

## CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 4

### *“The Hype and the Hope”*

This morning I'm going to 're-launch' my series began just before Christmas. Over the past few weeks we have looked specifically at the cultural controversy surrounding issues related to Christmas. Over the next few weeks I want to look with you at some of the larger cultural controversies that are at play in our world. We'll take a look at the Separation of Church and State, Prayer in Public School, The Death Penalty, Homosexuality, Euthanasia and a few others. Today I want to reset the parameters I'll use to preach this series. I want to lay out my "hopes" for this series so that the discussion of these controversies doesn't get lost in the "hype" of just another opinion being randomly spouted. Metaphorically, I 'hope' to bring some more 'light' to these issues, than just more 'heat' to the 'hype'.

This series has been inspired by a book I read during my Sabbatical 2 years ago called Confronting the Controversies by Adam Hamilton. The book is a collection of sermons Adam preached at the United Methodist, Church of the Resurrection located in Kansas City. Adam is a gifted communicator and I hope to do his work justice in my attempts. I am indebted to his research and his writing.

I hope this series might help in these 4 ways:

1) I hope to help Christians learn how to do Christian ethics; that is, how to think through complex moral issues applying both biblical teaching and theological thinking to these concerns. The most dangerous thing I have ever heard in the past 10 years of being your pastor was said to me shortly after my arrival here. After a message that apparently had been somewhat thought provoking, a person remarked at the door: "Just tell me what I'm supposed to believe, I don't want to have to think about all this stuff, just tell me what I'm supposed to believe."

That is not my job, to tell you what to believe, but to help us determine what God would have us believe, and even more, to inspire, encourage and empower us to translate those beliefs into God-pleasing actions. I hope to help us “think” together about some tough issues, and live better because we’ve thought together.

2) I hope to provide a model for how to dialogue about moral issues and maintain respect for persons on both sides of these different issues! I’ll tell you more about my methodology in a minute.

3) I hope to teach both Christians and non-Christians how the Christian faith relates to critical issues in contemporary society. The Christian faith is not supposed to be anti-culture, nor is it to be ignored in the cultural debate. Jesus often found himself in conflict with his culture, but he knew his larger mission was not to demonize nor abandon his culture, but to help transform it. I hope we might learn that lesson as well.

4) I hope this series will accomplish what I hope for in every sermon; that it might evangelize, encourage discipleship, offer prophetic challenges and provide pastoral care to my flock, both here and in the larger community. I know that’s a lot to ‘hope’ in any one sermon, but...I can hope can’t I?

I know that more in depth books have been written on each subject, and trying to do justice to each issue in a 20 minute sermon is a stretch, so some homework might be involved. I’d like to share with you my outline for looking at each of these cultural controversies. I want to begin with an overarching Biblical text that will introduce the issue, or address the solution, and then spend the first third of the message laying out the issue from one particular perspective, then another third exploring the issue from the other side of the fence. I hope to do those with equal intellectual intention and equal passion. Then the last third of the message I want to introduce the Biblical insight using the best scholarship and prayerfulness I can muster.

I know as a good teacher I'm not supposed to interpose my personal opinion, but I'll probably struggle to remain entirely objective. Rather than giving you "what to believe", I'll try to present my personal opinions, not as an ethics or cultural specialist, but as a fellow 'wrestler' seeking to wrestle at finding God's truth in the middle of each issue!

I make a couple basic assumptions going into this series;

1) I assume that part of what makes these issues truly controversial is that they are complex issues, not prone to simple or easy solutions. Because they are complex and multifaceted, a controversial issue by definition will result in multiple perspectives. I have no grand illusion that we'll finish this series and all believe exactly the same things about every issue.

2) Secondly I make an even more important assumption; I believe that thinking, compassionate, caring people of faith can hold different positions on these issues. That does not mean that both are right, or that both are wrong; but that both may have appropriate motives for holding their opposite perspectives and both will likely have valid points to make in each debate.

3) Thirdly, I assume some of these issues will be impossible to resolve completely this side of eternity. Which means, we'll have to figure out a way in the mean time to fulfill Jesus' commands to love one another, even while we might hold different opinions. It's part of the exciting process of being a follower of Jesus, and a member of the Family of God!

4) I'm assuming God cares about these current cultural issues. Not so that one side can point fingers at the other and gloat" "I'm right, therefore you are wrong..." No, God cares about these issues, because they affect how we live, and God cares about us!

