“Separation of Church and Hate”
Andy Stanley

Now today—interesting message—we’re talking about this uneasy tension between the church and politics, and the church and cultural issues, and some of you are so confused about what we do, why we do what we do as a church, and the reason you’re so confused is I’ve never explained this. And so we have people leave our church over this; we have people that get mad at me; I get all kinds of email—which I read all my email and respond to a lot of it. In fact, the meaner the email, the more likely the response because I just love talking to people who are mad because I just think well you just don’t understand. So anyway, so this is a politically charged topic. It’s not emotionally neutral and I’m reminded of this all the time.

Back during the Bush administration one Sunday or one weekend in the paper there was an article about President Bush that he had a quiet time every morning—that he had a devotional time where he read his Bible. And he mentioned in this interview that he read my dad’s devotional book. And I thought well isn’t that so cool. So the next Sunday I was preaching on the importance of getting up early and having a quiet time, and I mentioned even the President of the United States has a quiet time. If the president has time to have a quiet time, you have time to have a quiet time. And, I mentioned the fact that President Bush reads my dad’s devotional book. Oh my gosh, the email I got by mentioning the President of the United States. And Andy, how could you say . . . the questions were how can you support a president who . . . and they start listing all these things they didn’t like about President Bush. And I am thinking all I said was he has a quiet time and reads my dad’s book but this subject is so emotionally charged.

And then we hosted the First Lady, Barack Obama’s wife—you know Michelle—at our church and oh my gosh, I mean some people thought it was the greatest thing in the world. People left our church—we’re not sending you one more dollar—and all these blogs . . . I mean it was incredible. So we are equal opportunity offenders. We’re going to offend Republicans, we’re going to offend Democrats, we’re going to offend conservatives, we’re going to offend progressives or liberals or not so conservative, we’re going to offend everybody. And if you’ve stuck with us these fifteen years and you’re thinking surely there’s some rhyme or reason to this, the answer is absolutely there is. Years ago, before the election, I preached a series called Letters to the Next President. Some of you remember that and some people loved it and you wrote letters to the next president if the next president could read your letter. Other people were like I thought we weren’t a political church. Why are you doing a whole series with the word “president” in it? I thought we stayed away from politics. And you know, people were upset or people loved it. I did a series called God and Country—some people loved it. In fact one guy paid to send the whole series to every member of Congress. Other people were like I can’t believe you would spend . . . and so it’s like people are going to be mad.

We will never be republican enough for some Republicans, we’ll never be democrat enough for Democrats, so when I was invited to pray at the National Prayer
Service—which is this big high-church thing in the National Cathedral the day after the election, or excuse me, the inauguration—and I was going to get to pray for the president. When I got invited, I told Sandra, I said *what an honor. I think I should go but let’s not tell anybody. I don’t want anybody to know.* And then when I got back, you know, I can just take all the heat from people who think it was a bad idea but I *don’t want anybody to know.* So, I didn’t tell anybody and she kept saying *well you should tell somebody* and I’m like no, *because we’ll just get a lot of email, a lot of letters, I just don’t want to deal with it.* So the day before I left, I call our staff together and I told them and I told our elders and I got on a plane and left town, you know. We have a friend who is a Republican—like a very overt Republican—young pastor in a part of our country that’s very republican. I mean you could walk in his church and it’s just republican. Okay? And he was invited to pray for our president, our current president, and he was so nervous. *What are people going to think?* And it just so happened he had a trip scheduled to visit Dr. Billy Graham. Dr. Graham doesn’t travel because of just age and stage of life, and so he’ll invite groups—small groups and pastors—to meet with him and pray with him. And so this young man was invited to do this and this was going to happen before he was to give an answer about whether or not to pray for the president. And he told me this story, he said he had a chance to talk to Dr. Graham just for a few seconds privately and he said *Dr. Graham, I have a dilemma. I’ve been invited to pray for our current president and I don’t know, is that too political, is that something I should do?* And, here is what Dr. Billy Graham said, he said *son, you’re a pastor. You’ve been invited to pray for someone, that’s what we do.* I thought well there you have it, the wisdom of the ages.

So consequently, it’s very politically charged and so today some of you will love it, some of you will hate it, some of you will be confused, but I want you—to the best of my ability—to explain why we do what we do and the approach that we’re taking. And I must admit upfront, the approach that we take was highly influenced by things I experienced in church early on. I grew up in a denomination that was against everything. We were just against everything and I just got used to it. I just thought that’s what Christians do. We have leaflets and flyers and voter’s guides. We were against the Equal Rights Amendment—the ERA—and in fact, I think that it still hasn’t passed. I think it comes up every year since 1920-something. We had bumper stickers and all this stuff and I thought *now why are we against women having the same constitutional protection as men?* But we’re against that, you know. Then we were against the lottery of course. We had bumper stickers about that. We were against Cabbage Patch dolls. I don’t remember why but for some reason we weren’t supposed to support; I don’t know if it was the company that made them? Our denomination boycotted Disney World, I mean we were just . . . I mean it was just always you know. We were defending the truth and standing for what was right, and honestly I agreed with sort of the spirit in which those things were done. And I certainly agreed in some cases about, you know, what the Scripture taught. But it just was a little weird that every time we turned around our church and our group of churches, we were against everything.

