



If you live in the United States and you've managed to avoid political conversations for the last few months, then you either have completely shut off social media, live in an area with no internet or television reception or you may be a monk. Politics, by their very nature, divide us. This is especially true during an election season.

So where does that leave us as small group leaders? As leaders our goal is to guide our group to build connection with each other and foster spiritual growth. How do we lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ during such a politically stressed time? It starts by recognizing that this is nothing new. Jesus was part of plenty of politically charged conversations and the early church had their share of disagreements. Paul had a couple of thoughts on it.

"Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with – even when it seems that they are strong on opinion but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently." Romans 14:1 (MSG)

When it comes to politics, it's so tempting to feel like we have the moral high ground in our argument. We can easily justify saying hurtful things to others because we believe ourselves to be right. Paul had some advice for us here too.

*"I have the right to do anything," you say – but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" – but not everything is constructive. **No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.*** 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 (NIV)

So how do we bridge our group when we know that everyone is in a different place on the political spectrum? By reminding them of what we have in common. It was John F. Kennedy who said, *"What unites us is far greater than what divides us."* While President Kennedy was speaking to the Canadian Parliament about culture and politics, he still hit on a spiritual truth. Nowhere is this truer than in the Church. We are united by the sacrifice and grace of Jesus Christ. Nothing should be able to divide us in the face of that unifying power.

How do we facilitate this discussion?

Plan For It. Instead of running in the opposite direction (to no avail I might add) plan for this topic to come up. Set expectations with your group on how you will handle these types of conversations. It is important that the whole group lends a voice to how you will deal with this topic.

Don't Avoid It. For years we have been taught to avoid talking about politics because it will lead to conflict. That doesn't seem to have worked out well for us. Avoiding conflict leads to avoiding growth. Conflict can be messy because it involves our feelings and the people we care about. Instead of shying away from conflict, embrace it. It's often in the messy, awkward conversations that we stretch ourselves to understand others and grow in our relationships. That doesn't mean our small group time should become a political debate. Set boundaries.

Love Through It. Remember that what unites us is greater than what divides us; ultimately that is love, the love demonstrated through Jesus and the love we are commanded to show each other. When little jabs or outright declarations are made in group, address them right away but do so with love. As members of a small group our greatest desire should be to build each other up.

*"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. **Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**"*
Philippians 2:1-4

When Paul speaks of being like-minded, he isn't referring to all of us having the same political beliefs. No, he is speaking of something far greater and of more importance; being like-minded in our love of each other and God. Let us not lose sight of that during this turbulent time.

Conflict can be messy, but God will lead you through it with love, prayer, and truth.