

The Christian Response to Political Polarization

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*American political discourse has become poisonous to a truly frightening degree - and it shows no signs of getting more civil anytime soon.*

- Michael Schaub, NPR.

In the recent past, poisonous discourse caused by a deepening political divide threatens to tear America apart by the seams. From colleges to restaurants to church, regardless of background, this fist fight drags everyone in, in one way or another. Whether a political activist or a political avoidant, the toxic atmosphere surrounding politics affects everyone. Topics as diverse as the combatants range from abortion to the size of the government, and the chasm steadily widens between Democrats and Republicans, Left and Right.

### **Current Political Landscape**

Studies from the Pew Research Center show that, politically speaking, the Democratic and Republican parties are decisively divided:

- Social welfare: 71% of Democrats believe the government should do more to help needy Americans (even if it means going into debt) and 76% of Republicans believe the government should do less to help needy Americans.
- Size of government: 55% of Democrats believe government is efficient, and “69% of Republicans say government is wasteful and inefficient” (Pew).
- Regulations: 66% of Democrats claim America needs government regulation of business to protect public interest and 62% of Republicans report those regulations do “more harm than good” (Pew).

- Abortion: 76% of Democrats claim all or most cases of abortion should be legal, whereas 59% of Republicans state all or most cases of abortion should be illegal (Pew).
- American success: 70% of Democrats believe America is successful due to its ability to change whereas 70% of Republicans pin the nation's success on its dedication to the founding principles rather than an ability to change (26%).

As contrasting ideologies grow, so does resentment for people of other political opinions.

In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of free academic speech in the case of *Sweezy vs. New Hampshire*. Chief Justice Earl Warren commented:

The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. ... Scholarship cannot flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding, otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die (Hudson).

This atmosphere of academic free speech, however, seems to be disappearing. Due to fear of both peaceful and violent protest, many colleges now ban political speakers from both sides of the aisle. Campuses frequently ban speakers like Janet Mock (liberal transgender activist) or Ben Shapiro (conservative writer and podcast host for the Daily Wire) for no reason other than political disagreement (Jackson).

This intolerance of speech is not only reserved for college, however. Politicians like Maxine Waters, a Democratic Representative in California's 13th district, escalates the rhetorical tension further: "If you see anybody from that [Trump's] cabinet in a restaurant, in a department

store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd. You push back on them. Tell them they're not welcome anymore, anywhere" (Hains). On the aisle's other side, President Trump's divisive rhetoric accuses and demeans all who oppose him. During a 2018 speech in Blue Ash, Ohio, Trump called the Democrats who did not applaud during his State of the Union Address "unamerican" and "traitors" (Guardian News). Republicans and Democrats yell and scream across the aisle, accusing those on the other side of stupidity, immorality, and racism. Rarely, however, does anyone provide evidence to support these claims. Civil discussion has no seat at the political table anymore.

Neil Postman, American author, educator, media theorist, and cultural critic explains, "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other" (92). While political arguments may not entertain those involved, they certainly entertain millions of viewers and listeners hungry for conflict. Postman's statement certainly makes sense in the context of 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Many individuals across the nation cannot argue civilly or reasonably because they only want to hear their own opinions repeated back to them. This thinking further polarizes politics in America. The divide is so deep and wide, it even affects the Body of Christ, His church.

### **Two Possible Reactions**

*Reaction One: Isolationism*

Christians often react in two ways: isolationism or activism. Isolationists believe politics is a worldly invention causing only tension and toxicity. Isolationists argue that Christians should isolate themselves from politics because it is not God-centered and because Christians should “not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone... patiently enduring evil” (2 Tim. 2:24-25). The harsh verbal attacks woven into nearly every political discussion clearly contradicts this command. The current political landscape is indeed frequently filled with “foolish, ignorant controversies” that “breed quarrels” instead (2 Tim. 2:23). Despite the Roman oppression, the volatile uprisings, and the government corruption, Jesus never involved himself in the politics of his day. His sermons touched on daily life and repentance, not which political leader would best represent the people of Israel. Instead of contributing to political controversies that wash away with the folds of time, isolationists believe Christians should look only towards the gospel, the eternal word of God. If politics is just another form of worldly hatred, why *should* Christians be involved?