And this culminated for me in probably the mid-eighties; I can’t remember the date exactly. I was 28 years old, I do remember that. The Gay Pride Parade down
Peachtree Street, the time had been changed—now this was all rumor, I don’t know if this was true. Apparently our church—because of our denomination—got out of sorts with the gay community back then. And we just called [it] the homosexual community, there wasn’t same sex attraction—didn’t have any of that terminology. And so the rumor was they had changed the parade schedule and route so that they would be in front of our church on Peachtree Street when we were letting out of church to kind of make a point of ha ha, look at us. Now even if you’re gay you’ve got to admit that is a freak show. Okay? You have to pay to see that kind of stuff. It is not normal stuff. It’s just all out there. Anyway so our strategy—now I worked at the church—our strategy was we’re going to let church out early, send everybody out the back, get in their cars, and go home so when they come by our church we won’t be there, ha ha ha. You can guess what happened. Basically we let people out in time to get out on the street to see the parade is what happened. Because when you tell people don’t look, what do they do? They look. When you tell people don’t do something, you know they do it. And so consequently . . . and so we let everybody out and two things happened that I remember.

One is during the parade, when we’re all hiding in the bushes and not looking you know, don’t look kind of thing, hide the kids eyes because it was out there. . . Here is what I remember. On the other side of Peachtree Street was another large church and they had tables set up all along the street with water, and they’re passing out cups of water to the marchers while we’re hiding the women and children, run the other way. And I just remember thinking that that feels weird to me. The other thing was, as we led up to this time, a couple weeks out when all this commotion about they changed the parade route and the time, I said to my dad who was the pastor, I said now are we going to address the issue of homosexuality? Because all of a sudden everybody is talking about it, you know the parade and all the controversy. This seems like a good time to talk about the subject since it is on everybody’s mind anyway. And you know we had a conversation and I could tell that wasn’t in the plans. I said well how would you feel about me preaching a message this Sunday night after the parade? And I remember he looked at me like you’re 28 years old, are you kidding? I said I’d be happy to. He said God bless you, go ahead and to his credit gave me this opportunity. So that Sunday morning he gets up and says by the way come back to church tonight, Andy is going to preach a message on— and he gave the title and I can even remember the title. And so that Sunday night the place was packed. It was packed and so the first sermon I ever heard on the topic of the tension between homosexuality and Christianity and the gay agenda, the first sermon I ever heard on that was mine. I was 28 and it is not available in the Resource Center I assure you so don’t try to get a copy.

But there was just something in me that thought wait a minute, there we go again. I mean our intentions are good, you know, I don’t disagree with our theology. But we’re always positioned against everything. So I decided somewhere along the way I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life as a Christian—nor as a Christian leader—just being against everything in culture and against everything new, even if it was, you know, under the umbrella of defending the truth. And the interesting thing was this; as I began to read with fresh eyes the Gospels, and as I began to read with fresh eyes specifically
the Book of Acts, and as I began to read with fresh eyes the epistles of the Apostle Paul, it occurred to me that neither Jesus nor Paul positioned themselves against everything in culture or even against the Roman empire. In fact the only thing those two guys were consistently against were the people on the religious side of the aisle that were against everything. That was the only group they were ever against. It was kind of the perennial conflict with the Pharisees. So basically I felt like our stance as a denomination, as a church, looked kind of like this: become like us and then you can join us. Become like us and then you can join us. You know, while you’re embracing these sinful lifestyles or these bad habits or, you know, supporting candidates that don’t agree with us, you know, you stay over there. But once you become like us then you can join us.

Now for those of you who know the New Testament, who does that sound like? Pharisees. That doesn’t sound like the Apostle Paul; it doesn’t sound like Jesus. Jesus walks up to Matthew, the traitorous tax collector, and says hey, take a break from your tax collecting and follow me. Where are we going? We’re going to your house, invite some of your friends. And Peter is like I’m not going. Okay? I’m not going to go to his house. He’s got cooties. If we get too close we’re going to get tax collector cooties. This didn’t describe Jesus at all and so the world—the religious world that I kind of came out of, and many of you did as well, and many of those who helped launch this church, it was kind of like this—it was all about, you know, we were making a point but we weren’t really making a difference. We were making a point. We were preaching against it, and God says, and the righteousness and the holiness, and all those things I completely agree with. We were really good at making a point but we weren’t making any difference in our community because it was a if you’re like us, join us and until you become like us, we’re going to kind of preach against you. Now if you don’t remember anything else from today’s message I want you to remember this. This is huge. It is always easier to make a point than it is to make a difference. It is always easier to make a point than it is to make a difference. Every parent listening knows this. Right? You have sat down with your kids and you’ve said okay look me right in the eye, give me your undivided attention—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, now you go to your room and I’m going to give you some time to think about that. And they scamper off to their room. You know, you’re thinking they’re sitting over on their bed thinking about the wisdom of mom and dad; and they’re sitting in front of their computer screen doing this, you know. And as a parent you feel so good because you made your point and you’re like all bowed up like I told them, I didn’t back down, I didn’t let her interrupt me, I made my point. And then you can’t understand why your kids don’t change and here’s why: because telling you you’re wrong is different than guiding you to do something different. Telling you or trying to convince you you’re wrong is different from equipping you to do what’s right. Making you feel guilty for what I think you’re doing wrong is different than instructing you in what to do right.

