

“One Nation, Under God, Indivisible...”

“I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America...(say it).....one nation, under God, indivisible...”. The *United* States of America? *One* nation under God? *Indivisible*? Are we? In many ways, we are not united, not one nation, and not indivisible . There is deep division, and painful polarization, within our country.

Now, there has always been dissent. People on different sides of issues. And there have been times in our history when dissent has been particularly intense and sharp – like during the Vietnam War. But aren't we experiencing a similar degree of dividedness in the U.S. today? There is tremendous polarization *politically*, between the far left and far right...*economically*, between rich and poor as the middle class is shrinking...*morally and religiously*, between those who hold to traditional religious values and the growing segment of Americans who claim no religious affiliation and have a more secular outlook.

Let's think more about this lack of unity in American society: how it plays out, and what we might do to begin to overcome it. I'll use two Scriptures as a backdrop for this message. The first is Jeremiah 6:16 “Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good ways lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” The second Scripture is from the prophet Isaiah, in a passage that seems opposite from the one from Jeremiah: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Do you see the contrast here? The *prophet Jeremiah* says to the nation, “Look back to the ancient paths, where the good is, and walk in those time-tested ways.” But the *prophet Isaiah* says, “Don't look back at what was, but see the new thing God is doing right now before your eyes.” Now these represent two differing messages from God spoken within different historical situations. There are times when we need to resist change, and hold on to the old ways if we're going to do the right thing. And there are times when we need to let go of the old ways and perceive how God is in the changes taking place in front of our eyes. Let's try to see how these Scriptures may apply to what is happening in the U.S. today.

One of most critical division we see today is the split between those who want to hold on to our nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, and those opting for a more secular approach to life. Our nation was founded on Judeo-Christian values and principles, rooted in the Bible. You see this when you read the writings of our country's founders. But somewhere in the latter half of the 20th century *secular humanism* began to take root in our country.

I'm sure there are a number of causes for this growing secularism, but much of its impetus came from academia – college and university campuses – where liberal professors began to promote their “progressive” agenda. With secularism, humans, not God, are at the center of life. The Bible is no longer regarded as a sacred, divinely inspired book. Moral absolutes rooted in God's laws give way to a moral relativism where we decide for ourselves what's right and what's wrong. So, we are not “one nation, *under God*.”

One of the spinoffs of this growing secularism is the push to remove God and religion from public life. Religious symbols and practices, such as the Bible, prayer, the Ten Commandments,

the mention of God, are taboo in public places like schools, government, the workplace. The argument used is that there has to be a “wall of separation between church and state.” Many Americans think this phrase and concept is in our Constitution. But it isn’t! (In our adult Sunday School class a few months ago we watched a video where someone told about a member of Congress, a lawyer, who even thought this phrase “a wall of separation between church and state” was in the Constitution)!

This phrase actually came about when the Danbury Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, sent a letter to newly elected President, Thomas Jefferson, in 1801, expressing concern that their religious liberties would be denied since their state constitution did not explicitly protect their right to practice *their* religious beliefs, nor forbid the government from establishing a national religion. Jefferson wrote back assuring these Baptists that their religious freedom *would be* protected and that no denomination would become the established religion of the nation *because there would be a wall of separation between church and state.*

That interpretation of Jefferson’s words held until 1947, when the Supreme Court *misinterpreted* Jefferson’s use of the phrase “wall of separation between church and state” to mean that we keep God and religion out of public life (government, schools, etc.). So, we are saddled with that misunderstanding of the Constitution today! Actually, the First Amendment to the Constitution says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In other words, Congress shall not choose any religion to be the nation’s religion, nor shall our government stop anyone from practicing their religion.

So, we have this split between those who want to base our laws and conduct as a nation on traditional values rooted in the Christian Bible, and those who want to change that.

