

Patriots of Heaven

When I was a teen I was fascinated with the Civil War. I read biographies on Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Stonewall Jackson. One of my favorite books depicted their detailed battle strategies. But what surprised me the most about the War Between the States was the fact that there were sincere believers on both sides of the conflict. How could brothers in Christ take up arms against one another and fight to the death to defend their cause?

Thankfully we are not on the verge of a civil war, but these are perilous times. Political identities seem locked in and we're not willing to show much charity to those who do not share our point of view. We are ripe for deep state conspiracy theories and gender freedom. We swing from crony capitalism to economic revolution. Extremism has become the norm. There is no room for compromise. No place for respect. No hope for dialogue, much less consensus, even among sincere believers. Once again, region and demographics, seem to be playing a part in driving us apart and creating hostility between Christians. The straightforward teaching of the Bible on how to live in a radically pluralistic culture is neither taught nor practiced in the Church today. We are clinging to an enculturated Christendom model of religion. I want to believe that the Faith is stronger than blood, stronger than race, stronger than politics, but given the intensity of our polarization, I'm not so sure.

“Over the past fifty years, our partisan identities have merged with our racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities,” writes Ezra Klein in *Why We're Polarized*. “Those merged identities have attained a weight that is breaking our institutions and tearing at the bonds that hold this country together.” It appears that Christians have embraced a stronger political identity at the expense of their weaker Christian identity. Instead of being transformed by a renewed mind in Christ, Christians readily define themselves by an ideological political agenda. Our polarized political identities have grown strong by drawing on the energy and passion that rightly belongs to Christ. We have conflated zeal for the Lord with political zeal.

It was true for the Civil War and it is true today. Where you are *from* tends to dictate where you *stand*. A shallow grasp of the Bible has provided little resistance to partisan political ideologies. Instead of thinking Christianly, professing believers tend to think secularly, echoing the partisan ideology of their cultural tribe. The power of negative partisanship energizes political identities and fires people up, giving them something to fight for. It is easy to track these group identities because what defines them may be as simple as a preference for Whole Foods versus Cracker Barrel. It is amazing how small and predictable the defining indicators may be. We are quick to divide into “we” and “they” camps over a host of trigger issues, which may be small in themselves but, as Ezra Klein argues, they become the only thing that matters.

The 19th century Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard identified this phenomenon in *Works of Love* as group-selfishness. Group-selfishness sacrifices God's love and “locks God out or at most takes him along for the sake of appearance.” Worldly self-love comes in many forms: ethnic compatibility, tribal affinity, party loyalty, social familiarity, and generational identity. But to love as Christ loves us is to know the difference between “group-selfishness” and being the neighbor Christ calls us to be. We are often too steeped in western individualism and “group

selfishness” to appreciate the Body of Christ, the one group that exists for the sake of all others.

God builds us into a community, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, to become “a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). The most profound relational reconciliation and sociological realignment ever imagined takes place in Christ. From the depths of human depravity we are raised up in Christ to the heights of salvation and from the hostility of human enmity we are delivered by the peace of Christ into the household of God. Christ is our peace and he has “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). We have a new tribal identity, an identity that does not merely coincide with other tribal identities, but redeems and transcends them for God’s justice and glory. All divisions caused by race, religion, tradition, class, nation, or culture are meant to be overcome in Christ. For all the animosity and hate, estrangement and alienation, discord and division, divorce and brokenness in this world, there is only one saving solution, Jesus Christ.

The sad and difficult truth is this: if Christians were thinking Christianly they would not support either party nor any candidate, *at least not with enthusiasm*. Jesus’ kingdom ethic produces resident aliens, disciples who are foreigners in their home culture, whose fidelity offends “progressives” and whose compassion provokes “conservatives.” No party should have the endorsement of so-called “evangelical leaders” on the basis of a short-list of select values. The witness of the Church should not be held hostage to a seat on the Supreme Court or to effective gun control laws.

The challenge before us is to live into our identity as God’s chosen people, holy, and dearly loved; to put off whatever belongs to our earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry; to rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying; to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. The apostle declared, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” and “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:5-16). Faith is the bond that binds our hearts together in Christian love. This is the Faith that is thicker than blood, stronger than race, greater than class. This is the Faith that trumps partisan politics and worships the King.