So consequently, making a point is so easy and especially, you know, if you’re me—I get to wear one of these and get lots of rows of people. I mean it’s fun to make a point with a bunch of people that already agree with you, which is what happens in lots of environments all the time. People clap and laugh and they go out and say oh that was incredible. It’s easy to make a point. It is very, very, very difficult to make a difference.
But, we decided early on, you know what, we’re not going to be the point making church. We want to be a difference making church. And you know what, to make a difference requires a completely different strategy than the strategy required to make a point. And it’s always easier to make a point. You feel better when you make a point. And you can gather a crowd making a point. Making a difference takes far longer. Making a difference is confusing to your constituents. Making a difference is so slow going, there is so much steady plodding. Making a difference is confusing to people on both sides of whatever issue you’re trying to influence people on. But we decided a long time ago it would be easy to make a point; there are plenty of churches that sit back and just, you know, throw hand grenades out in the culture and make a point. We decided we’re not going to do that.

We want to be a church that really genuinely makes a difference and here’s what’s amazing: when you read the Gospels, and when you read the Book of Acts, and when you read the epistles of Paul, they basically give us a roadmap about how to do this and just so, you know, they pulled it off. Okay? Within three hundred years— within three hundred years basically of the death of Jesus—the Roman Empire embraced Christianity. And I know what you’re thinking. We don’t have three hundred years. Well yeah, we do. We got all the time in the world. We don’t. But someone does. Within three hundred years, think about this, Christianity toppled an empire in terms of an ideology and Christianity toppled a religious system that had been in place for a couple thousand years. It’s absolutely—it’s an amazing, amazing, amazing story—and the way they did it was not by making a point. Because the early Christians had no platform. They had no leverage in culture, they had no money, they had very little organization, they had nothing but some of the things that we’re going to talk about today. And there in the Gospels, there in the Gospels we find the picture of how to bring about cultural change. But it’s not by standing up in a crowd and making a point.

Here are some of the things that I’ve observed. I’ll tell you a few stories as we go along and then I’m going to look at two passages of Scripture. Here’s what they did—Jesus and Paul specifically—they constantly leaned relationally in the direction of those they disagreed with the most. They were constantly leaning relationally in the direction of those that they disagreed with the most. In other words, they were constantly building relational bridges to the people that they wanted to influence. A great example of this, one day the Apostle Paul is in Athens and he’s walking around—Acts 17— and he notices there’s all these idols to all these different gods because there’s this pantheon of Greek (and then became Roman) gods in Athens—very religious city back then. And he notices all of these gods. Now think about this; Paul is an educated Jewish man, raised as a Jewish boy on the Hebrew Scriptures. And the predominant law throughout the land and the prophets—when it comes to Judaism—was don’t have any idols. Don’t have any images. In fact, you weren’t allowed to do anything that reflected any kind of image of the Hebrew god. In fact the men who actually penned or copied the Old Testament Scripture, oftentimes they wouldn’t even write the word “God” because they were afraid by writing the word “God” it would be an image and they would violate the law of God. That’s how, you know, crazy they were about no images. So here’s the Apostle Paul walking around in a city full of images of false gods. So what would have been the easiest
sermon to preach? To preach against idolatry—look at all these examples. And he would have been exactly right. But he would have made no difference. And he was smart enough to know *I’m not here to make a point. I’m here to make a difference.* So he did this brilliant thing. He finds this altar that doesn’t have an image on it and the altar is dedicated to the unknown god. Now this is kind of funny—the Athenians didn’t want to offend any of the gods, so they thought *we might have left one out so let’s have an empty altar and in case that new god shows up, we can say okay we just didn’t know what you looked like but we’re ready for you. We have an altar for you.* Okay, that’s how they thought.

So Paul says *hmm that’s an idea.* So he says gentlemen, *I notice that you are very religious—common ground—I’m religious too. We have something in common. I’m a very devout religious person just like you are.* Everybody is shaking their head this way. He said *I would like to talk to you about this God* and guess what he preaches on? He does not preach against idolatry. He preaches for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And at the end of his message most people said *that is ridiculous* but a handful of people said *we would like to come back tomorrow and hear more.* See, they didn’t position themselves against; they relationally leaned into the people they disagreed with the most.

Consequently—here’s the other thing you notice—they were constantly at odds with the religious right of their day. This is so important, so important if you attend this church, if you had sat the Apostle Paul down and Jesus down with the Pharisees and had a quiz about theology, their theology would have matched up almost perfectly. They all agreed that God—there was one God. They all agreed that everything was created by God. They all agreed that everything belonged to God. They all agreed on the morality of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ethics. They all agreed that it was important to take care of the poor. I mean you could go right down the line. They all agreed on just about everything but they were constantly butting heads over their approach. Their approach was so different that ultimately it was the Pharisees that had Jesus crucified and had the Apostle Paul arrested. But if there had been a theology test, people from the outside would have seen very little difference in the theology of the Pharisees and the theology of the Apostle Paul or even Jesus. And so consequently because their approach was different, they were always butting heads with the people—listen—they agreed with the most.

