

INTRODUCTION

In my first church out of seminary, we had a sign where you could change the letters and leave a message. It was a lot of work for me to come up with a clever phrase. And if I kept the message up more than a week, there was always some well-meaning member who would say, "That message was up last week, too." That's probably why we don't have a message sign in front of our church! But I've got to hand it to some of the people who put the messages on signs around the land. They can be pretty creative—and even funny. Here are my top ten church sign messages.

1. Tweet Others as you would like to be tweeted.
2. Don't make me come down there – God.
3. How do we make holy water? We boil the hell out of it.
4. Choose the Bread of Life or you are Toast.
5. Now is a good time to visit. Our Pastor is on vacation.
6. Adam & Eve – The first people to not read the Apple terms and conditions.
7. Without Jesus there would be hell to pay.
8. Sin Burn is prevented by Son Screen.
9. God loves you more than Kanye loves Kanye.
10. What do you call a sleepwalking Nun? A Roam'n Catholic.

The Gospel according to John is all about signs. John chooses seven significant miracles of Jesus and calls them signs. These signs are to point us to the truth that Jesus was more than just a man—He was God in the flesh.

This is the fourth and final message from John 7. Jesus has been in Jerusalem during the Feast of Shelters. We see a growing animosity against Jesus. The Religious Mafia were certainly outraged because Jesus had jumped up in the middle of the final Festival ceremony and shouted to the crowd that He was the source of Living Water.

John 7:37-52: On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him." He said this about the Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus were going to receive the Spirit, for the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

When some from the crowd heard these words, they said, "This truly is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some said, "Surely the Messiah doesn't come from Galilee, does he? Doesn't the Scripture say that the Messiah comes from David's offspring and from the town of Bethlehem, where David lived?" So the crowd was divided because of him. Some of them wanted to seize him, but no one laid hands on him. (Up in verse 32 the Sanhedrin sent men to arrest Jesus). Then the servants came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him?"

The servants answered, "No man ever spoke like this!"

Then the Pharisees responded to them: "Are you fooled too? Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which doesn't know the law, is accursed."

Nicodemus—the one who came to him previously and who was one of them—said to them, "Our law doesn't judge a man before it hears from him and knows what he's doing, does it?"

"You aren't from Galilee too, are you?" they replied. "Investigate and you will see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

The one thing we learn this passage is that the people had different opinions about Him. The best summary of this passage is found in verse 43. It says, "So the crowd was DIVIDED because of him."

Jesus created division 2,000 years ago. And He has the same effect on people in the 21st Century. He still divides. That's why I've entitled this message Jesus: The Great Divider.

Have you ever wondered WHY people are so divided about Jesus? Let's learn three lessons about Jesus the Great Divider.

1. Jesus divides people because He claims to be ultimate truth.

The crowd had different opinions about Jesus. Some said He was the Prophet predicted by Moses. Others said He is the Messiah. But then they got hung-up because Jesus was from Galilee. I'll explain later why they were so obsessed with someone being from Galilee. Another group said, "The Messiah must come from Bethlehem!" Of course, we know what they didn't: Jesus WAS born in Bethlehem.

The idea of Jesus being divisive is hard for us to understand. We want to think of Jesus as the great UNITER. We remember where Jesus prayed in John 17 that we would all be ONE just as He and His Father were one. And there are many verses in the New Testament that speak of the unity of the Spirit.

When it comes to the Body of Christ, the church, there is unity. And we are all ONE in Christ Jesus. But when it comes to how the world reacts to the truth about Jesus, there is always division.

Jesus even predicted that family members would be divided over Him. Jesus said, "Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household."
(Matthew 10:34-36 CSB)

Jesus realized that because of the radical nature of His teaching, people would be divided about Him. We live in a post-modern age of relative morality. Postmodernism is a broad term applied to arts and science. It basically rejects all absolutes. In the spiritual sense, let me give you a simple definition of post-modernism. Post-modernism is suspicion toward anyone who claims to have absolute truth, because there is no such thing as absolute truth. Most Americans don't believe there is ultimate truth. Truth to them is whatever they believe to be truth. Today you hear people say, "Your truth may not be my truth; and my truth may not be your truth." That's how they can justify believing and behaving any way they choose.

Jesus made a claim that still divides people today. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 CSB) He claimed to BE truth and the ONLY way to get to Heaven. That divides billions of people today. In John 17:17 Jesus said to His Father, "Your Word is truth."

We'll have much more to say about truth in John 8 where Jesus said, "You will know the truth; and the truth will set you free." But for now, we just need to realize that the truth about Jesus divides people. Very often these days, His truth divides families.

