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Political Unity in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in a Polarized Culture

To all the followers of Jesus Christ striving for a more just world. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you as you grapple with the multitude of emotions arising from the state of our country. In a society where broken promises are commonplace, misinformation prevails in the age of social media, and trust in all forms of media is dwindling, the average person feels more isolated than ever. Consequently, individuals are experiencing heightened feelings of isolation and mistrust, leading to a desperate clinging to oversimplified narratives for a sense of stability. This has contributed to a marked increase in mental health issues, with depression, anxiety, and suicide rates¹ reaching unprecedented levels. The official declaration of loneliness as an epidemic by the United States Surgeon General underscores the severity of this societal issue.² Furthermore, the escalating inflation of goods and services further compounds the challenges faced by individuals and impedes progress towards a more equitable society.

In 2008, the world was chanting “Yes, We Can” as we elected the first black President in US history. It was the start of a new era. Both Democrats and Republicans saw this event as the end of racism. However, it soon became apparent that racism was still prevalent, and it seemed like our culture had regressed. During Donald Trump's presidency, many cities were literally burning in response to his racist rhetoric, and the GOP was labeled as the racist party, a far cry

¹Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) 2024
<https://www.dbsalliance.org/crisis/suicide-prevention-information/suicide-statistics/>

² US Department of Human Services, *New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States*. May 3, 2023. Accessed by 10/13/2024,
<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>.

from its origins as the party that had ended slavery. Fast-forward to the 2020 historic election, where a record number of voters chose President Joe Biden as their next President. Once again, there was hope for a brighter and more equitable future for people of color. However, communities of color soon realized that Biden's administration was also flawed with racist rhetoric and empty promises. During his campaign, he infamously stated that if the black community didn't vote for him, they were not black. Furthermore, two years into President Biden's presidency, Black White House staff were leaving the administration, as reported by Politico:

At least 21 Black staffers have left the White House since late last year [2021] or are planning to leave soon. Some of those who remain say it's no wonder why: They describe a work environment with little support from their superiors and fewer chances for promotion. The departures have been so pronounced that, according to one current and one former White House official, some Black aides have adopted a term for them: "Blaxit."³

In recent years, a significant political dichotomy has emerged within communities of color, leading to a rift between conservative and liberal people of color. This has left pastors and leaders in disarray. They struggle with addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion without being perceived as having a liberal political agenda. The reality is that racism, deeply rooted in US history, has created a lasting impact. Our history of eugenics and the subsequent Jim Crow laws have left a lasting legacy. Although our judicial system no longer upholds such laws, the pursuit of power has fostered a tribalistic social media culture. This has led to the public's tendency to blame others.

While racism is a relatively recent addition to our vocabulary in the last century, the pursuit of power and the prejudices associated with it are age-old issues. Jesus's teachings

³ Daniel Lippman, Politico, White House, (May 31, 2022). Accessed by October 12, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/31/biden-white-house-black-staffers-00035931>

emphasize repentance and reconciliation, challenging the Church, both conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, and everything in between, to pursue justice. The Kingdom of God does not align with any earthly political agenda seeking power; instead, it calls for the relinquishment of power for the well-being of others. We should recognize social and political justice work by enhancing it, acknowledging our faults through confession, and humbly standing in the tension. This means that we should align our earthly political opinions with the politics of the Kingdom of God.

The concepts of the Trinity and the cross necessitate reevaluating an insular approach centered on individual beliefs and those of like-minded individuals. Jeremy Treat, in the article *Kingdom and Cross: What God Has Joined Together, Let No Man Separate* states,

The cross is central (the climactic mid-point of the story), and the kingdom is telic (the end-goal of the story). The glory of God's wisdom, however, is displayed in the manner that the end-time kingdom has broken into the middle of history through the death of the Messiah. In short, the kingdom and the cross are held together by the Christ—Israel's messiah—who brings God's reign on earth through his atoning death on the cross. The kingdom is the ultimate goal of the cross, and the cross is the means by which the kingdom comes.⁴

Embracing the principles of the cross, which are grace, mercy, reconciliation, forgiveness, etc., entails an openness to participating in the selfless unity of the Trinity. This entails being receptive to forming meaningful connections with individuals who hold differing perspectives. Embodying the sacrificial love of the Trinity entails demonstrating selfless love towards all individuals, irrespective of their affiliation with a specific religious community.

⁴ Jeremy Treat, *Kingdom and Cross: What God Has Joined Together, Let No Man Separate*, September 30, 2014. Accessed by October 11, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-cross-god-joined-together-let-not-man-separate/>

The text below explores the political implications of Christ's teachings and the Kingdom of God. It emphasizes the importance of adhering solely to the teachings of Christ. It points out that the Kingdom of God is deeply political, particularly in the context of the crucifixion as a political demonstration. The text also highlights the difference between the politics of the Kingdom of God and mere socio-political debates every four years, stressing the call to repentance and reconciliation with God and others. This perspective provides an insightful lens through which to view the teachings of Jesus and their relevance in today's world.

Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:19–20

The Principles of the Cross point to the Kingdom of God. There is no resurrection if there is no cross. Putting to death our own earthly political opinions for the sake of loving your neighbor is crucial for ethnic reconciliation of all forms. My encouragement is, as Matthew 6:33 states, *“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* It is imperative that we seek unity in the body by having fruitful and honest conversations by operating at a high level of integration and humble interdependence.⁵

As the Apostle Paul would encourage the Romans;

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:1-2

⁵ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, (Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2013) 38.

In the realm of faith, it is crucial for the Church to embody wisdom in its approach to embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as integral aspects of the Kingdom of God. The Church should earnestly strive to embody grace, mercy, reconciliation, and forgiveness while also acknowledging the importance of addressing socio-political justice issues. This involves embracing the tension and demonstrating humility by acknowledging and confessing our shortcomings. Ultimately, this requires aligning our earthly political views with the principles of the Kingdom of God. It can be difficult to recognize prejudice when in a position of privilege, especially when strong biases are at play. Our personal and collective experiences influence our behavior, which in turn affects how we respond to the Kingdom of God. I encourage us to learn how to change our mindset and allow the Kingdom of God to shape our personal and collective experiences. Ethnic diversity, by its very nature, brings a plethora of ideas that may be opposing. But this needs to be seen as a blessing and not a curse because this presents an opportunity to embark on an adventure of seeking the Kingdom of God together. Christena Cleveland, in the book *Disunity in Christ*, expresses,

If we want to know how to embody the household of God, we need look no further than to Jesus. While on earth, Jesus modeled this new reality by connecting with every type of person around — conservative theologians, liberal theologians, prostitutes, divorcees, children, politicians, people who party hard, military servicemen, women, lepers, ethnic minorities, celebrities, and so forth — and inviting them to be a part of his group and to work together to bring wholeness to the cracked and crumbling world. Paul, Peter, Luke, John, James, and the writer of Hebrews repeatedly and empathetically make the same point: the unified church is the vehicle through which the kingdom of God is powerfully communicated to the world.⁶

While our emotions can get the best of us, we can rely on Jesus' grace when we witness tragedies that racism in America may cause. No matter our earthly political stances, we can "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." Proverbs 31:8-9 NIV

⁶ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 37.