

PASTOR'S NOTES. The Missionary Mind, Part 2.

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, Who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors**, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”*

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (NIV)

Imagine how churches started in places where there were few or no Christians. Missionaries (whether they called themselves that or not) moved into an area, maybe put up a business or got a local job where they came in contact with people of the area, and they started getting to know their neighbors.

Even today, almost every church starts in someone’s living room. After meeting people at their job or in other ways, and then earning a little bit of trust, a person or a family invites them to their home where they pray, read scripture, and talk together. Sometimes, this process is easier because people speak the same language, and they might already be familiar with Jesus and Christian faith. But some persons were willing to go to strange places, learn a new language, do a lot of listening, and earn the trust of people who knew nothing about Christ, in order to ultimately invite them to receive Christ for themselves. This is the missionary mind, and without it, Christianity never would have spread over the world and most likely none of you reading this would have ever heard about it.

“I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus.”

Acts 20:20-21 (NRSV)

Even though the missionary mind is essential to the spreading of the Christian faith, most of us grew up seeing this as something for a few select people or “super-Christians.” For most of us, we stick around with people who are like us, avoiding strangers, or anyone who seems different.

But we are different, even when we seem similar, even with people in our own families. How many families have already decided that they would not discuss religion, politics, or anything else where they might disagree! How far we have strayed from the vision of Christians wanting to invite Christ into every heart.

In our country we have political divisions (they spill over into church, too). Not surprising; we have disagreed about things as long as we had opinions. That the U.S. became a country in the first place was because at least some people were willing to try to understand how others thought and chose to work with them to reach a common goal.

We can probably all agree that in today's world, both in religion and in politics, we are not working on a common goal. I have a take on today's politics and how we got here, but since I am but a mere 60 years old, many of you could point out that the roots of our current reality go back much further.

In my lifetime, every presidential election (with the possible exceptions of 1964 and 1972) was close. When I say close, I mean that except for last year, less than 60% of the people who could have voted actually did so, and so any of those elections could have flipped the other way if more people on the one side voted. Campaigns noticed this; so their biggest effort is to get their people to vote. Every ad, every debate, every rally, and finally election day buses and carpools are all designed to accomplish this.

This strategy has some dubious underlying assumptions. First, it assumes that most people in this country are good, sensible, and they think like we do. We are the "silent majority." It also assumes that there is little or no value in trying to understand or communicate with the other side; perhaps some of them could be won over, but this is not worth the time and energy it would take. Just focus on getting our people out to vote. This also leads us to the idea that in every political contest, we *should* win. The only thing stopping us would be people not making it to the polls or if the other side cheats.

I have seen this played out over the years in increasingly divisive ways, to the point where we come to see persons who disagree with us as stupid, sick, or even dangerous. Do we really think that we can or should agree on everything? If we had just one political party, would we still be America?

In some ways polarization has gone to a new level. This past year both campaigns started asking if they had a rally for their candidate, will that make persons on the *other side* more likely to vote? There were reasons to think this. Seeing large numbers around the other candidate could make them so fearful that they would be more committed to showing up to vote, and fear is a strong motivator. In the end, this idea couldn't be fully tested, because neither campaign was going to risk it; if they have a rally in that state, we will have a rally in that state. But if this is true, just by raising an issue or a candidate, people might dig in their heels and becoming even more passionate against *you*.

So what does this have to do with us in the church? The same issues dividing the nation are also dividing us in our churches, as well as some of our own controversies. And few of us approach them with the missionary mind that brought Christ to the world.

We know that the Holy Spirit does the real work in inviting hearts and minds to Jesus. We also know that we have been graciously given a role in this life-changing, world-changing work. But if we try to force our way on others by winning, we know that this will not change their hearts. To change hearts, we have been given the gift of influence, but we can't influence anyone without trying to understand their motives. People change their hearts or minds for their own reasons, not ours. And unless we are willing to take the time to do this differently, the world in which we live now will only get more polarized, and *your* side will probably be worse off.

So all of this is to say that when we look at the current political climate, *I blame us*. We are the ones who have been entrusted with the gift of Christ. We received it because there were people who took risks to go to strange places, learn strange languages and customs, and show true love to people who were different. We owe so much to those people for our country, our quality of life, and our eternal life.

After all, whatever the burning questions or the struggles of our world, I am still convinced that Christ is the answer. And He has committed to *us* the ministry of reconciliation.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name "John" or similar, written in a cursive style.