The short answer is that the Bible tells us to. Believers are commanded “to do justice and to love mercy and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8). Many political controversies are, in fact, issues of *justice*: abortion, immigration, women’s rights, welfare, medicare require that Christians seek justice with mercy and humility. Dr. Jonathan Leeman, the editorial director of 9Marks and professor at Southern Baptist Seminary, reminds Christians that “politics, by its nature, deals with questions of justice, and the gospel requires us to care about justice.” God exhorts His people in Psalm 82:3-4, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” While there are good charity organizations set up to help with the problems of the fatherless and unwanted children and struggling widows, government programs like

welfare and the foster system are designed to help as well. Questions regarding the government's involvement demonstrate the importance of political involvement. How can Christians withdraw from politics when this process addresses the same problems believers are commanded to care about? As a Christian pastor, apologetic, and theologian, Tim Keller explains: "Those who avoid all political discussion and engagement are essentially casting a vote for the social status quo." That is not what Christians are called to do.

Some may still argue that because Jesus never involved himself in politics, isolationism is the model Christ established. This, however, is wrong on two points: truth and biblical history. Today's culture has obscured the truth in a number of foundational areas. The definition of marriage, family, gender, life, and love are all concepts obscured by secular political agendas. These concepts, however, have already been defined in scripture. John MacArthur, Christian author and pastor, affirms: "If you are one who has a moral authority, which would be the word of the living God, the Creator, then your responsibility in any society is to make sure that God's moral standards are heard" (MacArthur). In other words, Christians have an obligation to convey the truth and the moral standards of the Bible to others. Why? Because biblical teachings provide mutual benefits for both culture and individuals. The value of life, whether unborn or not, is found in the Bible (Psalm 139:13-16). Respect for the individual and their property is found in the Bible (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Respect for governing and parental authorities is found in the Bible (Eph. 6:1-3; Rom. 13:1-7). The basis for laws against stealing, murder, and rape is also found in the Bible (Ex. 20). "Christians should be involved politically as a way of loving our neighbors, whether they believe as we do or not" (Keller).

Historically, numerous biblical figures were actually immersed in politics. Daniel and his three friends, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah (also known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), served as advisors in King Nebuchadnezzar's court (Dan. 1:17-20). Esther fought to protect her people as the Queen of Persia (Esther 2:17, 4:16). In fact, as Esther faced the extermination of her people, her cousin Mordecai proclaimed:

Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Esther 4:13-14)

Mordecai warned Esther of the danger of an isolationist position and instead encouraged her to take political action, because he saw that God placed Esther on the Persian throne in anticipation of Haman's plot. He saw that God "removes kings and establishes kings" and places specific people in specific places with specific roles to further His master plan (Dan. 2:21). The same is true of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Because of these four men, King Nebuchadnezzar and all of Babylon ultimately recognized God's sovereignty. God is always involved in politics, whether Christians join him or not.

By insisting on political abstinence, isolationists undermine the importance of speaking truth. Focusing on God and avoiding quarrels are good things, but ignoring dangerous and corrosive policies is a bad thing. Walking in love instead of hate is good, but not if it subverts the truth. God is not only a God of love. He is also a God of truth. He is a God who proves the perfect balance between love *and* truth.

*Reaction Two: Activism*

On the opposite side of the spectrum is activism. Activists claim Christians should boldly proclaim biblical truth in every political sphere. Whether running for a political office or speaking in a political protest, Christians should clearly advocate for the morality and justice the Bible demands. Those who support this position believe basing law on biblical principles is a must. Christians should be firm and unrelenting in their beliefs and especially in their speech. Activists believe that truth comes before love, and many times truth stands alone. Not every Christian political activist speaks harshly and without love. Too many, however, speak condescendingly, disrespectfully, or refuse to listen to the opinions of those with whom they disagree.

It is true that throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments affirm harsh speech and action from God, His prophets, and His followers. David writes in Psalm 110:5-6, for example, “The Lord is at your right hand; He will shatter kings on the day of His wrath. He will execute judgement among the nations, filling them with corpses; He will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.” In Matthew 23:27, Jesus boldly proclaims, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.” Likewise, 1 Timothy 5:20 exhorts, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” Rebuking so they stand in fear? Calling people whitewashed tombs? Executing judgement? Shattering kings? Filling the nations with corpses? Clearly these verses and many like them indicate that Christians have the right to speak harsh truth.



