

Can Democrats and Republicans Live Together in Peace

Rich Nathan
September 3 & 4, 2016
Different Together
Matthew 22:15-22

I want to begin today by showing you a couple of video clips from this year's presidential primary debates. First from a Republican Primary Debate:

Republican Video

Now let's watch a video of a Democratic Primary Debate:

Democrat Video

I would remind you that these presidential debates were not between Democrats and Republicans. They were debates within the two parties.

How many of you have been absolutely disgusted by the style and tone, much less the substance, of this year's elections? How many of you have become really discouraged about the state of politics in America? We keep reading articles about reaching "a new low" in campaign rhetoric.

It's not just the candidates who are screaming at each other. I can't bear to watch a news program where you have a so-called debate between advocates for the two parties screaming, yelling, name-calling, and talking over each other.

Our entire nation is becoming more and more politically divided. It's even showing up in pastors' prayers. At the Republican National Convention, you may have heard a pastor pray this way:

I'm going to pray and I'm going to give the benediction. And you know why? Because we are electing a man in Donald Trump who believes in the name of Jesus Christ. And Republicans, we got to be united because our enemy is not other Republicans — but is Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party.

Let's pray together. Father God, in the name of Jesus, Lord we're so thankful for the life of Donald Trump. We're thankful that you are guiding him, that you are giving him the words to unite this party, this country, that we together can defeat the liberal Democratic Party, to keep us divided and not united. Because we are the United States of America, and we are the conservative party under God.

Wow. A pastor prays that God would help us to defeat our enemy who is not Satan or the world or sin. The pastor says the enemy is the other political party and its presidential nominee.

You know, today, Americans have an enormous range of options concerning what news sources we consume. What radio we listen to. What TV news shows we watch. Which internet sites we visit. Which newspapers and magazines we read. Many of us live in self-contained echo chambers that continually reinforce our perspectives and make us completely closed off to any argument from the other side.

And more and more Americans live in communities where our political beliefs are echoed by our neighbors. We are sorting ourselves by our political beliefs. Conservatives are choosing to live in conservative neighborhoods and liberals are choosing to live in more liberal neighborhoods.

I'm starting a new series that I'm calling "Different Together". With America increasingly fractured along political, economic, racial and even generational lines, is it possible for an individual to maintain his or her distinctive beliefs and identity and still unite around a vision of life that brings us all together?

You know, the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah said that when the Messiah comes here's what we will observe:

Isaiah 11:6-8

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,

the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

Maybe the wolf and the lamb will live together in peace, but the question I'd like to ask today is: can Democrats and Republicans live together in peace? That's the title of today's message.

Let's pray.

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

It’s commonplace today in New Testament scholarship to talk about placing Jesus in the context of first century Judaism. When we read these stories in the Gospels, we need to remember that we’re reading history. And Jesus was a first century Jew. But the truth is that in many respects, there is no such thing as first century Judaism. What we have instead is First century Judaisms – a wide variety of approaches to God’s Law, to tradition, to politics, and to culture. There were many Judaisms of Jesus’ day.

Now, I want you to see this. In verses 15-16, we read this:

Matthew 22:15-16

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.

Among the Judaisms of Jesus’ day were the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were anti-Roman and anti-government. They were looking forward to a Jewish State ruled over by a Jewish Messiah. The Pharisees were seeking a Messianic Kingdom ruled over by a Jewish Messianic King. So, they were opposed to paying taxes to Rome. The Herodians supported the reign of Herod, the puppet governor of the Romans. The Herodians were completely in favor of paying taxes to Rome. So, they come to Jesus – the Pharisees and the Herodians – with two completely opposite perspectives of government. One was anti-tax, one was pro-tax, and they asked this question:

Matthew 22:17

Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

And in this question, what we see I think

The Negative Approach to Politics:

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Co-opted

Do you understand what they're asking? They're saying, "Jesus, which party are you in favor of? The anti-tax party of the Pharisees or the pro-tax party of the Herodians. We want to co-opt you for partisan political purposes. So, are you for us or are you for the other guys?"

And, friend, this approach of attempting to co-opt Jesus and co-opt his followers in the church didn't just stay in the first century. We do exactly the same thing in the twenty-first century. We ask, "If Jesus voted for President, who would he vote for in the next election?" And some of his followers very confidently assert, "Jesus would obviously vote Republican because the Republicans are the pro-life party and with the Supreme Court at stake, nothing could be clearer than that Jesus would be a Republican."

Others would say, "Except that there are 2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor and lots of statements from Jesus about how we're supposed to welcome immigrants and care for those who are the least and the last. Jesus was always breaking down walls between people. It's obvious that if Jesus voted, he would vote Democrat."

"Except God created the Earth and throughout the Bible God regularly shows a concern about the Earth so it's obvious that God's Son, Jesus, would vote for the Green Party."

