

2016: A Year of Division, Unity and Opportunity

Like the children of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, we, as God's people, should understand the times and know what we should do.

What does 2016 hold in store for us, and how should we respond?

I offer these words as spiritual observations more than as prophetic pronouncements, in the same spirit that I wrote that 2015 would be a year of pushback, which it clearly was in many ways.

While I expect that pushback to continue, it seems obvious that 2016 will also be a year of polarizing and dividing in America.

This is self-evident given that 2016 is a presidential election year, and election rhetoric only highlights the differences between candidates, parties, ideologies and individuals.

This year will be no different, but in many ways it looks to be more intense.

Can you remember a time when America was more deeply divided? When pro-life vs. pro-abortion sentiments were as passionate? When our most fundamental freedoms were being threatened by LGBT activism? When competing policies on immigration and national security were as far apart?

The divide between Americans will only get greater in 2016 as these issues come front and center, and that means that those of us who hold to biblically-based values will come under more intense attack and mockery from those who differ with us.

Prepare to defend your faith and your values in 2016 like never before. Prepare to hold your ground.

At the same time, this is a great opportunity for bridge-building and unifying, beginning first in our Christian circles.

How can we possibly expect to have a positive impact on America (and I'm not talking about politics here) if we remain so fragmented? The more people turn against us and scorn our beliefs, the more we will realize how much we as believers have in common and how much we need each other. Now is the time to unite around the fundamentals of the gospel and around our country's great need for God.

But this will also be a great time for bridge-building outside of our own circles, as we determine not to get carried away with cheap slogans and political rhetoric and seek instead to reach out to those we differ with and—gasp—seek to build relationships.

I'm talking about interacting with Muslims (the vast majority of Muslims in our country will not try to behead you), atheists (they do not bite, and sometimes their anger reflects disappointment with God or the church), gays and lesbians (if you ask them honest questions rather than attack and demean them, many will gladly share their hearts), people whose race and ethnicity are different than yours (we can learn so much from each other just by asking what life is like in someone else's shoes) and those on the opposite side of the cultural divide from us (you might be surprised to find out that they have strong reasons for their beliefs and values, which will only challenge you to reinforce your own).

We are called to be the Lord's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), and that transcends being Republican, Democrat or Independent, or being conservative, liberal or libertarian.

Somehow, we must use the extreme polarization that will surely

come in 2016 as a stepping-stone for preaching the gospel rather than as a barrier that drives people further from the Lord. However, that is more easily said than done. Such efforts will have to be bathed in prayer.

But on a relational level, as much as it lies with us, we must be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9; Rom. 12:18; Heb. 12:14). As children of God, we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can be firm without being nasty. We can be immovable without being idiotic. We can say “no” to compromise while saying “yes” to compassion.

Isn't this what Jesus did? His words and deeds stirred up the opposition, and He Himself was a sign spoken against (Luke 2:34). Yet at the same time He was a friend of sinners.

Can we find a way to follow His lead?

Finally, I believe that 2016 will be year of a great opportunity, as the extreme shifts and divides in our country will make it possible for the unlikely and impossible to occur.

To give an example from the world of politics, while I am not a Donald Trump supporter, other leaders see him as a Cyrus-type figure whom God could raise up to rescue America from freefall, recognizing that only at such a volatile time as this could he have a real possibility of winning the election. (Cyrus was a Persian king whom God used to regather the Judean exiles and rebuild Jerusalem.)

Similarly, without so much intense disapproval of the political establishment, it would be more difficult for a staunch conservative like Ted Cruz to gain enough support to win, but again the unique climate of the day makes that much more possible.

Yet I'm not thinking primarily in political terms right now.

I sense that unexpected events (both national and international) could bring about sudden changes in American attitudes (just think of how the immigration debate has shifted because of Islamic terrorism). I sense that doors could open for previously unknown people to rise up and speak to the country (through both grassroots media and professional media). And I sense that believers, recognizing how watered down our contemporary gospel now is and how godless our nation has become, could finally recapture that holy desperation that can usher in a national awakening.

And so I enter the new year overflowing with faith and optimism, eager to see what lies ahead.

In the words of the 19th century missionary Adoniram Judson, "The future is as bright as the promises of God."