Here, I believe, is where need to hear what God says through the prophet Jeremiah: “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good ways lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16). We are at a crossroads in our culture. We are fighting a culture war that will determine our future as a country. Consider this: As our nation becomes more and more secularized, are we better off? If we leave God out of the picture, is life better? If we follow our own instincts and ignore God’s laws, what happens to morals, manners, common decency? I believe history shows that when a people disregard God’s laws and truth found in the Scriptures, that that nation begins to crumble and decay from within, and ultimately speeds up the demise of that nation and its people.

Let’s think for a minute about the polarization taking place today in the political arena. Do you remember the days when Democrats and Republicans could meet in the middle and work out compromises and pass bills for the good of the country? Those days are pretty much absent right now, aren’t they?

On the right, we have the far right Republicans with their ultra conservative agenda. On the left, there are the far left “progressives” in the Democratic Party. These two are at war with each

other. At times, ultra conservative Republicans, like the Tea Party group, seem to be out of touch with how society has changed. They sometimes make ridiculous statements expressing views that would turn the clock back on advancements we have made in terms of women's rights or minority rights. An example of this recently was when it came to light that the president of a leading Baptist seminary said that women should stay in an abusive relationship.

But on the other end of the spectrum, we have far left progressives, who hold some views that really are way, way out! Not long ago I saw a video where a speaker was addressing a group of students at a college. She pointed out that there are gender differences between males and females. At that, a number of students got up and walked out of the room!

Some of the radical left views are in opposition to the whole free enterprise system. Bernie Sanders was a candidate in the last election. Sanders is pretty much of a socialist. Many young people, in particular, seemed to be enamored with Sanders, but when some of these young adults were asked what socialism means, or what a socialist society looks like, they had no idea. Bill Easum, a United Methodist pastor and church consultant, predicts that by the year 2050, the United States will be a socialist country. He pointed to a survey here 44% of Millennials said they prefer socialism to capitalism.

So, there is a tremendous polarization politically, where extreme liberals and ultra conservatives are waging ideological warfare on our nation's turf.

Of course, the news media feeds into this political polarization in our country. Where can you go to get news that's unbiased, and not politically motivated? Good question! The mainstream (NBC, CBS, ABC, MSNBC, CNN) are predominantly liberal. Fox News claims to be unbiased, but it isn't – it favors Republicans. During the 8 years of Barack Obama's presidency the Fox News people relentlessly attacked the President, just as major networks today doggedly trash Donald Trump. This same political bias is true of newspapers and political columnists – you know pretty much which side they will take. So, the day of fair, objective news reporting is pretty much gone.

Neither political party has all the answers to our country's problems. Remember: God is not a Republican. God is not a Democrat! God is an Independent! Big time!

Both sides have something to contribute to our nation's welfare. For instance, there are some things *liberals* have brought about in our country that are good: the "Me-Too" movement, raising our country's awareness of sexual harassment and holding men accountable...championing the civil rights of gay men and women. Younger people, generally, are more liberal in their views. This is not all bad. Younger Americans don't hold some of the prejudices that older people have held. They are more accepting of gay people, and of racial and ethnic minorities, and mixed marriages, etc. We can learn from them. I believe God is in this, and the words of Isaiah are appropriate: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Political *conservatives* also play an important role, in calling us to hold on to some of the treasured ways that have shaped and maintained our country's greatness, and championing the rights of the unborn, and the rights of Christians in a culture becoming more hostile to Christians and the church. Here it's good to recall the word of God spoken through Jeremiah: "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good ways lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16).

There are many ways our country is divided and polarized. We have looked at just a few aspects of this divide within our country. So what's the answer? How can we become more a "united" States of America? "One" nation. Indivisible - undivided?

I think we know the answer, don't we? It's easy to understand what we have to do. But it's hard to do it. ***Our only hope lies in our being able to come together, somewhere in the middle, and to listen to each other. To learn from those on the other side of an issue. And to find common ground and work together.***

The Lancaster newspaper just recently featured an article where they interviewed Dr. James Dobson, of Focus on the Family. He mentioned too how contentious the climate is in the U.S. He compared it to the time of the Civil War. He said, "I really hope we can find a way to find some middle ground or learn to agree with each other on that which we can agree on."