When Paul commands believers to rebuke others, however, he clearly orders them to rebuke those within the church who “persist in sin,” not those who “differ in opinion.” God (the good and perfect judge and creator) reprimanding the pharisees (twisters of God’s truth for their own profit) is completely justified. Humans (sinful creatures) screaming at other humans (fellow image-bearers), over a political opinion is unjustifiable. Christians are called to “love one another with brotherly affection,” not disrespect and disregard a person based on their opinions. Christians are called to “owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). Verse after verse commands believers to love each other as Christ first loved them (John 13:34).

One practical reason to show love to those with whom we disagree, is because love persuades (1 Peter 4:8). In fact, love persuades much better than ridiculing rhetoric. For example, imagine a person is publicly sharing their opinion and someone tells them to shut up because his opinion is wrong, useless, and idiotic. Most would fight: arguing, screaming, throwing a punch, or completely shutting down. Now imagine a different scenario: the same person voices his opinion and a different person begins a polite discussion with him, asking why they believe what they do and what evidence they have. This produces a civil discussion that may even breed a friendly relationship. As Proverbs 15:1 reads: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Harsh words breed conflict, but love breeds community.

An excellent example of talking politics with “soft answers” is Steven Crowder, Christian comedian and political commentator. Crowder visits college campuses conducting “Change My Mind” interviews. Crowder simply sets up a table and a banner with his opinion and an open invitation for anyone who disagrees with him to sit down and attempt to change his mind. He

speaks kindly, respectfully, and provides rational arguments for his position. He is open about his sources and willingly shares them with anyone who asks. By creating a calm environment where people are free to share and defend their opinions, Crowder also makes room for civil, rational discussions. It is important to note that Crowder is not afraid to confront those who incite violence against him or others. To those who incite violence, Crowder boldly addresses them with a firm, inescapable truth, as well as respect. In his conversations, Crowder takes both love and truth into account. That example is sorely needed in today's volatile political atmosphere.

Neither isolation nor attacks move the conversation forward. Christians must be involved in politics, but not immersed enough to make their tongues forget who forged them. In order to do that, Christians must learn to love their enemies.

### **Balancing Truth and Love**

#### *Knowing Your "Enemy"*

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus commands, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Every Christian has two types of enemies: fellow believers and non-believers. However, can they even be called enemies? According to Luke 6:27-28, enemies are those who hate, curse, and abuse you. Looking at the Bible as a whole, Christians only have three real enemies: Satan, the world, and our own sin nature (Graham; Hardee). 1 Peter 5:8 warns Christians: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Similarly, Jesus warns His disciples that the world will hate them because He chose them out of the world (John 15:19). In Romans, Paul confesses, "I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I

want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Satan, the world, and human sin nature are the enemies of Christians, not political opponents. Therefore, no Christian should treat anyone who disagrees, Christian or not, as an enemy.

### **Non-Believers**

Non-believers can certainly be harder to civilly engage in political discourse with because they come from a different worldview. Many believers lose patience trying to find common ground. Some don't even try. This should in no way, however, deter believers from sharing both love and truth. One key to overcoming this dilemma is to view these “enemies” through another lens.

So often, Christians fall prey to thinking in finite human terms and forget to think in eternal kingdom terms. As Genesis records, “God created man in His own image” (1:27). This indicates that people are created to be like God, possessing God-like attributes including intellect and the power to make moral judgements (Grudem 443). Christians have an inherent obligation to respect and cherish all people, even their political *enemies*. Not because everyone is easy to get along with, but because everyone is “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God in “His own image” (Psalm 139:13; Gen. 1:17). As junior U.S. senator from Nebraska, Ben Sasse advises, we should “start from the assumption that our opponents are like us - decent folks who want what's best but who start from different places” (Schaub). This is comparable to the *enemies-to-lovers* archetype common in literature. The enemies bicker and fight, sometimes physically, and can't seem to get along. They taunt and demean each other. They spit and laugh in each other's faces until there's a drastic change. They see their enemy grieving over the loss of a friend or playing with a child or taking care of their family. In that moment, perspectives change and the person

looks at his enemy and sees a person. It can be a challenge to speak kindly to political opponents who may not respect the Christian perspective, but who can claim they have never challenged the patience and kindness of another? All people have “fallen short of the glory of God” so “let him who is without sin” cast the first stone (Rom. 3:23; John 8:7). If Christians can see their political opponents as fellow creations of God, not as mortal enemies, perspectives will shift and perhaps positions will as well.