The third thing you observed is this: they were not concerned about guilt by association. Now let me be clear, this is not a parenting strategy. Okay? This isn’t *go home and tell your kids I don’t care who you associate with.* This is not a parenting strategy but listen carefully, neither the Apostle Paul nor Jesus was concerned about guilt by association. Let me ask you a question: in the New Testament who was the group that was like fanatically concerned about guilt by association? Which group? Yeah I think I heard it online, somebody said at home, that’s right, the Pharisees. The Pharisees were like almost—listen, this is so weird . . . they’ve arrested Jesus you know, they’ve tried him illegally, they have beat him, they have hired false witnesses against him, then they take him to Pilate and Pilate says *yeah come on in*—they said *oh no we*
can’t go in your house we’ll become ceremonially unclean. Oh my gosh, what hypocrites, right? But, this was the group that, you know, Pilate, the deal is if anybody sees us going in your house they’re going to think like we can’t do that. I mean they were just fanatics about it. You never find Jesus worried about guilt by association. In fact—now this is for those of you who have really read your Bibles—what was Jesus’ reputation? What do they say about Jesus? He’s the what? He’s the friend of tax gatherers and sinners. His reputation is he spends too much time with the people he shouldn’t spend any time with. So there is Jesus with the tax gatherers and the sinners, to which we say Jesus, by hanging out with tax gatherers, (this is the question I get a lot), are you saying that, are you saying that it’s okay to cheat people on their taxes? Jesus, by hanging out with sinners are you saying that it’s okay to sin? To which Jesus would say are you kidding? Sin will ultimately kill me. Sin will ultimately have me nailed to a cross. Sin will ultimately cost me my life. What do you mean am I condoning sin? I am not condoning sin; I’m trying to reach sinners, so while you sit safely back in your little congregation of people who all believe the same thing and sing the same songs and all get along and agree about everything, I’m actually trying to engage people who need this message. And I could care less that you criticize me for who I hang out with. You never ever find the Apostle Paul or Jesus concerned about guilty by association.

In fact for those of you who are Catholic, this is a little piece of information that’s interesting. Peter—you know your guy, you know the first pope, I mean the head of the church—you know we all love Peter. Peter was actually chastised by the Apostle Paul because Peter, after Jesus left, he started giving into pressure to when he was with the Jews acting like he didn’t hang out with the gentiles. And when the Jews left, then he would hang out with the gentiles and the Apostle Paul chastised him in Galatians chapter 2. He said how dare you play the hypocrite. I know that you hang out with these non-Jewish people but when the Jews show up, you go scampering back over there because you’re afraid that they’re going to think something bad about you, you hypocrite. He actually confronts Peter on this. That took a lot of nerve, you know, to confront Peter. He’s like “the guy.” So consequently this was a big deal. They never worried about guilt by association. A lot of the criticism I get and that we get is this very thing. And you know what I always say, could care less. It doesn’t matter. I’m not worried. And the interesting thing is, the people who are most critical of us in this regard, we agree with on about just about everything except approach.

The other thing you find is this, they refused to be dragged into debates that distracted them from the primary issues. This is huge. They refused to be dragged into debates that distracted them from primary issues. So Jesus is walking along one day and the Pharisees say hey, we got a question. Hey what do you think about us paying Caesar’s taxes? What do you think about all this taxation? Do you think we should pay our taxes? It’s a trick question and Jesus is like you know, I’m not here to solve the tax issue. Anybody got a coin? The Pharisees are digging around—anybody got a coin? They give him a coin, and Jesus says, who is that? Well that is Caesar. Well give to Caesar what Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s. See ya. And the Pharisees are like who thought of that stupid question? That is a terrible question.
One day Jesus is walking along—Matthew 21, Luke 20, I think Mark records this story as well . . . this is so powerful, I’ve taught my children this; this is so important, maybe we should come back and spend a whole Sunday on it—just walking along one day and the Pharisees say hey Jesus, ask you a question. Hey, all this stuff you’re teaching, all this crazy, wild, you know, new stuff you’re teaching, love your enemies, you know, by whose authority are you teaching, by whose authority are you teaching? Trick question. Jesus said well I’ll answer you after you answer me, by whose authority did John the Baptist baptize? So they all go off to the side and they’re like okay, okay, okay if we say it was God’s authority he’s going to ask us then why didn’t you let John baptize you; if we say it wasn’t God’s authority then the people are going to be mad at us because John the Baptist is a folk hero, you know, and the people just love John the Baptist. In fact one of the Pharisees said I’m afraid if we say John the Baptist wasn’t, you know, his authority wasn’t God they’re going to stone us. So all these courageous Pharisees come back to Jesus and they say we don’t know. Jesus says then I’m not going to tell you either and walks off.

