

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON  
**HOSTILE  
PARTISANSHIP**



LIBERTY MCARTOR



# HOSTILE PARTISANSHIP



In *The Weekly Standard* in 2017, writer Andrew Cline said that as a young man, he frequently shared pizza with a liberal friend, even though they “worked on opposite ends of many political issues.”<sup>1</sup> To befriend someone working against your own political goals may seem unfathomable to many Republicans and Democrats today. That’s because political opponents are no longer mere people with different opinions. They’re the enemy, and they’re evil. At least, that’s what a collection of recent studies and polls reveal about the modern partisan mindset.

Before our eyes, this way of thinking is morphing into a frightening blueprint for action. As Christians it's possible, even tempting, to participate in the verbal and physical conflict of our time. And this is where we must pause. As our culture becomes more hate-obsessed — as vitriolic words breed violence — it's up to us to step back and reflect. Are we looking for identity in something other than Christ? Are we approaching civic engagement from a Christian understanding of the common good, or are we placing our hope in earthly kings? Answering these questions will help us navigate the present hostility and lead the way to a healthier political climate.

## **Troubling Trends**

In his column, Cline cited a 2016 Pew Research Center report showing that only 3 percent of Republicans considered Democrats to be moral, and 9 percent of Democrats said the same of Republicans. A 2019 paper by political scientists Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason titled "Lethal Mass Partisanship" reveals even more troubling statistics:

- Over 42% of Democrats and Republicans view their political opponents as “downright evil”
- Nearly 1 in 5 members of each party said their political opponents “lack the traits to be considered fully human.”
- 20% of Democrats and 16% of Republicans admitted to sometimes thinking, “We’d be better off as a country if large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died.”
- 18.3% of Democrats and 13.8% of Republicans said violence would be justified if the other party wins the 2020 presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

“It is hard to form friendships with people we believe to be morally corrupt,” writes Cline. “But the consequences of such a belief go far beyond that. When we view the other party as immoral, we are less prone to seek compromise. When we refuse to seek compromise, we render our system of representative government ineffective.”

Even beyond missed friendships and ineffective government, the consequences

of such thinking are deadly. A 17-year-old shot three men, killing two, in a clash in Kenosha, Wisconsin, amid protests following the August 2020 police shooting of Jacob Blake.<sup>3</sup> The same month in Portland, a Trump supporter was shot and killed, following a night of confrontation between members of far-right political groups and Black Lives Matter protesters.<sup>4</sup> A witness claimed that rioters celebrated his death.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Louisiana Rep. Steve Scalise was shot and injured in an attack on Republicans playing baseball; a North Carolina man fired an AR-15 in a pizza shop in Washington, DC, motivated by conspiracy theories about a Democrat-run pedophile ring; racially motivated mass shooters have targeted places like Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and a Wal-Mart in El Paso.

Criminals, bigots, and fringe fanatics will always exist. But in an increasingly polarized society, where political opponents are viewed as “downright evil,” acts of politically motivated violence will become more common.

How did we get here? There isn't just

one answer, but multiple contributing (and related) factors are clear. Let's consider the secularization of America, the loss of genuine human community, and the rise of a worldview that places people into rigid categories of "good" or "bad."

### **Less Religion, Less Civility**

In 2017 for *The Atlantic*,<sup>6</sup> columnist Peter Beinart argued that, contrary to what many predicted, Americans' abandonment of organized religion has had a negative affect on our political discourse. He cites Public Religion Research Institute data showing that "the percentage of white Republicans with no religious affiliation has nearly tripled since 1990," and connects this to the rise of white nationalism on the right.

"Whatever the reason, when cultural conservatives disengage from organized religion, they tend to redraw the boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasizing race and nation," he observes. But the secularization is happening on the left as well, among both white and black people. Beinart notes the difference between the religious rhetoric of

the 1960's Civil Rights Movement and the often more militant tone of the modern Black Lives Matter movement.

"For years, political commentators dreamed that the culture war over religious morality that began in the 1960s and '70s would fade," Beinart concludes. "And the more secular, more ferociously national and racial culture war that has followed is worse."

### **"Anti-Tribes" Replace Community**

Sen. Ben Sasse argues that Americans' "community cohesion" is suffering. "Partisan tribalism is statistically higher than at any point since the Civil War," he writes in his book *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—And How To Heal*.<sup>7</sup> According to Sasse, who draws on a wealth of sociological research, "cultural fragmentation, technological developments, and economic upheaval have undermined the feeling of togetherness that Americans shared just a few short decades ago."<sup>8</sup> He states:

As natural, healthy tribes—family, friends, workplace, and neighborhood—have crumbled, we've turned

to anti-tribes: an us-versus-them politics and a rage-fueled media complex that exploits our divisions for clicks.<sup>9</sup>

## **A Wrong View of Good vs. Evil**

The “us-versus-them” mentality is something Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt explore in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions And Bad Ideas Are Setting Up A Generation For Failure*.

Lukianoff and Haidt identify “three great untruths” that have formed the worldview of millennials. One is that “life is a battle between good people and evil people.”<sup>10</sup>

“In tribal mode, we seem to go blind to arguments and information that challenge our team’s narrative,” they write.<sup>11</sup> “Identifying a common enemy is an effective way to enlarge and motivate your tribe.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, our fellow Americans are abandoning organized religion. They’re feeling lost and lonely. So they form “tribes” around common enemies rather than common humanity. The result is increasingly hostile social discourse, and violence.

