

POLITICS, POLARISATION AND CHRISTIANITY

Many commentators are saying our society is becoming more and more polarised. We see it in America -deeply entrenched polarisation both politically and theologically. It is a polarisation that fractures relationships and churches and can end up expressing itself in violence, verbally and physically.

The fear is that this polarisation is spreading to NZ society. We saw an example of it with Covid. Both society and the church became deeply divided over essentially an issue of public health. It would be hard to argue that was a core theological issue and yet the issue of vaccination and the government response to Covid divided families, churches and society. There would not be a church in the country that did not lose people over this issues, regardless of what stance they took.

We see polarisation in NZ between Maori / pakeha, around i gender, rural / urban, rich / poor, vax/ anti vax Left / right. Govt vs freedom.

Polarisation is “the thought constraint that creates opposite poles between groups. This comes from the fear of certain identity based differences that lead to avoidance and us vs them thinking.

I want to bring to bear some fundamental theological truths into this issue and look at how this should impact our behaviour.

Theology of Humanity

1. All are made in the image of God. This is what defines them not some single issue on which they might have a view. This is the primary lens we need to view people through as Christians. Gen 1:16
2. All are sinners. That means you have blind spots and areas where you are deceived. Rom 3:23
3. All need God's grace and mercy. We can't earn God's approval. This removes all pride from us. Eph 2:5

Theology of the world

4. The world is a mixture of good and evil Matt 13:28-29, Also teaching in Revelation.
5. There are spiritual powers at work. Eph 6:12
6. Jesus message will bring conflict. Luke 12: 51-52 We just have to be careful that division is not because we are being obnoxious judgmental people. But because of Jesus.
7. God has a deep heart for the poor. Is 58:6-7. Jesus said I have come to bring good news the poor, relieve for the oppressed. Luke 4:18-19 When we stand up for the poor, this will bring us into conflict with deeply vested interests.

8. Governments and laws don't change hearts. Paul's says the OT law shows us what is wrong but is powerless to change us. Rom 3:20 So we could have the best laws in the world, but people will continue to kill people, and defraud people, and be greedy, and pollute the planet.

9. There are no simple solutions to the issues of the world before Christ's return. We know the world to come has no sin or suffering but that is not the case now. Romans 8:20-21. A Biblical example of this is the Bible's teaching on divorce. Moses allowed divorce, and Jesus reiterated this. Mat 19:3-9 Why? Although God hates divorce, it sometimes can be the lesser of the two evils. It is wrong to keep a couple together in a relationship that is abusive or where one party has destroyed the trust through adultery. So this is a compromise. Politics is about compromise in a sinful world.

Theology of Government

10. Governments are God's idea. Rom 13:1
11. We are to pray for leaders. 1 Tim 2:2
12. We are to submit to government. Rom 13:1-2
13. We can appeal to government Paul appealed to Caesar for this release. i.e. he used the legal channels available to him to try to seek justice. In a democracy such as NZ we can appeal to the govt through peaceful protest, through our MPs through voting. Acts 25:21

Now I realize that was quite a bit to get through. But it is a good example of how to use the Bible when faced with complex issues. Not by proof verses. But by stepping back from the issue and saying,. What theological truths are relevant in this situation? Once you have them in place, then you consider how that should impact ones behavior, ones actions. Most of Paul's letters are classic examples of this. He starts with the theological truths at the front half of the book and then in the second half he says “Because of those truths, this is how you should behave.”

What I have outlined in this mini theological survey, very few Christians would disagree with. It is fairly basic theology. So if we put all this together in our world today what are the implications for how we behave as Christians in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised and fractured.

Tentative Conclusions.

A. Don't label people. When we label people, we reduce them to a single issue. People are more complex than that. We should never define a person based on their view on an issue of debate. That is devaluing. Not respecting them as a person made in the image of God. Prov 12:15



B. Debate ideas not people. Conflict is not a failure of community, it is the process of being community. There is always going to be differences in community. We need to learn to debate ideas yet often we can feel threatened by this. It is much easier to rubbish a person, or judge what a person is saying on their personality. Prov 18:2

C. Listen to other views. Because we recognize we are sinners, this means we don't have the full truth but part of it. Prov 18:17. To think we always totally right is the exact opposite of humility. What is the other person saying? Why is this important to them? What are they seeing that I can not? They will bring a life experience that is very different from your own.

D. Speak words that bring life, not death. It was appalling to see the things Christians said about Jacinda Ardern and other politicians during the pandemic. We need to be so careful about how we speak about each other and our leaders, who are appointed by God. Prov. 18:21 We can inflame debates and ruin relationship with our words.

E. Unite on essentials, liberty on non essentials, love in all. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies. Luke 6:27

F. The spiritual disciplines of worship, communion, prayer for one another, and practical support for one another are the glue that holds us together as people.

When we come together to worship, in spite of our differences, we are acknowledging that all our views, ideas are actually under the Lordship of Christ. We are bowing down to the one who holds the universe in his hands

When we gather around the communion table, we are acknowledging the work of Jesus on the cross. God's grace freely given to us as sinners. We are all equal before the cross. Who am I to judge my fellow believer when I am a sinner? Who am I to think my views are better when we are both recipients of God's grace. Take the log out of our own eye first.

When we pray for one another, we are recognizing another person's need and asking God to bless them. They are not my enemy but a fellow struggler trying to get through life with all its pain and heartache. Sickness and death and tragedy are no respecters of views.

When we love each other with practical love we are acknowledging our dependence on one another. We need each other. And love has no boundaries. When a person shows you love at a vulnerable time, you are not worried about what their political views are or if they got vaccinated. You are just grateful for their love

This is the power in these simple acts. This is why it is so important to come together as God's people. There is power in coming together in these ways that should actually undercut society's increased polarisation. In humility and trust we can truly listen to each other, and learn how to do conflict well. Learn how to disagree and love each other.

May we speak but with humility and respect

May we act, not in selfish ways but in interests of those less well off

May we be a people united around Jesus Christ and what he has done for us.

If this brings us into conflict, know that Jesus said it would

But may we not demonize those we disagree with, inside the church or out

May we not act as if we know everything and simplify what is complex

May we not discredit the name of Jesus by how we act to those who hold different views

May God give us wisdom in how to be agents of reconciliation in a world that is deeply fractured

Maybe we be agents of salt, and light, and love to all we encounter.

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REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

- Do you agree with the social commentators who say we are becoming more polarised? Can you give examples you have seen?
- Looking back now, why do you think Covid was so divisive within churches?
- Why do we often get so heated about things that are not core theology? Or about politics?
- Is polarisation always bad?
- What labels are used within Christianity that are really unhelpful?
- Discuss the statement. "Conflict is not a failure of community it is the process of being community." Is this too idealistic?
- Is it possible to hold very different views on issues and still remain in good relationship with people?
- Why does the church often seem really bad at dealing with conflict and differences of views? Why should it be the best place to deal with these things?
- What do we need to do to make the church a place that can model how to do conflict well, and still maintain unity?
- What challenges you the most about this sermon?



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