Now here’s what is important, did Jesus know by whose authority he did what he did and said what he said? Yes or no. Of course he did. Here’s what he knew that we don’t know sometimes: sometimes there are questions you should never answer. There are questions you should never answer. There are questions you should never answer based on whose asking, when they’re asking, and where they’re asking it. I’ve taught my kids this. There are questions—it’s not that you don’t know the answer—there are questions you should never ever answer and the Apostle Paul and Jesus understood this. We will not be dragged into issues that are not central to why we are here.

The last thing is this or the next one is this: they didn’t judge non-Christians for behaving like non-Christians. Now the church is an expert at the opposite of this. I mean the church—through the ages, in fact—the church loses its influence in culture, the church loses its influence in culture internationally to the degree they try to police the behavior of people who aren’t even a part of the church. Mark it down. The church has its greatest influence when the church polices its own behavior and understands that people who have never embraced Christianity . . . why in the world would we expect them to act like Christians? But there have been many pockets through American history and certainly even in denominational history where people spend most of their time criticizing non-Christians for not acting like Christians.

Here’s what Paul taught, here’s what he taught—he asked this question, what business do we have of judging outsiders? The implication is: none. Why in the world would we hold people who aren’t even Christians accountable to a set of rules they never subscribed to, to begin with? The church shines the brightest when Christians act like Christians. There’s a novel idea, right? And when Christians refuse to police their own behavior and try to police everyone else’s, do you know what you call that? It starts with an H, three syllables . . . hypocrisy! And people see that a mile off. You never find that with Jesus. You never find that with the Apostle Paul. Paul didn’t go into Athens and go oh, I can’t believe they’re worshipping these idols. Of course, they’re worshipping idols,
they’re not Jewish, they’re not Christian. He never expected non-Christians to behave like Christians. This is something that gets the church in trouble generation after generation after generation. You say Andy, shouldn’t we be concerned about people’s behavior? Absolutely, that’s why we should build relational bridges. That’s why our approach to bringing about change is so strategic. That’s why we cannot be content to sit back and make points. We’ve got to be about our Father’s business to make a difference. So those are some of the things you observe.

Now real quickly, there were so many passages to choose from I just chose two real quickly. Here’s I think one thing that Jesus said that just underscores these illustrations I’ve given you and one passage from the Apostle Paul that underscores the illustrations we see from his life. Here’s what Jesus said—and you know these verses, many of you have memorized these verses, we sing songs about these verses—he says you (talking to his little group of followers), you’re the light of the world. Implication: the world is dark and God has put a flashlight in it and that’s you. The world is dark, the world is in trouble, the world is wandering around in darkness, and God has done something unique in this generation. He’s put a light in the world and you are that light. A city on a hill cannot be hidden, to which they’re all going that’s right. (And no, we don’t get that . . . [and] the best way to understand that is to be in an airplane flying and all of a sudden, you know, you see the sky lit up and you see a city—a lit up city in our culture, you can’t hide that. You know when you’re flying over a city—a lit up city—it cannot be hidden.) Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand so it gives light to everyone in the dark house. So people are listening to Jesus going okay let me write that down, okay so what’s your point? Christians, especially conservative Christians of which “I am one,” listen to this, listen to this: In the same way let your light shine before others—others that are in the darkness—in such a way that they may see your (let’s say this together), good deeds—not billboard. And I think billboards are fine, you know, do cute Christian billboards all day long. It’s not going to make any difference. It’s just making a point. Here’s what Jesus said, you want to make a difference? Listen, do you want to be a light that attracts people like a light attracts a bug? Do you want to want to be a light to where people go wow that is so different, look at the way they go, and I don’t feel like they want me to do that but there’s something . . . and he said here’s what you got to do, you have got to live your life in such a way that they see your good deeds and after they see your good deeds they begin to connect the dots and they glorify your Father in heaven.

Here’s what he’s saying—he’s saying look, you need to conduct your morality, your marriage, the way you raise your kids, the way you spend your money, the way you give your money, the way you participate in the community, the way you foster, the way you adopt, the way you love, the way you don’t judge, you need to do it in such a way that people in darkness look at you and look at us the community and go whoa, I don’t think I’d want to be one of them but I sure hope my son finds a cute one and marries her because they’re good people. I don’t know if I’d ever want to be one of those Christians but I’d like to hire a bunch of them. They’re so honest. They’re so transparent, they tell you the truth, you never have to worry about them stealing from you. I don’t know if I ever want to be one of those but I hope my daughter marries one
because they’re so moral and once they make a commitment in marriage they keep their promises and they keep their commitments. He said I want you to live your life in such a way that you make a point by making a difference. You make a difference—which is the point—and you’re like a light in a dark world and the world is attracted to you. Now at this point in the message you know the people who would object to Jesus may think but wait a minute, wait a minute Jesus, what about righteousness and what about truth and what about drawing a line in the sand? What about, you know, teaching the law of God and the holiness of God? And of course Jesus could read their minds so the very next verse he says this, do not think (and they’re going that’s exactly what I was thinking! because that’s what he did all the time)—do not think that I’ve come to abolish the law. Because they’re thinking wait a minute, if we’re just supposed to be good people that attract people and, you know, what about the law? [Jesus said] Don’t worry, I’m not giving up on the law; I’ve not come to abolish the law or the prophets, I’ve not come to abolish them but I’ve come to fulfill them. This isn’t either/or, this is both/and, and you don’t have to, you know, throw, you know, moral and ethical and behavior grenades out in culture and tell people how to live their life. You just get it right and you will be like a light in a dark, dark room. You will be “attractional.”