Ten years ago I told you the story of a Muslim girl from Ohio named Rifqa Bary. She became a Christian at age 16, and when her Muslim father heard about it, he and some members of their mosque planned to kill her unless she renounced Christ. Under Sharia law, this is called an honor-killing. Rifqa refused to denounce Jesus, and had to run away. She found refuge with a Christian family in Florida. Her story and the subsequent custody hearing made national headlines. She was ultimately returned to her home in Ohio, but was placed under protective care of local law enforcement. Her family ignored her as if she was a dead person.

At age 18 she left home. She is now 28 and has gained legal citizenship. She has graduated from college and is pursuing a degree in law. She has written a book entitled *Hiding in the Light: Why I risked everything to leave Islam to follow Jesus*.

That's a story that has been repeated thousands of times in families around the world. And it doesn't just happen in Muslim families. Many times, a family member will follow Jesus and the other members of the family aren't religious, so that family is divided. Some of you have family members who make it impossible to talk about things of faith when the family gathers. When it comes to faith in Jesus, He is the great divider.

2. You can't be neutral about Jesus; to be neutral is to be against him.

The Jewish leaders were against Jesus. They sent their Temple police to arrest Jesus. But they came back empty-handed. Can you see the humor in this? Try to imagine the anger of the Jewish leaders when these tough guards came back without Jesus. They demanded, "Where is He? Why didn't you arrest Him?"

The guards hung their heads like kids caught stealing from the cookie jar. "Well, um, you see sir, we went to arrest him, and He was teaching, so we wanted to wait until he finished. But we

started listening to Him, and He was saying some amazing things. No man has ever taught like this before. Instead of us arresting Him, His words arrested us—so we decided not to arrest Him.”

The leaders were angry and said, “You are a bunch of fools because you’ve been fooled like the common people. They don’t know the Law, WE do. We’re the experts and we say He’s got to die.” These two groups demonstrate that you can’t be neutral about Jesus.

Jesus said, “Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather with me scatters.” Matthew 12:30 (CSB). Someone said this is the most narrow-minded statement Jesus ever made. That may be true in our current pluralistic, super-tolerant American religious mindset. It does sound rather intolerant, doesn’t it? But that doesn’t change the fact that it is true.

Jesus says you cannot straddle the fence when it comes to Him. You are either at this moment trusting Him or you are rejecting Him. The only thing you cannot do is to be neutral about Him. So are you gathering people toward Him, or are you pushing people away from Him?

The great intellectual writer, C.S. Lewis, wrote: “There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan.” Lewis said that you can write Jesus off as a lunatic. Or you can attack Him as a liar. Or you can crown Him as Lord. The only thing you cannot do is *ignore* Him.

Some nations, like Switzerland, declare that when it comes to war, they are neutral, but if they were ever under attack they would be forced to change their position. People who try to be neutral about Jesus remind me of the man in Kentucky during the Civil War who tried to be neutral. He didn’t want to be identified with the Rebels, so he wore a dark blue shirt. And he didn’t want to be identified with the Yankees so he wore grey trousers. As a result He got shot at from both sides! There is no neutrality when it comes to Christ.

3. Expect to be ridiculed when you take a stand for Jesus.

When Nicodemus defended Jesus, they turned on him with sarcastic anger and mocked him by saying, “You aren’t from Galilee too, are you?” they replied. “Investigate and you will see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” Actually, when you investigate the scriptures you discover that Jonah, Micah, and Elijah were from the Galilee area.

Nicodemus was the Jewish ruler who came to Jesus at night. Jesus told Him that religious wasn’t enough. Jesus said that if anyone wants to see God’s Kingdom, we must be born again. We’re not sure if Nicodemus was a follower of Jesus but here he speaks up for Jesus. And after the crucifixion, it is Nicodemus who joined Joseph of Arimathea in covering the corpse of Christ with spices and placing it in the tomb.

Just speaking up for Jesus unleashed the hate of the other members of Sanhedrin. They accuse him of being a Galilean.

So why is all this opposition against anyone from Galilee? Galilee was the region in the north near the Sea of Galilee. It was considered the rural part of Israel. The residents of Jerusalem were the refined, educated, aristocrats of Jewish society. And the people from Galilee were considered uneducated backwoods hicks. The religious leaders couldn't imagine a prophet, much less the Messiah coming from such a backwoods area.

Let me illustrate their attitude. I grew up in Alabama next to Mississippi, where Mike Parks grew up, and those states have more rednecks per capita than any other state. Of all the Presidents of the U.S. it is truthful to say that no President ever arose from Alabama or Mississippi. By the way, when it comes to Texas, we've had four U.S. Presidents: Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, George Bush 41 and 43. And that doesn't count the three Presidents of the Republic of Texas!

