

Tough Questions/Real Answers: RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Ephesians 4:1-6, 14-16

How do we make decisions on social issues?

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
October 29, 2023

Dr. Isidor Isaac Rabi was a pioneer physicist in the 20th century. A distinguished member of the faculty at Columbia University, he won a Nobel Prize in Physics in 1944. He worked on the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb. More positively, his research led to the technology behind magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and microwave ovens. Once someone asked Dr. Rabi how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but how he conducted himself in his studies. She always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?"

"Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."¹

Asking good questions can also make you a faithful disciple of Jesus. That's the whole point of this sermon series. Perhaps when I began this series on "Tough Questions/Real Answers" back in September, some of you may have thought I was going to preach on the controversial questions of our time: abortion, homosexuality, racism, the death penalty, church/state issues, and so forth. There are reasons I haven't. For one thing, I steered more toward deeper theological and spiritual issues, because I think ultimately those are more enduring questions. Secondly, I believe social issues should be dealt with in dialogue, as a conversation between people who may have different ideas. Preaching is one-way communication. Thirdly, there is a difference between courage and foolhardiness!

However, as followers of Jesus, we do need to make decisions about some of these issues if we are going to be engaged in our world today. We have to make ethical decisions at work, at school, at church, even on the golf course—and I'm not going to confess my sins at that point! Sometimes those decisions have to be made on the spur of the moment.

Dr. Gordon MacDonald, one of my favorite Christian writers, was on his way to speak at a convention in Minneapolis a few years ago, and his taxi from the airport was stopped at a red light. Suddenly a dirty, drunken street person stumbled across the street and fell out in the crosswalk. From inside the taxi Gordon heard the man's head thud against the pavement. He opened the door and stood up to see the man lying in a spreading pool of

blood, and he began to think: I have on a brand new suit; I'm due to speak in 15 minutes; I can't get messed up; I'm in a strange city; and I don't have any medical training. He even thought, if that guy is dumb enough to get that drunk, why should busy people stop and help?

He wrote later, "I'm ashamed of this. I can't believe a Bible-believing Christian could find those thoughts in the filing cabinets of his soul. For a few seconds those thoughts militated against any movement on my part. Before I could come to better senses, other people came rushing to this man's help, and I was able to get back into my taxi and go on to the convention center to speak about sensitivity and caring for the needs of other human beings. Isn't that stupid?"²

Every day we are faced with decisions. How do we translate our faith into action? How do we confront the controversies of our time? How do we find godly answers to social questions?

What I want to talk about today is not so much the issues as the rules of engagement. "Rules of engagement" is a military term that means the conditions and procedures under which a soldier or a unit can confront the enemy. Likewise, we need rules we can use to decide social issues. There can be lots of different ways to feel and think about any number of questions, and different circumstances can call forth different decisions. What we need is a set of standards by which we can enter into the conversation. We need a foundation of discourse so we can engage in meaningful dialogue. We need rules of engagement.

Not knowing how to deal with social issues, not having some good rules of engagement, can leave you adrift in your faith. Paul describes what happens: "*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.*"³ Without rules of engagement, we don't know where to stand or how to get there, and that can have tragic consequences.

How can we provide the knowledge and the courage and the strength to help people make ethical and godly decisions on social issues? Let me offer some rules of engagement.

The basic Methodist tool of ethical discussion is called the "**Wesleyan Quadrilateral.**" John Wesley had four sources of authority when it came to making decisions of faith. This image is not actually something Wesley ever said; it was formulated by Dr. Albert Outler, a great Wesleyan scholar, who drew it out of the body of Wesley's work. My contribution to Wesleyan scholarship is to call it the "Wesleyan trapezoid," because to me, Wesley gave greater weight to Scripture than to any other source of authority. He referred to himself as *homo unius libri*—a man of one book.⁴

So the long side of the trapezoid, the primary source of authority for Christians, is **Scripture.** The fundamental rule, sufficient both for faith and practice, is the Bible. Paul gave Timothy the reason: "*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*"⁵

Of course, Paul was writing before the New Testament came to be. He was referring to the Hebrew Scriptures. But the principle still holds. When a question arises about our behavior, we search the Scriptures for an answer. If the Scriptures don't deal with the issue specifically—like nuclear weapons or genetic engineering—we try to interpret themes or principles out of Scripture that apply to the issue.

Having looked at Scripture first, then we look at the **tradition** of the church. What have Christians believed for two thousand years? How have faithful people responded to a particular issue in the past? Paul tells Timothy to remember the tradition in which he was raised: “*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.*”⁶ What have we learned and believed from our parents and teachers in the faith? We have to take that into consideration.

Wesley lived in the 18th century, a period we call the Enlightenment. It was a time when human thought was flourishing, and science was having its real beginning. So Wesley thought **reason** was very important for deciding questions of faith and action. God didn’t give us a brain just to keep our skulls from caving in. He gave us the ability to think things through, to make logical connections and lucid arguments for or against a position. To be a Christian, you don’t have to check your mind at the door. We can be a thinking, reasonable people.

The fourth side of the Wesleyan trapezoid is **experience**. When you have searched Scripture and tradition and thought it through, what does your heart tell you? What do you know deep in your gut is right? Wesley believed in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and feelings. If we have been in prayer about something, and we get an inner witness, we can trust that God is speaking to us.

Sometimes experience is not just our own inner leading, but the corporate experience of the Body of Christ. When we have a decision to make or we’re wondering about some issue, we can engage in conversation with other faithful people and come to a sense of what is right, based on Scripture, tradition, reason, and the common experience of the community of faith.