Here’s how the Apostle Paul said it. Again he said it so many ways, here’s just one example. He taught this: be wise (this is the Apostle Paul talking to Christians)—be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Now that’s just his terminology. There are people in the faith and outside the faith. This isn’t good people versus bad people, this is just people who believe versus people who don’t. They’re outside the faith. Be wise, be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. In other words, every time you have an opportunity to influence someone, every time you have an opportunity to have a conversation with someone around the issue of faith, be wise in the way you manage that conversation. Then he goes on and says this, let your conversations (Christians, hang on) let your conversations always be full of (let’s say it together), grace. And they are supposed to be what of grace? What is this word? You know what full means? It means full. A little Greek word “full.” Like there’s hardly any room for anything else, full. Let your conversations with outsiders be full of grace. But what about law? Hang on. But what about righteousness? Hang on. But what about taking back America? Hang on. Let your conversations be full of grace. In other words, there needs to be so much grace in your conversations it looks like it’s too much. Like whoa, I’m going to spill it. Like whoa, hold it steady. It’s full of grace and seasoned with salt. Little sprinkle of salt. Do you know what we’ve done for the past fifty years in conservative evangelical America? We’ve had our conversation full of salt, sprinkle a little grace. But if you ask Jesus to forgive you, you can join us. See you’re bad, you’re wrong, you’re evil, you’re doing it wrong, you’re corrupting, you’re bad, you’re evil, but if you ask for forgiveness—a little sprinkle of grace—you can be forgiven. Jesus says that’s how you make a point, that’s not how you make a difference.

You know how you became a Christian? You became a Christian because somebody flooded you with grace, and there was something “attractional,” and you weren’t sure you bought into all of it because there was that salt, but there was just so much grace. And you didn’t feel judged, you felt loved. But you knew you were different
from them and they had different standards and sometimes you felt convicted being around them. And sometimes you felt guilty and—they didn’t make you feel guilty you just knew that well, *they’re kind of better in some ways but they love me anyway*. It was so confusing to you till you became a Christian, because you were around some people—maybe a family member, maybe somebody you work with—and their conversation was full of grace. That’s how you make a difference so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Now here’s the cool thing, here’s the thing that we don’t talk much about. After Paul died (you know he was beheaded by Nero) and after Jesus is gone, the next three hundred years of Christianity, the Christians began getting this right. After Christianity there were three—some say two, some say four—but basically there were three major plagues in the Roman world all along the Mediterranean rim, three plagues. During those plagues, it’s documented that the pagans—because they didn’t believe in afterlife, they weren’t sure, you know, the pagan gods didn’t care about people, the pagan gods just played with people, and so there was no love between a person and a pagan god—during these plagues, during these plagues the pagans . . . the rich people left the city first, the pagan priests left the city second basically, and the poor people—the average person—was left to die and to rot. And it’s documented how people fled the cities. But in many, many, many of these cities—so much so that some have argued that the rise of Christianity was contingent upon the way Christians responded to the plagues—the Christians stayed in the cities and they took care of their family members. And with just a little bit of care, just with water and nurture, they were able to nurse them back to health; where[as] the pagans put their family members in the streets and left town because they were so afraid of the plague. They were so afraid to die. Christians did not fear death. They did not fear the afterlife.

And then once they cared for their own, they began to care for the pagans who had been left in the street—the babies and the children. So much so, their light shown in such a way that many, many pagans in the cities that survived . . . so many people died during these plagues. Marcus Aurelius, the Emperor you heard about when you watch the movie *Gladiator*—he was an actual historical figure. His son didn’t strangle him, he died of the plague. And he writes in a letter that on some days over five thousand—some people say he exaggerated, let’s say five hundred—five hundred bodies a day were taken out of Rome because of the plague. They would annihilate entire cities. And in this diseased environment, Christians rose to the occasion and they were the light of the world and it made a huge, huge difference. And as you know, by the time Constantine came along, he embraced Christianity. There’s lots of stories about whether that was true and how it happened but at the end of the day, persecution of Christians stopped and Rome became “a Christian nation”.

What you may not know is that a couple of emperors later was an emperor called Emperor Julian—Julian the Apostate, they would call him—because Emperor Julian decided *hey enough of Christianity we got to take this thing back to our roots*. (You’re going to hate me for this) *We’ve got to take this back to our founding fathers*. Okay? *And our founding fathers were pagans and so we got to take Rome back*. Plus things
weren’t going very well in Rome so they thought they had offended the gods. So Emperor Julian decides to reinstitute paganism in Rome but he ran into some trouble. The trouble was Christianity had such incredible momentum and Christianity was known for its generosity and known for its benevolence. So when he erected some new priests, some new temples to these pagan gods, and when he reinstituted the priesthood of the pagans, it just didn’t gain much traction.

