

PASTOR'S NOTES. Doing Religion and Politics Differently, Part 2.

*“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 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.”*

2 Corinthians 5:14-18 (NIV)

When social scientists began studying persuasion, the common assumption was that people act in what they consider their best interest. Even today, many argue that we are by nature selfish, and every choice we make is for ourselves. Some argue that even when we appear to deny ourselves in the short term, it is because we are still thinking of ourselves in the longer term. However, a possible exception is group identification. For example, some people will support a political party whose policies impact them personally in a negative way.

Our group identifications serve us well, most of the time. They allow us to make quick decisions about people and issues by seeing where our group stands. Consider our political identity. Most people in this country identify themselves as either Republican or Democrat. While a number of people publicly call themselves Independents, most of them still tend to lean to one party over the other, most likely because of their family tradition. Until the most recent times, both political parties had members across the political spectrum, because most people were born into their party. And while we tend to think of our history as always being Democrat vs. Republican, this has not always been the case. We used to be Federalist vs. Democratic-Republicans, Democratic-Republicans vs. Democrats, Democrats vs. Whigs, Democrats vs. Republicans, and occasionally a third or even fourth party was significant.

I don’t know if our country would be better served by three or more strong parties instead of two, but I do know that it is far better than if there were only one. Party divisions have allowed for alternative points to be heard and have prevented (to a degree) one side from overwhelming the other. Yes, I am inclined to agree with a friend who bemoaned that people are more concerned with *who* is right, instead of *what* is right. However, the sheer volume of issues we are called upon to decide is overwhelming without some kind of “party line.” For issues in distant states or in other countries, I can’t know all the details, nor can I trust that I am getting all the information needed from the news outlets. Inevitably it would seem that I have to make some decisions by looking to my group.

Our political identities can go overboard. Consider how we use labels like “conservative” or “liberal.” Depending on your perspective, you may be tempted to see one as good and the other as evil. But real people are both liberal and conservative about various things in their lives. After all, a conservative view of an issue is about preserving what is valuable. Who can reasonably oppose this? But a liberal (or “progressive”) view of an issue is about making a change for the better. Again, who can reasonably oppose this? So the issue isn’t whether the liberal or conservative view is right in

general, but how do we make things better while preserving the best of what we have now.

We can assume that if you have had a long-term disagreement or argument with someone, then likely something about your position is wrong. Your position might not be wrong in itself, but there is a strong chance that you do not correctly understand your opponent's position. All of us (including you) come to decisions based on emotion, experience, and (maybe) reason. If you can't see how your opponent can come to believe their position, then you are stuck until you try to understand.

Group identifications can be get in the way. I suspect that one of the reasons people avoid political discussions is that we fear that if we share our position on one issue, people will make all kinds of assumptions about other issues, because they will classify us by our group. Similarly, our identification by race or gender or age can lead us to make some right assumptions about strangers, but also some very wrong ones as well. The labels that we use allow us to make quick decisions, but at the cost of not seeing the person before us in their full humanity.

*“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

Galatians 3:26-28 (NRSV)

You have probably heard preachers who say the only identification that matters is our identity in Christ, either as *“child of God”* or *“sinner saved by grace”* or something similar. I fundamentally agree with the premise. It is important to see each person as a unique individual in Christ, one that He willingly died for. However, since people self-identify with different groups, usually for personal reasons, then learning this is important if we will grow to know them.

Christ has called us to a ministry of reconciliation. Among other things, this means knowing the people around us at a deeper level. We always want to remember their value to Jesus Christ. We want to look at them as a unique gift to the world, even though they might see themselves through a group lens. We want to understand not only what they believe, but why they believe it. Just as with Jesus, some will be closed to you even if you take this approach. So there is no guarantee. But some who have taken this approach have seen miraculous changes in relationships, even after years of conflict. May their example inspire us all to bring reconciliation, to the glory of our Lord Jesus.

Yours in Christ,

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