Not in the sense that He would spare us from the discomfort of healthy debate, but in the sense that God wants us to live creative, and effective lives in the midst of the world stream in which we find ourselves.

Just as Jesus inspired his followers to 'render unto Caesar what was Caesar's in 30 AD, and just as Jesus inspired Martin Luther to challenge the abuses of the Roman Church in 1500, and just as Jesus inspired John Wesley to work to abolish the Child labor practices in 1720, and just as Jesus inspired Abe Lincoln, and Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. to abolish slavery and continue to work for equal rights for minorities; Jesus wants us to be champions for His cause in the battlefield of our current culture. God cares about these issues that affect our lives. That being the case; leads us then to the great question of the morning as we continue to set the parameters of this series. How do Christian people determine what is true? How can we discern the convictions God would have us hold, and work toward?

John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Methodism, offered four tools for discerning God's will. We have come to call this the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which means 4-sided. These four principles will be the tools we'll use in this sermon series to help us consider the issues we'll discuss.

1) **SCRIPTURE**: The Bible is the primary means for learning God's will. It was never intended to be an inerrant historical record, nor a science text book, or a mathematics primer; we study the Scriptures prayerfully, looking for precepts, principles and direct commandments as they relate to the issues at hand. The Bible is our map, our guide, our 'owner's manual.' But the Bible can be difficult to interpret. It was written in a time when circumstances were very different from ours; and sometimes, confusing us further, the writers express perspectives that seem to conflict with each other. I'll try to include some of those instances while looking at the various viewpoints related to specific issues.

But, remarkably, most often the Bible speaks to us with one authoritative voice about what God expects of our lives. For John Wesley, (and I propose for us) the Bible was a primary source, not one equal among the four, but the primary source with the others occupying equal second place status among the four.

Someone imagined the quadrilateral as a three legged milking stool, with Scripture being the primary seat, and the other three components as the legs that support that primary component.

2) **TRADITION**: Along with the Scriptures, we look for guidance to the teachings and beliefs of the church as expressed by Christians in all ages. The Christian tradition includes writings about theology and doctrine, prayers and affirmations, the writings of councils and the wisdom gained throughout Christian and human history. Tradition, for those who are United Methodists (like myself) also includes the Book of Discipline of the UMC, as well as John Wesley's writings. As United Methodists, we may not always agree with our denominations' official positions, but they must, at the very least, be taken seriously in forming and shaping our understanding of God's will, as long as we abide under the UMC tent! We must be especially careful in this 'me first' generation that places such primacy on the present, to not discount the inestimable value of those faithful saints who have gone before us carving out what we tenderly call our 'tradition.' It is the second source of discerning God's will, and God's truth.

3) **EXPERIENCE**: The experience Wesley refers to is not simply a collection of events and happenings, which may not always present a reliable picture to go by, but our experiences of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. We experience the Holy Spirit in worship, in the fellowship of other believers, in our work among God World and in the testimony we share with our unbelieving neighbors and culture. In other words, we believe that God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit's witness, discerned through prayer and confirmed by our experience with the community of disciples.

4) **REASON**: Wesley believed that God gave us minds along with the ability (and responsibility) to do our best to apply intellectual reason to our interpretation and understanding of God's word, and God's will, and God's world.

Reason by itself can be manipulated and lead us in the wrong direction – it is obviously possible to make a “reasonable” argument on either side of an issue – but reason can be used, (must be used) along with the other three tools and be constrained by them. I would add to Wesley's inclusion of reason, a healthy dose of common sense, as a balancing component to the overuse of mere mental gymnastics. I worked 8 years and attended 7 years at academic institutions that sometimes ignore the value of common sense and invest almost entirely in the mental ability to solve every problem and address every issue. I hope we will not make that same mistake.

Well, these are basic principles and tools that we will use in these discussions, and I would encourage you to begin using them in your everyday lives as you seek to discover God's will for your life. They might help us begin to view all of life through the eyes of faith.

In conclusion; regardless of how each of us individually might come out believing on a given issue, my last hope (amidst the increasing hype) is that each of us will seek God's will and long to bring our convictions in line with God's faith, so that in all things Jesus Christ may be Lord in our life! Ok, I guess I have one more hope...that through our study of these Current Cultural Controversies, we may all grow in that faith and that we might live our lives together, and work together to create a more civil and more just culture. AMEN

(next week: The Separation of Church and State)

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***“The Hype and the Hope”***

**My 4 basic “Hopes”**

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**My 4 basic “Assumptions”**

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**The 4 basic “Tools” for discerning truth**

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