"Except that God prescribes a limited role for government. He has set up other institutions to govern other spheres of life – mainly the family and the church. So, there's no doubt that Jesus would vote Libertarian."

The Pharisees and Herodians of Jesus' day, the political parties of our day, are constantly trying to co-opt Jesus and they've been successful in co-opting Christians to believe that somehow Jesus can be squeezed into one of the existing political parties. The great temptation offered to the church over the last 2,000 years is to turn religion into a handmaiden of politics.

Christians, you want influence? You want power? Just bow down at the altar of partisan politics. Jesus, do you support the anti-tax party or the pro-tax party? Do you notice that Jesus almost never answers the questions that people pose to him? Instead, he has the very frustrating habit of answering questions with his own questions.

Here's what we read in verses 18-21:

Slide Matthew 22:18-21

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

In other words, don’t try to squeeze God into your little political boxes. Jesus says, “You can’t place God on your right or left political spectrum or your particular ways of dividing up the world. God doesn’t fit.”

That’s the negative approach to politics – politicians try to co-opt Christians or co-opt Jesus, to hook the engine of the church to their particular political rocket ship. That approach guarantees that Democrats and Republicans can never live together in peace.

What’s the positive approach to politics?

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The Positive Approach to Politics

Just for the sake of memory, I want to suggest that the positive approach that Jesus takes to political engagement can be listed under four headings, each beginning with the letter C. Negatively, Jesus says, “Don’t let yourself be co-opted”. Christians, don’t let yourselves or your churches be used as a tool for any politician. Don’t let yourself be used. So, what’s the first C of our positive engagement with politics?

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Character

This week is my 29th anniversary of being pastor here at Vineyard Columbus. Every presidential election year, since I’ve been pastoring, I’ve had people come up to me and say, “How should I vote? How do you think a Christian should vote?” It’s interesting that Jesus in the Bible doesn’t tell us how to vote, but he does tell us how to live. He’s not nearly as concerned with our votes as he is with our values. He believes that our influence doesn’t come primarily from our political convictions, but from our personal character.

If you look at the most famous sermon ever preached, The Sermon on the Mount, look at Jesus' description of the character of his followers. As we go through this, ask yourself: first, how did Jesus think Christians would influence the world? And second, is Jesus' description of his followers the public face of Christianity in America right now? For example, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says,

Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Jesus said to his followers – your influence will be directly related to your display of mercy. Is the public face of Christianity in America that Christians are merciful people? That if you've screwed up, if you've messed up, if you've done something that you're ashamed of and you meet a Christian or you go to church that you are probably going to be shown mercy? Your mistakes aren't going to be thrown in your face, you're going to be treated kindly. Is mercy the public face of Christianity in America?

Or how about this one?

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Is the public face of Christianity in America that Christians are all about making peace, breaking down dividing walls, bringing people together, trying to figure out how we can get along? How can we build a more inclusive society? A more welcoming society? Christians are folks who don't start wars, they seek an end to wars.

Consider:

Matthew 5:32

³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Is the public face of Christianity in America, "You know, those Christians, they stay married? If you want to know about persevering in marriage just hang around some Christians."

How about?

Matthew 5:37

³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Is the public face of Christianity in America that Christians are people whose word you can count on? When a Christian makes a deal with you in business, you can take it to the bank.

See, the biggest threat to Christianity in America does not come from outside the church. The biggest threat to Christianity in America comes from inside the church from Christians who don't look like or sound remotely close to Jesus' description of what his followers ought to be like in the Sermon on the Mount.

What the world needs most is not another political agenda from the church. Surveys tell us the reason so many people, especially millennials, are leaving the church is because Christians act like just another political interest group fighting for their piece of the pie. What the world needs most is an attractive alternative to the fallen world of politics. The world is desperate for a model of the good life embodied in a community of people. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

People are desperate to see a community of people in which old and young, singles and married, parents and children, are living thriving, vibrant lives together in peace: black, white, Asian and Hispanic, Democrats and Republicans. So, I ask you again, what is the public face of Christianity in America? What if we Christians took Jesus seriously and tried to actually put into practice the Sermon on the Mount! "You know what, I don't necessarily believe what those Christians believe about God. But the truth is that those Christians live better lives than I do. I really admire their families. I really admire their marriages. I love having a Christian work for me. You have to hand it to those Christians. They care about our city. They mentor kids in the public schools. Whenever there's a need in the community, the first thing I think is let's call the church! People are hungry, let's call the church. There's a conflict between the police and the African-American community, let's call the church because the church is a place of understanding. The church will show us how to listen to each other. They'll show us how to show respect to each other.