And we actually have a fragment of a letter that he wrote complaining about this. I want to read this to you. So here we are about 355 to 365 AD, Emperor Julian complaining about the fact that we can’t get this paganism going because of all these crazy Christians. Now listen carefully to what he was complaining about. Here we go: “Recent Christian growth is caused by their moral character, even if pretended, and by their benevolence towards strangers.” He’s going okay, we have a problem here. The Christians are too moral. They’re so moral they do all the right things and it’s hard for us to compete with that. Now I don’t believe it’s sincere. I think they’re just pretending. Nobody is really that good. Nobody loves their wife that much. Nobody loves children that much. Nobody is really that good. But even if it’s pretended character, it’s hard to compete with. He goes on, “I think that when the poor happen to be neglected and overlooked by the priests,” (he’s talking about his own priests, I think. You know, here’s all the poor people and the pagan priests are like who cares about you because the gods don’t care about you, the gods don’t even care about people so we don’t have to take care of the poor). So he says when they’re overlooked by our priests “the impious Galileans,” (that’s how he referred to Christians) “the impious Galileans observe this and devoted themselves to benevolence,” (but it gets worse) “the impious Galileans support not only their poor but ours as well.” How are we going to compete with that? The Christians keep taking in children, the Christians keep taking care of the poor, the Christians keep giving generously. Nobody is going to join our cult when they’ve got that as an option. That’s pretty powerful isn’t it? “Everyone can see that our people lack aid from us but they’re getting aid from these impious Galileans.”

Do you know why the west was won? Do you know why Rome finally switched over to Christianity? It wasn’t because of preaching. It wasn’t because of billboards. I love billboards, they’re great. I love preaching, it’s great. That’s what I do, right? It wasn’t because Christians got together and we made a point. They decided let’s just do what Jesus told us to do. Let’s . . . oh yeah, let’s just be a light. Let’s police our own behavior. Let’s be moral. Let’s have better marriages. Let’s have better children. Let’s be more generous. Let’s be more benevolent. No child left behind. Like, we’re going to take them in and love on them. Let’s get this right and we’ll be like a light in the dark room and people will begin circling and looking and then they’ll join us. And my friends, that’s exactly what happened.

And you know what? If you love this country and if there’s something in you that wants to “take it back” that’s fine. This is how you do it. It has already worked once and we have the opportunity—and I think as a church we have the responsibility—not to be content with making points and making everybody clap and love me. I think we’re here to make a difference. And you know how you make a difference? Love one another. Love
your enemy. Take care of those that don’t take care of you. Live in the very opposite fashion of the people around you and people will go oh, that’s so weird. I don’t want to be one. Hey honey, I think you should date one of those Christians, they always tell the truth.

So in closing here’s what we’ve been doing, here’s what we’ll continue to do: taking a public stand on anything the public wants us to take a stand on is neither necessary nor wise. This is why we don’t talk a lot about current events. This is why you don’t see me on the news representing evangelical America. We get calls all the time Andy, come on our show. No we’re not coming. Why? Because I’m not going to do this. It’s not necessary, it’s not wise; it makes a point, it doesn’t make a difference.

The second one: we’re not going to fear guilt by association. We’re not. We’re going to have Republicans, we’re going to have Democrats, we’re going to have good people, we’re going to have crazy people, we’re not going to fear this. When we think we can leverage a relationship for the purpose and the sake of the Gospel, we’re going to do it. And I’m not afraid, and we’re not afraid, and you have supported me in this even though at times I’m sure you thought what? Do the elders know? Has he taken the strange pill? We are not to the best of our ability ever going to fear guilt by association. Jesus did not. Neither did the Apostle Paul. We’re the hands and the feet of Jesus in our culture. So on the outside we will appear very inconsistent. Jesus had dinner with a Pharisee; Jesus had dinner with Matthew. Which one are you, Jesus? Whose side are you on? “I’m not here to take sides, I’m here to take over!” as the black preacher said. I love that. So we’re not taking sides but we are not going to shrink from our opportunity, our opportunity to relationally build bridges.

The other thing that we haven’t done and will continue is that we’re not going to police the behavior of people who don’t believe what we believe. Now you hear me do this all the time and you didn’t know what I was doing. When I preach, here’s what you hear sometimes, I’ll say you know what, now if you’re not a Christian you get a pass on this. Do you hear me say that? If you’re not a Christian you don’t even have to do this. Why am I saying that? I want the non-Christians who attend our church to know we don’t expect you to act like Christians. Good grief, most Christians aren’t even acting like a Christian. And then I’ll say this, I’ll say now, the Scripture teaches this and Christians you’ve got to do this. Now if you’re not a Christian, try this—you don’t have to. We have to, we’re Christians. Just try it and see what happens. You don’t have to. You are under no moral obligation. I’m not talking to you. The scripture isn’t written to you. The New Testament isn’t written to you. So we’re never ever, ever going to take a stand, do a sermon series, and go public with trying to get everybody in America to do something or everybody in America to stop something. Hey, they’re not accountable to us. We’re accountable to us and if we get it right and we’re lights, our influence continues to spread not even because we’re trying to influence. Jesus said it’s just going to happen because you’re light in a dark, dark room.

