *I easily could have been mowed down by the friendly fire* that was taking place in those other seminaries. And it's why I am so committed to keeping NHCC from becoming political or issue-oriented ... because "*friendly fire*" could happen here. It's already happening at many other churches.

Several weeks ago when I decided to do this series, I came across a book called *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* by Mike Slaughter & Charles Gutenson, two pastors who had experienced the ministry of their church being hijacked (so to speak) by political agendas. The book looked interesting but what was even more interesting were some of the reader comments on Amazon.

**One person wrote:**

I haven't been to church regularly in three years because of the persecution I faced

for voting Democrat. I've been told I'm going to Hell and that I am less of a Christian. Of course, I don't believe any of that but would you go to church with people like that? Knowing that you are being judged by who you vote for rather than for your Christian walk?

**Another person (from Australia) wrote:**

At the last federal election I voted for the Greens. I don't think that makes me a 'Green'. It does mean that I felt – on the whole – their position best depicted the stuff of the kingdom [of God]. What disturbed me was the way some folks concluded that I obviously wasn't a Christian because I held this point of view.

Now, just so you'll know, here at NHCC we've never experienced anything that extreme. About the worst I can think of is that a few people left the church in 2008 when I did an

election series and, in one message, pointed out that the Democratic Party platform actually had some very biblical components to it. (I did a similar message about the Republicans but I guessed they missed that one).

I *have* had several people come to me over the years (and some in recent days as we've gotten into this series) and say that they worry about being criticized, demonized or marginalized either by me or by others in the church if they let on that they were Democrats or political liberals. I've assured them that I have no intention of doing any such thing and that I doubt that others here would do it intentionally – though sometimes all of us stupidly shoot off our mouths without thinking ... and are mortified when we do.

However, since we are about to deal with some issues that are very controversial and

potentially divisive when we get into part two of this series, we need to talk about how to avoid “friendly fire.”

When I started this series I said I was tempted to just jump in and deal with the issues directly but then I felt like God was leading me to talk *first* about *how to even talk about the issues* because of this potential possibility. Next month, when we start talking about God and grass, God and guns, God and Gosnell, God and gays we’re going to have differences of opinion, maybe strong differences of opinion. Some of us are going to see black, some are going to see white and some are going to see gray.

The challenge is ... how do we hold those opinions in a way that honors Jesus, preserves our fellowship and demonstrates the fact that we truly are a counter-cultural community?

- That we don't do what the world does.
- That we don't shoot our wounded.
- That we don't demonize those who think differently than we do.

How do we make this amazing scripture Paul wrote to several first-century congregations a reality in ours?

**He wrote:**

*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for 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 3:26-28 (NIV)*

I love the imagery here. In a world divided by gender, religion and social status, Paul was saying to them “when you came to Jesus, you

immersed yourself in *Him* and you clothed yourself in *Him*. And now, you are more aligned with *Him* than you are with any of those ways the culture tries to define you.” If Paul was writing to us in our day and time, I suspect he might go so far as to add “there is neither Democrat nor Republican nor Independent nor Libertarian, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

How powerful it would be if we could get our minds around that!

By the way, this is why baptism is so important and why Paul mentions it here. When you get into the water of baptism you are proclaiming “this is what is true of me.” You are visualizing the reality that “I am more *of* Jesus and his people, more *in* Jesus and his people than I am *of* and *in* anything else.” And by the way #2, we’re going to do a baptism in August – sign up for it!



Now, if you haven't picked it up yet, let me just come out and say that of all the messages in this series, this is the most important one to me personally and the one I feel most passionate about for *if we fail on this point* – if we fail to see ourselves as “in Christ” first and foremost and fall into the divisive, destructive and deadly pattern of this world – *we ought to just close the doors and quit playing church. Seriously.*

That's because Jesus said that how we as believers treat each other is at the core of what makes us counter-cultural; it's what makes us as a minority-community so attractive that others want “in.”

**He said:**

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one*

*another.”      John 13:34-35*  
*(NIV)*

## **A Voice from the Past**

So how are we to handle the differences of opinion that exist (and may even become magnified as we move forward in this series) without becoming adversarial and worldly?

To answer that question, I originally intended to break down what the Apostle Paul wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Romans because those believers were dealing with a lot of internal conflict. But as I was preparing this message, I remembered a sermon that I read several years ago that was first preached *almost 350 years ago* – that’s like, 1760 – by a man who later became known as the father of Methodism and The Methodist Church, John Wesley.

I’ve never been a Methodist and I don’t think

I ever will be but, I have to tell you that I love John Wesley's approach to so much of the Christian life but nothing as much as the way he approached handling differences of opinion among Christians.

Now, Wesley's culture and mission was very different from ours.

- First of all, he was an Englishman.
- Second, a biblical and Christian perspective dominated the worldview of the average person on the street.
- Third, Wesley's main concern wasn't reaching non-believers with the Gospel. It was leading nominal Christians or Christians-in-name-only to become true believers and followers of Jesus in everyday life.

But there is one great similarity between our culture and John Wesley's: *conflict*.

I'll spare you all the historical details but, in the 150 years leading up to the time of Wesley, the entire continent of Europe had been through a tremendous upheaval in the Protestant Reformation. Not long after that, the people of England went through a similar upheaval and conflict when the Anglican Church split from the Catholic Church. And the disagreement wasn't confined to intellectual and spiritual territory. It resulted in three civil wars in Great Britain alone.

