

How to Love People Across the Political Divide

Our country has always enjoyed lively political debate. But psychologists and sociologists have noticed that the 2016 election took the United States to a whole new level of polarization. The animosity is hot—and getting hotter. In fact, couples have gotten divorced and families have stopped speaking to each other because a massive chasm separates Red and Blue political platforms.

To put it bluntly, we hate each other.

Call it the Trump factor, if you will. But more than two months after the presidential election, nerves are still raw, and blood is still boiling. Longtime friends are avoiding contact or unfriending each other on Facebook. Rage is seething under the surface of our country like a volcano about to erupt.

This anger is also in the church. Believers are at odds with each other over who voted for whom and who supports what policies—and even who drinks Starbucks coffee, shops at Nordstrom's or likes Lady Gaga's Super Bowl halftime show. Everything has been politicized. This divisive spirit burns bridges, erects walls and pushes God's people into opposite camps over even the most trivial matters.

Many white evangelicals view Trump's presidential victory as a miracle of God, and for that reason, some of them rigidly defend every decision he makes. Other Christians—including many African-American, Hispanic and millennial believers—view Trump as a dangerous threat to the country. And somewhere in the middle are Christians who accept the outcome of the election and pray faithfully for Trump, even if they don't support every move he makes.

We are faced with a serious challenge. Either we choose to love each other across this vast divide, or our love becomes cold and our message becomes hollow and hypocritical. I'm praying we will rise above the conflict so we can show America who Jesus is. Only a church full of love can reflect Him. Here are some steps we can take now:

1. Read your Bible and pray more than you listen to news programs. There's nothing wrong with staying in the know when it comes to politics. But if you find yourself listening to countless hours of angry commentators every day on Fox News or CNN, it's possible you have become addicted to this verbal venom. Today's polarized media is fueling a civil war, and many Christians have become pawns in the devil's scheme to divide and conquer. Please hit the mute button when necessary. Tune out the screaming before it poisons you.

2. Submit your mouth (and your social media posts) to the Holy Spirit. I've been shocked by the belligerent tone some Christians take when defending their views. Is it really necessary to blow someone out of the water just because they disagree with you? The Bible makes it simple when it says: "Be kind one to another" (Eph. 4:32). Does this commandment apply to us, or not?

(I'll admit I haven't always tempered my words in this column, and for that I am sorry. I'm learning that grace should season my words like salt. Please forgive me if my tone sounded self-righteous, condescending or judgmental.)

3. Let Jesus adjust your attitude. In the Old Testament, Moses went on top of a mountain and received the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus went on top of a mountain and gave His most quoted sermon—which focuses not on outward behavior but on attitudes of the heart. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to show love, mercy, gentleness and forgiveness. And in it Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. But today we prefer quick-witted comebacks, one-line zingers and downright ugliness to get our points across. Our hearts are full of resentment and hostility. We need the Beatitudes now more than ever.

4. Look for common ground in conversations. If we are going to reach unbelievers for Jesus, it certainly won't be by having a discussion about immigration policy or Obamacare. Some topics need to be avoided when trying to win someone's trust. Romans 12:18: "If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men." Steer the conversation away from divisive topics and avoid getting on your personal soapbox.

5. Let love be your guiding rule. Right after the apostle Paul told the Corinthians to "be bold like men" and "be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13), he added in verse 14: "Let all that you do be done with love." I fear many Christians today think it's weak to show love. But Paul tells us that loving people is the strongest, bravest, most powerful thing we can ever do—especially in a culture in which it's acceptable to be mean and offensive.

6. Embrace the priority of evangelism. I love to watch the 1970 film *The Cross and the Switchblade* because it stirs my passion to reach lost people. The clothes and the hairstyles in the movie are dated, but I'm inspired when I see how evangelist David Wilkerson risked his life to reach a group of drug-addicted gang members in a New York ghetto.

Wilkerson didn't go after those Puerto Rican youths with a political message. He didn't preach to them about policies on drugs or immigration. He preached Jesus, pure and simple. And that is what brought Nicky Cruz and his friends to salvation. When we are full of love, we focus on Jesus. Let's get back to the main thing and stop arguing about the issues that divide.
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