Followers of Christ, listen to me now. Jesus gave us something so much more powerful and influential than our attachment to some political party, an incredibly attractive way to live that would elicit the admiration of the world if we did it. I fear that we have like

Esau in the Old Testament, traded in our birthright as the Right of the world for a bowl of lentils sold to us by a political party.

How do we positively engage in politics? How do Democrats and Republicans live together? The first C is character, the second C is

Civility

In this election year, a number of candidates have said incredibly disparaging things about different people and different groups and then justified them with a rejection of political correctness. It's become commonplace in the last 25 years to say really harsh and negative things about someone or some group and then say, "Well, I just refuse to be captive to political correctness."

The term of political correctness has a long history and it means different things to different people. But to me, I think that recent letters from the president of the University of Chicago and the Dean of Students at the University of Chicago shed light on a kind of political correctness that ought to be rejected and that civility ought to be embraced.

The President of the University of Chicago recently spoke out in the plainest language against the stifling of opinions that differ from politically correct opinions on campus. He said,

Free speech is at risk at the very institution where it should be assured: the university. Invited speakers are disinvited because a segment of a university community deems them offensive, while other orators are shouted down for similar reasons. Demands have been made that assigned readings in some courses be eliminated because they might make some people uncomfortable. Worst of all, such demands have been supported by university administrators. In other words, at a university.

What I would suggest in America as a whole, is that we not shy away from free inquiry or the pursuit of truth or discussing various topics because some politically powerful group shouts us down. But here's the distinction that needs to be drawn. It was drawn by the University of Chicago's Dean of Students,

Members of our community are encouraged to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn, without fear of censorship. But we must show civility and mutual respect to each other. Freedom of expression does not mean the freedom to harass or threaten others.

In other words, an attack on political correctness is not some blanket absolution for a loss of civility.

What does civility mean? Civility is public politeness. It simply means that we display tact, moderation, and good manners towards people who are different than us, or with whom we disagree. Civility is not just public, it is internal. Civility is a heart-commitment in which we want to see other people flourish. With civility we're talking about basic respect for others, respecting other people at high-priced restaurants enough that you don't ruin their meal by coming in from the gym wearing gym shorts and a sweaty tank top where they can see the hair of your armpits. You don't walk into a fancy restaurant wearing flip flops showing your dirty feet. Civility is simply the respect we owe each other.

Why should we be civil? Let me go back to Jesus' statements in Matthew 22. You'll recall in this story that Jesus was asked, "Which political party do you support, the anti-tax party or the pro-tax party?" How does Jesus answer? He says, "Show me a coin." So, they brought him a denarius.

Matthew 22:20-21

20 and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

21 "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

The coin had the image of Caesar on it. We treat money as all-important, and the reason we often divide from each other is who shows the most honor to this coin, who gets the biggest share of the money. But the coin is just a piece of metal. Jesus asks, "Whose image is on the coin?" Caesar's image. Then give to the government what belongs to the government. Pay your taxes.

But if I could indulge in a little bit of pastoral imagination. I imagine Jesus pointing to a person in the crowd and by implication he says, "Whose image is on this person?" Every Jew would know that human beings are made in the image of God. So, give to God what is God's. You show honor to money because it has Caesar's image on it. Show more honor to people because they carry the image of God.

Why should we treat other people with respect, even people we really disagree with? Because every human being is made in the image of God; your parents who keep sending you political blogs that make your blood boil because you find them offensive; the racist who says on TV that the white race is the superior race and whites deserve to rule; or old Fred whose lying drunk in a doorway and reeks of alcohol – every human being is made in the image of God. Even politicians from the other political party that you really dislike.

I want to show you a brief video of two men who are a part of Vineyard Columbus. One is a Republican and the other is a Democrat. Let's watch the video.

Video of Drew and Jack

- It's encouraging to hear that people can still be civil and even friends despite their radically different viewpoints.
- We would love to hear more stories like Jack and Drew's.
- If you have a story like this please share it with the hashtag #DifferentTogetherVC

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#DifferentTogetherVC

- Take a picture with someone who is an unlikely friend and post it on Instagram or share about your friendship on Twitter. Maybe make a short video with you and your friend and share it with us on Facebook.
- We would love to spread the word around our community and social media that we can be Different, Together.

I would love to have people in our church and in our small groups relate to each other the way that these two men do. Whatever differences in political opinion, however strongly held our political ideologies are, these guys are a model of the way we ought to relate.

Can Democrats and Republicans live together in peace? If they are people of character. If they conduct themselves with civility. And here's the third C.

Contact

I read a fascinating article about the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention which drafted the US Constitution back in 1787. Now, these men met for four months in the small city of Philadelphia in a hot room in the summer to pound out what became known as the United States Constitution. They were forming a country and writing its governing charter. A charter that was unlike anything that the world had ever seen before. They succeeded in writing that Constitution. How did they pull this off?

