

PASTOR'S NOTES. Doing Religion and Politics Differently, Part 1.

*“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)

In a previous Maple Leaf article (about a year ago), I stated my belief that for the current political climate in our culture, what we hear called “divisiveness” or “polarization,” ***I blame us (Christians)***. We are the ones who have been entrusted with the gift of Christ. We received it because our foremothers and fathers took risks to 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.

While there are many in religious and political circles who thrive on the arguments and division, we of the church are more interested in reconciliation. If you are one of those, I have come up with a list of guidelines for how we might look at religious and political disputes in different and more helpful ways. Depending on how we number them, I have ten (so far). I’ll present the first three here:

We begin first with the **conviction that everyone is in our mission field**. That is, God’s design is to give eternal life to anyone who will accept it, regardless of how much they are like or unlike us. Many people, both religious and politically, have already decided that it is not their job to understand or convince people of a different generation, different race, or different politics. However, we do not have the authority to make that decision:

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of **all** nations...”*

Matthew 28:18-19a (NRSV)

For many years I was involved with a group of about 15 neighborhood pastors. There were Methodists, Lutherans, Nazarenes, Mennonites, Baptists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics. Most of the time we met for mutual prayer and support. Sometimes we tried to do projects together, but that was hard. Inevitably people would have disagreements about how to do ministry, and usually someone would feel insulted and might even leave the group for a time. But when Jesus prayed in the garden that His disciples would all be one, he didn’t mean just the Methodists (even though that by itself is extremely hard!). To the world outside the church, our efforts to separate ourselves from other forms of Christianity make no sense. That world sees only Christians, who are senselessly arguing among themselves, and in that worldview any failure of one is a failure of all Christians. In all my groups with other churches, I struggled with how to work together when we have very different ideas about how to do ministry, yet I knew that our Lord requires us to learn to live together and support each other *somehow*. So I am convinced that **to be one in Christ requires us to live with points of view that we cannot reconcile with reason**. That’s just the way it is.

*After Jesus had spoken these words, He looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son so that the Son may glorify You... I have made Your name known to those whom You gave Me from the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word... And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, protect them in Your name that You have given Me, so that they may be **one**, as We are **one**... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be **one**. As You, Father, are in Me and I am in You, may they also be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given them, so that they may be **one**, as We are **one**...”*

John 17:1, 6, 11, 20-22 (NIV)

We hold many beliefs with strong conviction. But I am becoming only more convinced that **no principle is more important than persons**. Religious and political principles are important; but in the bigger picture they are temporary. Governments come and go, and the important issues of the day change, but the gospel message has continued to be to bring as many people as we can into a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. After all, wasn't it one of the more astonishing things about Jesus (and thus about God) that He cared more about people than rules, even to His death?

*“For though I am free with respect to all, **I have made myself a slave to all**, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. **I have become all things to all people**, that I might by all means save some. **I do it all for the sake of the gospel**, so that I may share in its blessings.”*

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NRSV)

So this is a brief statement of the first three guidelines. Next month, I'll say a little more about some of the others. So far I have: we need to have different ideas about issues; everyone needs to be conservative about some things and progressive about others; we are likely wrong if we assume because a person has a position on one issue, we can know how they think on other issues; all of us reach positions based on emotion and experience and (maybe) reason; if we have been in a long-term argument, it is a sign that something about our position is wrong – at the least we are likely wrong about our opponent's position; most of our disputes are framed in ways that do not allow us a way to resolve them; and if we allow ourselves to look at a person or group with contempt, we are heading on the road to hell (Matthew 5:21-22).

These other guidelines are little blurry right now; I'll try to make them clearer next time.

Yours in Christ,

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