### **Believers**

The same strategy works with Christian political opponents. When a person accepts Christ, they are adopted into the family of God, the Body of Christ (Gal. 4:4-8). Christians become brothers and sisters, which is why they are commanded to “love one another with brotherly affection” (Rom. 12:10). Jesus reveals in John 15:17, “These things I command you, so that you will love one another.” 1 John 4:21 echoes, “And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” Charles Spurgeon, famed Baptist preacher of the 19th century, relates:

Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints.

Loving one another creates “Christian unity” (Piper). Christian unity is the unity every Christian finds in the Holy Spirit. It is the bond between believers that transcends politics and ethnicity and background, and its purpose is to glorify God and witness to the world (Piper). John 13:35

explains how, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Christians are called to love non-believers because they are made in the image of God and fellow believers because they are members of the family of God. Both acts glorify God (Piper). Therefore, Christians have every reason to love their believing and unbelieving political opponents. The question then becomes *how* do Christians demonstrate love?

### *Practical Ways to Love Non-Christian Opponents*

The mere thought of loving a person who disrespects and belittles their opponents seems difficult, almost impossible, and it often discourages Christians from speaking at all. Love should not be given apart from truth just as truth should not be delivered apart from love. Paul poetically explains in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have and deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Paul repeatedly proclaims that truth without love is worthless. Christians should love their “enemies,” but *how*? Humility, prayer, respect, and understanding are good places to start (Leeman; Cospers).

### **Humility**

Humility is a recognition that Christians in themselves do not have all the answers, all the resources, nor all the brilliance to deal with the struggles of life (Leeman). By first realizing that

Christians, just like everyone else, do not have all the answers, believers can then approach opponents and discussions with a humility that brings with it the realization that they may not convince everyone. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many other prophets all faced the reality of ineffective, insufficient words. In fact, in Jeremiah 7:27, God promises ineffectiveness as He explains, “You shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.” As Douglas M. Jones relates in his book *A Rhetoric of Love*, the prophets are essentially told to “speak, but know that no one will listen. Declare, but understand that they won’t hear. Preach, but realize that they will not heed your words” (59). It takes courage to take up a rhetorical mission bound to failure, but it takes humility to accept that with grace. Humility also requires believers to recognize that some of their answers may be wrong (Leeman). It is easy for a Christian to believe themselves right and true because they follow the ultimate truth of the scriptures. However, just because a person follows Christ, does not mean that all their politics are better than an unbeliever’s politics. Through humility, Christians are able to recognize their own wrongs and accept the inability to persuade certain people.

### **Prayer**

As an exercise in humility, Christians should also pray, one of the most important aspects of the Christian walk (Cosper). Philippians 4:6-7 commands:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When dealing with political opponents and toxic comments that may emerge, stress and anxieties can cause the same toxicity to infect the mouth. This is a problem. As James 3:9-12 explains, Christians already have problems taming their tongues:

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and saltwater? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Christians can stop that process, however, by praying (giving up fears, anxieties, frustrations, problems to God) and embracing peace instead. Prayer not only provides peace, it also guards hearts and minds in Christ (Phil 4:7). Esther, queen of Persia fasted and prayed for three days before confronting the king about Haman's plans to kill the Jews (Esther 4:6-17). Esther had to convince the king of Persia, a pagan king who banished his previous wife, of Haman's plot to kill the Jews. Esther faced powerful political enemies, and her solution was prayer (Casper). Christians should humbly pray for protection from poisonous politics and wisdom to speak truth clearly with love to unbelieving opponents, treating them with the same respect we want to be treated with ourselves.