And people, including Wesley, were tired of it. In fact, when Wesley wrote his commentary to the New Testament in 1754, he included this statement in the preface:

Would to God that all the party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms, which have divided the Christian world, were forgot: and that we might all agree to sit down together, as humble, loving disciples, at the feet of our common

Master, to hear his word, to imbibe his Spirit, and to transcribe his life in our own!

That's why I love John Wesley. He gets it.

So, 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 a relatively 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 inquiry concerning Jehonadab's opinions. And yet he certainly held some which were very uncommon, indeed quite peculiar (which is evident from other parts of the Old Testament). And even today, Wesley continued, it is very possible that many good men also entertain peculiar opinions, and some of them may be as unusual as Jehonadab's.

But although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true, yet can no man be assured that *all* his own opinions, *taken together*, are true. In fact, every thinking man is assured they are not. He knows, generally, that he himself is

mistaken; although in what particular opinions he is mistaken, he does not, perhaps he cannot, know.

Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same “liberty of thinking” that he desires *they* should allow *him*, and will no more insist on *their* embracing *his* opinions than he would have *them* to insist on his embracing *theirs*. He will be patient with those who differ from him, and only ask [those] with whom he desires to unite in love 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 close 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 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," and that he governs even the most minute and the most toxic [circumstances] to his own glory and the good of them that love him? Do you "walk by faith not by sight," looking not at temporal things but things eternal?

Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he revealed in your soul? Do you know Jesus Christ and him crucified? Does he dwell in you and you in him? Is he formed in your heart by faith? Having absolutely renounced all your own works, your own righteousness,

have you "submitted yourself unto the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ Jesus? 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?" Does your soul continually "magnify the Lord, and your spirit rejoice in God your Savior?" Having learned "in everything to give thanks," do you find "it is a joyful and a pleasant thing to be thankful?" Is God the center of your soul, the sum of all your desires? Are you accordingly laying up your treasure in heaven and counting all other things [rubbish] and dross? Has the love of God cast the love of the world out of your soul?

Are you employed in doing, "not your own will, but the will of him that sent you," of him that sent you down to sojourn here awhile, to spend a few days in a strange land, until, having finished the work he has given you to do, you return to your Father's house? Is it your [food] "to do the will of your Father which is in heaven?" Is your eye single in all things, always fixed on him, always looking unto Jesus? 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?"

Does the love of God constrain you to serve him with fear, to "rejoice unto him with reverence?" Are you more afraid of displeasing God than either of death or hell? Is nothing so terrible to you as the thought of offending the eyes of his glory? Upon this ground, do you "hate all evil ways," every

transgression of his holy and perfect law; and because of that "exercise yourself to have a conscience [clear] of offence toward God, and toward man?"

**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? Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy? Does your heart yearn over them? Could you "wish yourself" temporally "accursed" for their sake [as the Apostle Paul did]? 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? Do you do them all the good you can, endeavoring to supply all their needs, assisting them both in body and soul, to the uttermost of your power?

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 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 as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint heir of his glory.

If I am ignorant, love me with the love that is long-suffering and kind; that is patient, bearing and not increasing my burden; that is tender, soft, and compassionate still; that does not envy if at any time it pleases God to prosper me in his work even more than you. Love me with the love that is not provoked,

either at my follies or infirmities, or when it seems to you I am not acting according to the will of God.

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. Pray that the love of God and of all mankind may be more generously poured into my heart; that I may be more fervent and active in doing the will of my Father which is in heaven, more zealous of good works, and more careful to abstain from all appearance

of evil.

**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.”

## **Conclusion/Communion**



Now, there's more to this sermon ... including Wesley's repeated clarification that what he is recommending does not mean abandoning our personal convictions and beliefs. In fact, he recommends that all believers be clearly convinced that their manner of worshipping God is both scriptural and rational; that, in the entire world there are no better particular views and forms of worship than his or hers. But his main point is:

**In spite of those differences, we believers have in common so many deep realities and 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 – are the things that unify us and the things to which we should give most of our attention and energy.

And when we do ... when we become as

committed to loving our brothers and sisters in Christ as we are to promoting and defending our own opinions – we will become that shining city on a hill; that counter-cultural community of people who are known not because of what they are “for or against” but how they love one another.

And I’m thankful that in many ways we already are that kind of community here at NHCC. But I long for that to become even truer of us. And I long for you to be part of that and to experience that in your life – and not just as you relate to brothers and sisters in this congregation but in your own family or where you work or go to school.

So this morning we’re going to close with a song and then a time of communion. And I want to ask you to please not leave until we’re done unless it’s an emergency.

As the band does this song, I want you to

listen closely to the words and examine your own heart. Ask yourself the questions Wesley asked his listeners:

- Is your heart right with God?
- Is it right with your neighbor (the people around you in everyday life)?

And when it comes to the family of faith – the fellow followers of Jesus in your life ... will you ask God to help you love them? Help you to pray for them instead of criticizing, demonizing or marginalizing? Ask him to help you encourage them to live a life of love and good deeds? Walk with them and do God's work with them even though you're opposite ends of the spectrum on political and cultural issues?

Let's concentrate on that as the band does the song and then I'll come back and we'll have a very brief time of communion.

# **Feature – “With One Voice”**

## Endnotes