They were very different from each other. There were Anglicans and Presbyterians. Quakers and Unitarians. Christians and Deists. Farmers and urban dwellers. They were from big states and small. They had very different economic interests, very different political perspectives. How did they hammer out a Constitution?

Can you imagine if you put the Congress of today in a room together for four months and said, “Create a new government.” Would any one of them be left alive after even four days? A historian said that one of the secrets to the drafting of the US Constitution is that at the end of every day, these very different men would retire to the local boarding houses where they ate together and drank beer together and roomed together. What held the Constitutional Convention together was that these men had contact with each other that went beyond their business dealings and political wrangling.

There is a theory in Sociology called “The Contact Hypothesis” which says that the best way to improve relations between groups that experience conflict is to bring those groups together in situations that lower barriers and promote personal interaction. That’s the contact hypothesis. It’s been tested and proven hundreds of times in the last 60 years. If you bring people together under the right conditions where we promote personal interaction and friendship, prejudice will break down, stereotypes will break down. Appreciation and mutual understanding will rise.

Haven’t you seen this in your own life, friend? Maybe you grew up in a neighborhood where racially everyone was like you. You are African-American and you didn’t know any white people. You were white, you didn’t know any African-Americans or any Hispanics. Maybe you grew up with a lot of stereotypes about what this other race would be like, but when you got older you actually became friends with someone who was of that other race. They didn’t fit the stereotypes, the generalizations, the fears you had. These things began to break down. The contact hypothesis.

Now, brothers and sisters, I believe that a church like ours with our incredible diversity is the perfect environment to break down our prejudices, our generalizations, our fears, the harsh opinions that we have about folks with a different political perspective. One of the main reasons that Jesus invented the church is to break down dividing walls.

John 17:20-21

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

This was the Apostle Paul’s vision for the church as well – a place where dividing walls could be broken down.

Galatians 3:26-28

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor

Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Close contact with people and the building of friendships across political differences can especially happen in small groups. Christian small groups are the perfect environment to break down dividing walls. Which leads to my last C. Can Democrats and Republicans live together in peace? Yes, if they have Christian character. If they conduct themselves with civility. If they have real contact with each other especially in the context of the church. Here's the last C. If they are:

Christ-Centered

Jesus is not a Conservative Republican. And he's not a Liberal Democrat. He's not a Libertarian or a follower of the Green Party. Again, let's look at the text:

Matthew 22:20-21

20 and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

21 "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Give to God what is God's. Jesus is saying, "Don't give your ultimate loyalty – your heart, your passion, the very core of your being – to anything other than God."

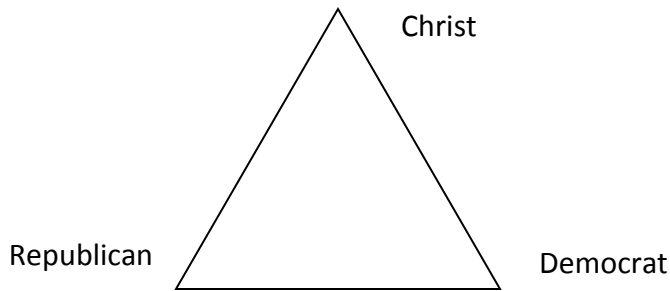
Friend, for many Christians in America our political affiliations have become an idol.

You know you have an idol in your life if when that thing is removed you are devastated, you are destroyed. If your house burns down, or you lose your job, you may be really sad. You say, "What I'm going through is really hard." But if your possessions or your job has become an idol, you say, "This is the end. There is no hope. My life is over!"

Currently, politics, according to Pastor Tim Keller from Redeemer's Church in New York, has become an idol in America. Here is what Keller writes:

When either party wins an election, a certain percentage of the losing side talks openly about leaving the country. They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and for the work of the Gospel. When their political leaders are out of power, they experience a death. They believe that if their policies and people are not in power, everything will fall apart...In our politics [we believe] that opponents are not simply mistaken, they are absolutely evil.

Let me show you a picture as we close today.



I've often drawn a triangle like this when I've done premarital counseling. And I say to people, "Look, so many folks when they get married, they try to convince their partner of the rightness of their perspective. You need to move over to where I am at. But if you really want to get close together and you want to be close to Christ. Better yet, you move close to Christ. Guess what happens? You move closer to each other."

The same thing is true in politics. If someone is a Republican and gets close to Christ, if someone is a Democrat and gets close to Christ, guess what? They are going to get close to each other.

Jesus gives those of us who are Democrats and those of us who are Republicans the ultimate secret to live together in peace – Jesus says: make me the center of your life. Make me the center of your relationship with each other and politics will not separate you. Republicans and Democrats, you will be able to live together in peace!

Let's pray.

Can Democrats and Republicans Live Together in Peace

Rich Nathan
September 3 & 4, 2016
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Matthew 22:15-22

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