### **Respect**

Respect can be a hard concept to grasp and even harder to maintain, especially when applying it those with whom we disagree. Respect is defined as the "due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others" (Oxford). As simple as it sounds to show "due regard" for another person, it may be as impossible as walking on the sun when attempting to converse with

someone of worldly values. In such cases, the Bible again provides examples. When Daniel was a teenager, the Babylonians destroyed his home, captured him and his friends, and forced them to serve the Babylonian king as advisors (Dan. 1). Anyone else would resent their captors, but Daniel did not. Daniel studied hard, surpassing all others around him, rising in status to become the king's top advisor. Would Daniel have been given such a trusted position of influence if he lived his life with resentment and disrespect for the Babylonians? He certainly wasn't alive when Peter wrote, "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:17). But he exemplified this command better than most Christians today. Listening, making eye contact, speaking without condescension, and considering another's viewpoints are all ways to show respect. All these tips, however, are useless if Christians care more about arguing a point than they care about the individual. Political "opponents" are not ideologies to conquer. They are people made in the image of God and deserve care and respect. It may be hard to listen to disagreeable opinions, but respect is not as impossible as walking on the sun. Like understanding, respect is merely difficult.

### **Understanding**

The final consideration in terms of showing love and truth is understanding political opponents (Leeman). To understand someone is to "be sympathetically or knowledgeably aware of the character or nature of" that person (Oxford). Practically speaking, understanding an opponent's reasoning and motives can provide a path to persuasion. Relationally speaking, understanding opponents provides a way to love and, overall, it supplies new perspectives that might have been overlooked otherwise.



Working hard to understand opponents builds bridges across steep ravines of disagreement and offers a potential olive branch. Christians can learn understanding by following the Apostle Paul's example. Paul understood that not everyone comes from a religious background or the same religious community. Acts 17:16-34 describes how, in Athens, Paul "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." People who heard Paul speak brought him to the Areopagus, the cultural hub for conversation, where they asked him to explain his beliefs. He builds a bridge immediately: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (22). Paul uses his knowledge of the Athenian culture and religions to make an appealing argument for the Christian God and Jesus' resurrection. "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed" (Acts 17:32-34). Paul built a bridge between what he saw in the culture and what he knew to be true, ultimately drawing people to Christ. Non-believing political opponents are like the crowds Jesus spoke to: When Jesus "saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Political opponents may not seem like helpless sheep when they berate and call those with whom they disagree awful names, but that's what they are: a people without a good and perfect shepherd. Understanding that premise is a big step towards treating people with love while also conveying truth.

Humility, prayer, respect, understanding: all are important to speaking truth and loving political opponents well (Leeman; Cosper). By purposely addressing non-believing opponents in

these ways, Christians can show God's glory, build relationships, and maybe even bring a few lost sheep into the sheep shed.

*Practical Ways to Love Christian Opponents*

What should Christians do, however, about political opponents who are also part of the Body of Christ? Most assume that all Christians hold the same political views, but that isn't necessarily the case. Christians do not hold the same political stance, nor do they all reside within a single political party (Keller; Dever). The key to keeping politics from destroying Christian unity requires knowing the difference between biblical law and wisdom, showing grace and understanding, and obeying scriptural teachings (Leeman).

**Biblical Law vs. Wisdom**

First, the difference between biblical law and wisdom. Biblical law is any specific law or guideline stated in the Bible. Examples are the Ten Commandments and the Levitical laws. They are direct and specific commands addressing morally right and wrong practices. Wisdom applies this knowledge of law to any situation in various ways (Leeman). For example, in basketball, the ball can be dribbled in any direction and passed to any team member to get the ball in the basket. In the same way, there are multiple ways to help the poor and multiple candidates to vote for. Most Christians know and try to follow biblical laws. What Christians may not be unified on are the specific ways to help the poor, which gun-control regulations will keep people safe, which presidential candidate to vote for. Every Christian should seek to help the poor, but should people use the welfare system to help the poor? Should believers vote for a candidate with good policies but few Christian values? Shouldn't all Christians be voting for the same person and the same laws? This is where understanding the difference between biblical law and biblical wisdom

is key. Biblical laws are non-negotiables (Leeman). The commandment, “Thou shalt not murder” is not up for debate (Ex. 20:13 NKJV). Biblical wisdom, however, is full of negotiation. The commandment “to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering” can be carried out in many ways (James 1:27 GNT). By remembering that human opinions are not God’s laws, but instead mere subjective opinions, Christians gain the ability to converse calmly with other believers because they know what is biblical and what is opinion (Leeman). Christians can also begin walking beside brothers and sisters in Christ with grace and understanding towards a common goal.