Having these rules of engagement, we can make ethical decisions that are informed and honor God. What a blessing it can be, even in the tough decisions we have to make, to be able to make those decisions with the foundation and the assurance of our faith. I’m not saying the same decision should be made in every single case. I’m not saying that equally faithful people won’t come to totally different conclusions. My point is that we should never take such a decision lightly. Every ethical decision, every social issue should be measured against Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, so we can make a choice that honors God. Then we can grow in Christ until we reach full maturity as disciples. Then we can build up the church in love. That is God’s desire for each of us.

All this requires one more rule of engagement: **tolerance for dialogue**. If we are going to grow into the likeness of Christ, and if we are going to knit the community of faith together in love, we have to be tolerant enough of different opinions to allow conversation to happen. I’m not saying that the answers don’t matter, because they do. But we will never get together on the answers if we are not willing to engage one another in conversation about the questions.

The attitude of tolerance has a long history in the Methodist movement. John Wesley said, “As to all opinions which do not strike at the heart of Christianity, we think and let think.”⁷ In the United Methodist Church today, you will find faithful Christians who have very different opinions on almost every social issue, from very conservative to very liberal, and all along the spectrum. We live in a big tent that covers a lot of ground. Not only is that OK, it’s one of the things I really value about the United Methodist Church.

But keeping the big tent up has become increasingly difficult in today’s world. We are living in a time of endemic polarization. You have to pick a tribe, and then all the other

tribes are your enemies. Those who don't agree with you are bad people. Something's wrong with them, and all they deserve is your contempt. Much of our civil discourse is not civil anymore; it has devolved into "us" versus "them."

We see this in politics, of course. Our federal government was paralyzed for three weeks because even the members of the same party couldn't reach agreement. (I'm not sure they've limbered up yet.) We see polarization in race relations and the rise of hate crimes, even though the overall crime rate is down.⁸ We see it in the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. We see it in the conflicts over abortion, sexual identity, and immigration. What are we to do? Are we just going to go down fighting?

Let's remember the Jesus rules. We've heard from Paul and John Wesley. Let's also listen to Jesus. He condensed all the Law and Prophets, all the Scriptures, all the rules, into two simple statements: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.*" And "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"⁹ Drawn from Jesus' own Scripture and tradition, there is no clearer call. There is no greater power. There is no better rule of engagement.

There is nothing more radical in a polarized society than love. This love of Jesus is not some sweet, sentimental emotion. I heard a presentation about a month ago from Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, a black woman pastor at the oldest continuous church in New York City. Her term for Jesus' rule of engagement is "Fierce Love."¹⁰ The fierce love of Jesus took him all the way to the cross. Pastor Lewis talked about the 4 C's of fierce love.

For followers of Jesus, fierce love exhibits **candor**. It tells the truth, but it "speaks the truth in love," as Paul said.¹¹

Fierce love engages in **conflict**; it doesn't run away. But the hope is that the conflict can be constructive and productive of a better outcome.

Fierce love builds **community**, even with those who think differently about things. In the end, it's all about relationships, and nobody can accomplish anything all alone.

Fierce love generates **compassion**, for the poor, hungry, oppressed, sick, broken, and depressed, for sure, but also for those who are enemies and who hold you in contempt. You know what? They all have mamas, too. They all have the same human hurts and heartaches and doubts and despair that everyone has, even if you can't see them. Maybe all they need is some fierce love, not necessarily to agree with you, but to become your friend.

Is there hope today? Is there hope in our world, with all the conflicts and the problems and the polarization? Where there is God, there is hope! Where there is love, there is hope!

I hear lots of conversation today about reducing the polarization in our country. One national organization is called Starts With Us—you can google it.¹² Their research indicates that 87% of Americans are tired of the toxic polarization over all the issues. Indeed, any solution will not start in Washington; it will start with regular people like us.

I was reading my favorite Republican, Rex Nelson, this week. He was talking about an organization in Arkansas called Braver Angels, which is trying to unite people across party lines to discuss the issues facing our state. He quoted the organizer of the group as saying, "We must find ways to build bridges again and try not to be antagonistic toward those who disagree."¹³ That's good work.

That's the church's work. We are the community of faith, love, and hope. We belong to a tradition in which our founder said to those who disagreed with him, "If your heart is

as my heart, give me your hand.”¹⁴ We have a Savior who said, “Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself.” We have rules of engagement, to examine every issue through the lenses of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. We can love with ferocity, speaking the truth with candor, engaging in constructive conflict, building community, and generating compassion, even for our enemies.

It starts with us. We have the motivation to make the world a better place. We have the rules of engagement; let’s engage! What are we waiting on, church? We have an answer!

¹ Sermons.com. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isidor_Isaac_Rabi.

² Gordon MacDonald, from the sermon “Pointing to Jesus: Generosity,” February 22, 1998.

³ Ephesians 4:14.

⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Volume V, p. 3.

⁵ II Timothy 3:16-17.

⁶ II Timothy 3:14-15.

⁷ John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*, <https://seedbed.com/on-john-wesley-quotes/>.

⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/violent-crime-car-jackings-fbi-2022-crime-statistics/>.

<https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics>.

⁹ Mark 12:29-31, cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Leviticus 19:18.

¹⁰ Jacqui Lewis, *Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World* (New York: Harmony Books, 2021).

¹¹ Ephesians 4:15.

¹² <https://startswith.us/>.

¹³ <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2023/oct/25/our-better-angels/>.

¹⁴ John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” II, 1. <https://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/catholic.html>.