The authors cited above offer ideas on how to combat this polarization. Sasse advocates a sort of localism as an antidote to anti-tribes:

Imagine if just 10 percent of the time we spend angrily tracking national political news were redirected to volunteering at our kids' or grandkids' school, serving at a soup kitchen, visiting a nursing home. We'd be community-rich.<sup>13</sup>

Lukianoff and Haidt argue, "We should be doing everything we can to turn down the tribalism and turn up the sense of common humanity."<sup>14</sup>

Christians should embrace these ideas, but we'll only succeed if we start from a biblical understanding of our role in society.

### **Humility, Patience, and Tolerance**

What is our role? To be sure, part of our duty is to call out evil practices and policies. Author Timothy Keller and legal scholar John Inazu write in *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference*:

If our culture cannot form people who can speak with both conviction and empathy across deep differences, then it becomes even more important for the church to use its theological and spiritual resources to produce such people.<sup>15</sup>

And yet, conviction *without* empathy will only worsen the polarization. We must reject the idea that political opponents, even those who endorse evil, are irredeemable enemies against whom our only goal is utter defeat.

This approach is far from a “live and let live” mentality. As Keller and Inazu remind us, “Jesus didn’t tell us to tolerate our enemies. He says to love them.”<sup>16</sup>

Love means engagement — which means building relationships as well as speaking boldly and honestly. “Our engagement with the world will lead us into unfamiliar relationships and risky spaces,” Keller and Inazu acknowledge. “There can and will be costs. But we look to Jesus, who engaged the world, not just at the possible risk of his comfort but at the sure and certain cost of his life.”<sup>17</sup>

While engaging, Christians should “embody humility, patience, and tolerance.” (Keller and Inazu define tolerance as “a practical enduring of beliefs and practices that we do not share. It does not mean accepting those beliefs or approving those practices.”)<sup>18</sup> They continue:

All three of these practices—humility, patience, and tolerance—demonstrate a principled empathy in which we speak “the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). The ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes requires humility, and the impetus for doing so requires patience rooted in hope and tolerance grounded in love.<sup>19</sup>

### **Christian Conduct In the Earthly City**

Theologian Kristen Deede Johnson harkens back to Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo, who dealt with Christian engagement in a secular world.

“Ensuring the success of one particular political order is not, in Augustine’s view, incumbent upon us as Christians,” Johnson writes. “Political systems may come and

go, but our citizenship in the heavenly city remains.”<sup>20</sup> She goes on:

Even as we take this big-picture approach to our citizenship, we are called to be involved in the earthly cities in which we live. The earthly city can achieve certain goods, and we as pilgrims can and should contribute to those goods, while recognizing that they are not the ultimate goods for which we were created and redeemed. ... Augustine echoes Jeremiah’s counsel to the exiles to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which they lived.<sup>21</sup>

Writing to Roman Christians, Paul advised “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). What happens when we try to live peaceably, but are “canceled” because of our faith — or worse? Regardless of the exact situation, our example is always Jesus, who forgave his killers even as he hung on the cross. Love — first for God and therefore for our enemies — should motivate us.

Simply, our thoughts, actions, and

interactions should flow from a heart that does the following:

- Places its hope in God alone.
- Understands our earthly citizenship in the context of our eternal home.
- Is motivated by love.
- Seeks peace where possible.
- Desires the common good of all, not just those with whom we agree or to whom we can easily relate.

We must also lead the way by collaborating across cultural, philosophical, and faith divides. We can look for common ground and forge partnerships to better fulfill biblical mandates, like caring for the oppressed. All the while, we must keep in mind that we'll never mesh completely with any earthly political agenda, and we'll never achieve perfection in our nation. That's okay, because as Jesus tells us, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

## **Additional Resources**

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## **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Cline, "The Political Has Gotten A Little Too Personal," The Weekly Standard, June 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/the-political-has-gotten-a-little-too-personal>

<sup>2</sup> Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, "Lethal Mass Partisanship: Prevalence, Correlates, & Electoral Contingencies," January 2019, [https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe\\_mason\\_ncap-sa\\_2019\\_-\\_lethal\\_partisanship\\_-\\_final\\_lmedit.pdf](https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe_mason_ncap-sa_2019_-_lethal_partisanship_-_final_lmedit.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Teo Armus, Mark Berman, and Griff Witte, "Before a fatal shooting, teenage Kenosha suspect idolized the police," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/27/kyle-rittenhouse-kenosha-shooting-protests/>

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Treisman, "1 Killed in Portland Amid Clashes Between Pro-Trump Caravan and Counterprotesters," *NPR*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/08/30/907699226/1-killed-in-portland-amid-clashes-between-pro-trump-caravan-and-counterprotester>

<sup>5</sup> Talia Kaplan, "Fatal Portland Shooting witness: 'Appalled' by 'people in the street celebrating' victim's death," *Fox News*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/fatal-portland-shooting-witness-appalled-people-celebrating>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith," *The Atlantic*, April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking->

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—And How To Heal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 13

<sup>8</sup> Sasse, *Them*, 135

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions And Bad Ideas Are Setting Up A Generation For Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 14

<sup>11</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 62

<sup>12</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 66

<sup>13</sup> Sasse, *Them*, 250

<sup>14</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 73

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Keller and John Inazu, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2020), xix

<sup>16</sup> Keller and Inazu, *Uncommon Ground*, xviii

<sup>17</sup> Keller and Inazu, *Uncommon Ground*, xxi

<sup>18</sup> Keller and Inazu, *Uncommon Ground*, xvii

<sup>19</sup> Keller and Inazu, *Uncommon Ground*, xvii

<sup>20</sup> Kristen Deede Johnson, "The Theologian," in *Uncommon Ground*, 8

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



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