### **Grace and Understanding**

In essence, Christians must treat each other with grace and understanding because “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13 ESV). Christians must understand that every political opponent has different experiences affecting their political views, that it is possible for an opponent to be right, that they may be willing to listen and have their minds changed, and that they are, above all, still a member of the Body of Christ, a member of the spiritual family. Christians must understand and give grace, free and unmerited favor, not because opponents were nice or ‘came to their senses’ but because we are instructed to demonstrate earnest love from a pure heart (1 Peter:22). Offer these things things out of love “for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” and “anyone who says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:7, 19). Giving grace and understanding to believing political opponents is just one more way of showing love, which strengthens Christian unity.

### **Obeying Scriptural Teaching**

Likewise, an important way to keep Christian unity is by following scripture. Scripture, the living word of God, is what ties Christians together. Every Christian should recognize scripture as his or her ultimate authority. Therefore, a Christian does not need to claim political authority over others. It is not commanded in scripture, nor is it necessary to “correct” other Christians on their views surrounding healthcare, welfare, or the current president. Does this mean no one has the *right* solution to political problems? Not necessarily. Some solutions are surely better than others, and Christians should freely and graciously debate those ideas. Human wisdom, however, does not equate with God’s laws and no human has ultimate authority to present their opinions as such.

If, however, a Christian believes and teaches “things they ought not to teach,” it is important to know that fellow believers have the authority to “rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:11-12). If Christians are to maintain unity, there has to be union regarding the clear truths of the Bible. If a Christian teacher leads people away with false teaching, it is every Christian’s obligation to step in and “rebuke them sharply,” for they should know better (Titus 1:11). Fellow Christians with differing political ideals are not the enemy. As Rupertus Meldenius, a German Lutheran reformer of the early seventeenth century, writes, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity” (Ross). Christians are brothers and sisters who share in the revelation of God’s word. We should unite on the immovable foundation of scripture instead of the inconstancy of political parties.

If believers are to truly keep Christian unity, the purpose of which is to witness the glory of God, then brothers and sisters should avoid dimming lights with petty political quarrels (Piper). Are opinions about healthcare and welfare so important they must split the church? That

is surely not the case, and it will never be the case if believers remember the difference between biblical law and their opinion, where ultimate authority comes from, and how to walk with grace and understanding alongside fellow Christians.

### **Conclusion**

Political division is wider than ever. The division is sadly evident in the church as Christians either run from politics to avoid strife or use politics to abuse their opponents. Instead, Christians should lovingly speak truth. By praying to God for wisdom and patience, showing respect to political opponents, and attempting to understand an opponent's views and motivations, Christians can begin speaking truth and walking in love (Leeman; Cosper). In a poisoned political atmosphere, it is important that we not only keep unity in the church, but also strive to be a light in the darkness, a city on a hill that exemplifies God's glory for all the world to see. Christians can do that by simply treating political opponents, not as enemies, but as creations of God who deserve respect and dignity. That will truly prove God's glory.

There are several Christian organizations, such as the Colorado Family Action Foundation, that are politically embroiled but work towards speaking respectfully to all political opponents. While Christians are not required to join such political organizations, we should all make conscious efforts to imitate Christ in our political discussions. This may include simply asking polite questions, having a political opponent over for dinner, purposefully creating spaces at work for free discourse, starting a small group that meets at local coffee shops to discuss politics. Anything that gets Christians out of their bubbles and into respectful dialogue is an opportunity worth taking.

Every Christian should strive to pray for opponents, respect opponents, understand opponents, and love opponents as Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19). In other words, we should “hope and pray our presence is filled with the aroma of Christ” so we can speak truth, show love, and witness to the world the glory of God (Casper).

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