The next one is when political and cultural issues interface with Biblical teaching, we’re going to talk about it. See, we’re not trying to dodge the difficult things. You were
here for *The New Rules for Love, Sex and Dating*. Okay? We don’t dodge difficult things. When the Scripture is clear, we’re going to be clear. We’re going to be clear when it lines up with Republicans, we’re going to be clear when it lines up with Democrats, we’re going to be clear when it doesn’t line up with anybody because that’s not our agenda. We are—to the best of our ability—when something is scriptural and it conflicts with something in culture or conflicts with something that’s Biblical, we’re not going to shrink away. We’re not going to shy away from the issues. But here’s what we’re going to do and here’s what we’ve always done: we’re going to say *here’s what is going on in culture, here’s what the scripture teaches, and if you’re a Christian, if you’re a Christian, here’s how you should respond. Don’t try to impose this on your friends who aren’t Christians. Why would they pay attention to that? But let’s us get this right regardless of what culture says and regardless of what culture does. That’s exactly what Jesus taught.*

And then the last thing is this: we’re not always going to get this right. We’re not. It would be easy to be very conservative, and very political, and just chase everybody off that doesn’t agree with us. It would be easy to put our head in the sand, and just teach verse by verse through the Bible, and ignore all political and all cultural issues because “we’re Biblical.” It would be easy to do that. But to do what we’re attempting to do—to make a difference, to make a difference it is difficult and it’s messy. It’s messy, messy. We have a pastor at Buckhead Church, John Hambrick, and I love something John says all the time to our staff. He says this, “*We,*” (talking about our church) “*we walk toward the messes.*” We don’t shy away, we don’t have a bunch of policies. In fact, one of our policies is no policies—lots of conversations, no policies. We church people ask all the time what’s your policy? *We don’t have a policy on that. What’s your policy? I don’t have any policies.* Let’s talk. Let’s just have a conversation. It’s easy to have policies because when people ask questions you just send them an email. We’re not doing that. Which makes it messy, time consuming, extraordinarily relational, and you know what? That’s what we’re going to do. We think that’s what Jesus did. We walk toward messes, you know why? Because all of us either were a mess, are a mess, or will be a mess. We’re messy people and listen, if Jesus extended his hands and his arms for our mess, the least we can do is roll up our sleeves and get involved in other people’s messes—even if people don’t understand, even if we appear to be inconsistent. Because at the end of the day, that’s what we’ve been called to do.

So let me just say this: thank you for allowing us to do this to the best of our ability, knowing that we haven’t always gotten it right and knowing that at times you didn’t even know why we were doing what we were doing. But would you pray—especially as we get into another political cycle—that we would see the opportunities we need to take advantage of. Because let me be clear, the mission of the church—and for those of you who are super conservative, before you hate me just go home and think about it—the mission of the church is not to return America to colonial eighteenth century morality. Okay? Ladies, you wouldn’t even get a vote on it anyway. Listen, the mission of the church is that the world would know that God has done something in the world. That he sent his son into this world, he is Jesus the Christ, as Peter said, the Son of the Living God. He died on the cross and was buried. He rose from the dead and was
seen. And we know that when that message grips the heart and soul of an individual, it begins to change them not from the outside in, not from their political views to something else, it begins to change them from the inside out. And they become more compassionate, and they become more generous, and they become more loving, and they become better husbands and better wives and better fathers and better mothers, and they become more consistent in terms of their morality and their ethics; they’re more honest, they’re better employers, they’re better employees. We change from the inside out. That’s the message, that’s the Gospel, and that’s what changed the world. And that’s what will continue to change the world if the church will lock and load on that one central idea.

So let’s be a light. Let’s out-give every other organization in this city. Let’s out-serve every—let’s serve people we don’t even like and, you know, let’s serve people that we don’t even agree with, and let’s serve people we’re not even sure if they should be in our country. Let’s confuse everybody with our generosity and with our benevolence. Let’s be a light that’s so confounding people buzz around us like flies going *I got to land there, I got to know*. And you know what else? Let’s let our conversation be so full of grace that Christians around us wonder where we stand on certain issues. It’s like *I think you’re just too accepting of that*. No, I’m not too accepting of that, I want to over-accept them and I don’t even have an agenda. Even if they never become a Christian, when they go to their grave they’ll say *you know what, I never went to her church and I never agreed with what she believed but I’ll tell you what, when I was in need I knew I could count on her. There was something and I could—there was something about what she believed and this God that she served and her generosity and her benevolence and her consistency, it’s undeniable.* And let’s let our conversations be full of grace that is going to spill with sprinkled in just a little bit of salt. And you know what will happen? We will make a point. But we will make a point because we made a difference. And that’s what Jesus taught, that’s what Paul modeled, that’s what the early church did, and that’s the opportunity that we have.