I doubt a President will ever come from Alabama. I'll admit we were rednecks in Alabama—but as backward as we were there, whenever we heard about the hillbillies in West Virginia, we felt pretty sophisticated. Everything is relative. A redneck is higher on the social ladder than a hillbilly. In Israel, the people from the hills of Galilee were the lowest rung of the ladder, the hillbillies. The sophisticated people of Jerusalem considered everyone in Galilee to be a country hick, along the lines of the hillbilly mother who wrote this letter to her son:

Dear Jim Bob, I'm writin' this letter real slow 'cause I know you can't read very fast. We don't live where we did before 'cause your dad done read in the paper that most accidents happen within ten miles from your home. So we moved 15 miles away to be safer.

I can't send you our new address 'cause the last family who lived here took the numbers off beside the door so they wouldn't have to change their address at their new house.

I locked my keys in the car yesterday. We wuz really worried 'cause it took me two hours to get your pa out of the car.

Your sister had a new baby yesterday. We haven't found out if it's a boy or girl yet. So I don't know if you'll be an aunt or an uncle.

Your Uncle Buddy Bob drowned in a vat at the whisky factory where he worked last week. Some men tried to fish him out, but he was able to fight them off—they say he died happy. We had him cremated and he burned for three days.

I meant to put a \$10 bill in this letter but I had already sealed the envelope when I thought about it. Love, Ma

There are many pseudo-sophisticated people in our culture who believe Bible-believing Christians are as dumb as a rock. We are witnessing an attack against Christianity and the Bible like nothing we have ever seen. The Academic community considers us to all be a bunch of

hicks from the sticks. The same scorn directed toward Nicodemus is directed toward us who stand up for Jesus.

There is a strong expression of intellectual snobbery happening in our nation today. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale were all founded as Christian schools to train young men for the Gospel Ministry. Today if you attend an Ivy League school and claim to believe in Creation rather than Evolution, you will be ridiculed and laughed to shame. Many intellectuals consider all Christians to be ignorant Bible-thumpers who refuse to change with the times. If you claim to believe the Bible in today's culture you will be labeled as "narrow-minded, bigoted, homophobic, anti-intellectual, unscientific, and intolerant"—and probably a lot worse than I can't say with children present.

Jesus predicted we would be persecuted when we stand for Him.

Jesus said, "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12 CSB)

The greatest time of persecution against Christians in history is taking place now. According to Open Doors, one out of every nine Christians in the world live in a place where it is forbidden, or illegal to publicly practice the Christian faith.

Ten years ago, I had hoped and prayed the doors for the Gospel would continue to open in China. But at this time China is persecuting Christians, burning churches, and kicking out foreign Christians at a level we haven't seen since Mao's cultural revolution that started in 1967. But the believers in China aren't discouraged. The church will go back underground and it will grow at an even faster rate. Because throughout history the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church. Look around the world. Look around your city, and your family. Jesus is still the great divider.

CONCLUSION

Years ago we were driving in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado and we came to Independence pass. This location is called "the Continental Divide." Geologists call it the backbone of the continent. It's the line running north and south where the mountains reach their highest peaks. The portion of the Continental Divide in the U.S. is about 3,000 miles long and stretches from Montana to the Mexico border. There is an amazing meteorological fact about this ridge. Two drops of rain can be falling side by side. If one falls on the western side of the ridge, that drop of water will join others and flow westward toward the Pacific Ocean. If the other drop falls on the eastern side the ridge it will join others to flow into the Mississippi River out into the Gulf and finally out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Think about it. Two raindrops so close they are almost clinging to each other can start in the same place, but end up oceans away from each other. People are the same way.

Belief in Jesus isn't the Continental Divide, it is the Eternal Divide.

Two people can be sitting beside each other hearing the Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ. One accepts Christ and goes to Heaven, and the person next to him or her rejects God's gift of eternal life and spend eternity separated from God.

I've seen this happen in families, in marriage, among friends. It's amazing how people respond differently to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Someone has said the same sun that melts ice will harden clay.

Which side of the divide do you stand today? Can you say, "I have repented of my sin and placed my faith in Jesus Christ. I'm going to follow Jesus regardless of how I am persecuted or scorned by our changing culture!" If so, you're on the right side of salvation.

But if you're on the wrong side, and you never change, your destiny is to spend eternity separated from God in a place the Bible calls hell. But it's not too late. Right now, you can step across that line of faith. You can turn your back on your sin and trust Jesus. You can say, "I have decided to follow Jesus—no turning back." If you do, you will end up in Heaven for all eternity.

The truth about Jesus divides. But when you surrender to the truth of Jesus you find yourself united with the other members of God's Family. And suddenly you learn why God created you—to have a personal love relationship with Him.

OUTLINE

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