The other day I read a quote from Paul Beloeche, the Christian singer and songwriter ("Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord" "Above All"). I've tried unsuccessfully to find that quote and remember where I read it. While I don't remember his exact words, the point of what he was saying is that in our country we need to talk with one another, listen to each other, and stop shouting at each other. We can learn from those on the other side of an issue.

We've become accustomed to this scenario: Talk shows and newscasts where people are trying to talk over one another, even shouting at each other, or attacking the other. ***You and I can refuse to get involved in this kind of verbal tug-o-war.*** If we have *family members or friends* who have different views, listen to them. Look for the truths in what they have to say. In our *communities*, we can sit down with those on the opposite side of an issue and have a sensible dialogue. Lancaster Newspaper has been holding these kind of sit-down and talk and listen sessions around the county. In our *churches*, we ought to encourage open discussion, and be a safe place where people on opposite sides of issues can respect and love one another.

In our country, everyone should have a right to express their opinions. But in some ways, that is not the case today. I have to be honest and say that I believe it is often those on the *liberal* side of things who seem to be the worst offenders here. Ann Coulter is a conservative commentator and author. She was scheduled to make a speech at the University of California at Berkeley in April of 2017. But her appearance there was cancelled because of concern for her safety, since some had threatened violence if she came. From what I have read, Jerry Seinfeld, Larry the Cable Guy, Jay Leno, and even Bill Maher won't do college campuses because of having to contend with the political correctness in those places, and the limitations it places on them.

Columnist George Will, in a recent column titled, “The fight for free speech on college campuses in US”, relates how on election night in 2016, the President of the University of Michigan, Mark Schlissel, addressed more than 1,000 of their students, telling them that the 90% who voted for loser Hillary Clinton had rejected hate. George Will says, “He thereby effectively made those who disagreed with him and with the campus majority eligible to be targets of the university’s ‘bias response teams.’” See, if you as a student or faculty member say something that someone else feels “victimizes” or jeopardizes a “social climate” that is “safe and inclusive”, you can be reported and have one of these “bias response teams” investigate you. As a result, you may be disciplined for saying something that other students feel hurts or offends them.

But...get this...this university President, along with some other members of the administration, *are now being sued* for violating students’ constitutional rights by a new organization called Freedom First. Fortunately, Freedom First people are taking seriously this “speech patrol” climate where students (particularly conservative ones) are not permitted to voice their views. Someone from the Wall Street Journal went to the University of Michigan and asked for the records of one year of these bias incident reports, and the university tried to block that attempt by imposing a fee of more than \$2,400 just to view these public records. (By the way, in 2015 the University of Michigan received grants from the U.S. government – our taxpayers’ money - totaling \$735 million in federal research funds).

Kirsten Powers is a journalist and a political analyst who writes for USA Today and appears on CNN. She is not an ultra-conservative, nor even probably a conservative, and yet she has written a book, *The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech*.

In a time when our nation is deeply divided and polarized there is a pressing need for us to allow free speech expressing all sides of an issue. Also, to respect those who differ from our view. You have probably heard on the news that Saturday, a week ago, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders went to a restaurant in Lexington, Virginia, and was told she had to leave because she worked for Donald Trump. She politely left. The day after, on MSNBC, Representative Maxine Waters (D-California) openly encouraged Americans to harass Trump officials in public spaces. I ask, is this the kind of country you want to live in? I don’t.

Two quick, final thoughts. First, our country needs our prayers. Can we not pray every day for our nation and its leaders, for the leaders of all nations, and for us to come together to work out the pressing issues of our day in way that there is “liberty and justice for all” (as it says in our Pledge of Allegiance)? And secondly, as a nation, we have many flaws. There are many things in our history that cause us shame. There are many things in the present that need correction. But if country is as bad as some say it is, how come so many people are trying to get in?

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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