

# Us Against Them? By: Kenneth LaPrade

**But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (James 1:19b, 20)**

How might this biblical truth apply to our approach toward a world in which rapidly fired opinions are tweeted quickly from the hip in the arenas of social issues, political agendas, religious wrangling, and a volatile tangle of “us against them” controversies?

Many of us know from experience what it is like to have strongly defended former views with which we now firmly disagree! On top of that, we might have undergone the experience of being pegged as traitors by good friends - for no longer going with the flow of a previous paradigm. Sometimes, it might be advisable to slowly and humbly meditate on all the implications of such dilemmas in our own lives. We cannot undo any past failures via time machines, nor can we retroactively pretend to have learned things we didn't know in the past.

Serious Christians in general know what it is like (in their opinions) to be lovingly outspoken at times and yet be badly misunderstood. Some very reflective, thoughtful ones, upon changing perspectives, might realize in hindsight that they were previously often guilty of confusing “boldness” with **brash** arrogance. Being in denial about having been previously contentious helps no one. Sometimes clear distinctions like this are hard to pinpoint even if we have had good intentions. At times, prayerful self-doubt about our possibly mistaken past behaviors and attitudes - is truly a good thing, leading us to greater clarity!

Honest folks desire to be frank and forthcoming without being rude, controlling, or pushy. They also want to be gentle and approachable without being gun shy, defensive, or wishy-washy. As highly imperfect, growing individuals within a slowly maturing community of believers, how do we keep from getting out of kilter? We know that clamming up and making Christianity a purely “private religion” is unscriptural, but we also know that brazen, “wooly-bully” public displays can often do more harm than good! They can even end up turning folks **away** from the faith.

In fact, in the context of zealous evangelism with an incomplete or distorted message (such as a lack of a true Kingdom focus), Christians can sadly be as harmful as the hypocrites rebuked by Jesus! “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell [the judgement of Gehenna] as yourselves.” – (Mt. 23:15) One might keep in mind that these first century religious leaders were convinced in their own eyes that they were totally “right”; they did not think of themselves as false or hypocritical.

As we humbly examine any doubtful fruit in our own experiences, we must never lose confidence in how merciful and forgiving the Heavenly Father is with our sins, shortcomings, quirks, and misunderstandings - as we keep seeking to be genuine with Him according to Scriptures. If we believe (correctly) that God will be fair and compassionate in future

judgements with those who never even heard the message, can we not be patient and forbearing with one another who endeavor (at some level) to live as Christians? If we are to love even our enemies, why not be an example to the unbelieving world of extreme forgiveness among fellow Christians? Shouldn't we do this, even if there are serious household errors that should be challenged? We know from the Bible that we don't really love God if we can't love one another.

I know that I am not alone when I make this personal observation: I have never been treated with more cruel suspicion and hostile rejection by secularists, atheists, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, etc., than I have been by fellow "Christians!" **You** could probably make a similar statement! Why is that? Is a spiritual battle in play in which we are seduced to forget who the real enemies are? On top of such tragedy, I would say that most "Christian" mean-spiritedness (including either subtle or over-the-top expulsions) have been due to dogfights among brethren from the same basic background. Such pervasive trends make religious chatter about "loving one another" a matter of hollow rhetoric without substance. You shall know them by their fruit, right? Of course, it should be no surprise if outsiders accurately size us up in exasperation and mutter, "Why in the heck believe in God and Jesus and all that stuff if those guys who believe spend all their time quibbling over issue X or which leader to follow?" Our bad "Christian" example can speak more loudly to outsiders than a "correct" doctrinal understanding of anything! [In saying this I am not relegating true knowledge and practice to a status of insignificance; unity built around hazy lies is of no value before God.] I **am**, however, being observant concerning mutual, widespread sloppiness in learning to be good, decent neighbors.

Of course, what follows here is sadly logical. How in the world can we genuinely exemplify loving our neighbors and even our enemies, while being baited into treating the close circle of family members with hostility? There must be a loving way to help one another out of this obviously dark, centuries-long travesty, without compromising important beliefs or without getting distracted by less important issues.

As an example of less important issues (also of real neighborly priorities), I will recount incidents from my school workplace over 10 years ago (in the spring of 2008), during primary campaigns in U.S. politics. A friendly colleague, with good intentions, had distributed copies of a religious publication from her church to all of us on the faculty. Shortly after that she went on to chat with each of us about the upcoming voting situation, informing each of us solemnly that one of the candidates was a secret Muslim plant being inserted to undermine the nation. [Perhaps you have also heard this specific conspiracy theory.] In fact, she challenged me twice about accepting this upfront idea, a proposal which had been boldly preached at her well-known El Paso megachurch. Though I thought this was an alarming, misguided "mission" to falsely represent Christianity, (and I seriously doubted her bizarre theory), I tried to stay civil. I did feel some anger that Christianity itself was getting a black eye. I honestly felt quite embarrassed for her, and I simply prayed for her. She really did not know any better. By the way, she was a distant acquaintance, and there was no communicative rapport between us.

Nevertheless, in hindsight, I've considered some good learning from this weird example. My role as a believer is to do my best to represent the gospel of the Kingdom, not to get distracted by **any** political wrangling or conspiracy theories (as if such "preaching" could help anyone.) As one who has had careful dialogue about Jesus with intelligent, good-hearted Muslims, how can I be genuinely loving toward them if I were to endorse ideas that implicitly demonize them in a categorical way? Honestly speaking, if I had been an "unbeliever" listening seriously to my old colleague, I would have been badly **turned off** - as far as considering any "Christianity" she supposedly represented! Asserting political views that brashly demonize others is **not speaking the gospel!** It would be a shameful bad example if one were to turn people away from the gospel with such ungodly distractions. Remember that God desires that **all** humans be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth.

Nevertheless, before I applaud myself for not having been seduced by that nonsense (in my opinion), I must humbly ask myself: have I ever done the same thing? You bet I have! In addition to years of know-it-all assertions promoting **dangerous** strands of "got it made" theology; I compounded such errors decades ago by proclaiming certain wild conspiracies! Nowadays, I am very content to obey the Bible and pray for those in authority. Even in speaking candidly about social issues, the goal should be to help folks, not to control Gentile nations.

Anyway, I believe now that our Heavenly Father was extremely forgiving toward me, while I had assumed quite falsely for a long time that my walk of faith was solid. Like my zealous old work colleague, I did not know any better! So, I can certainly remember my own troubled plight and be empathetic toward others. Shouldn't we all humbly strive to follow how He is exceedingly kind and forgiving? We should not be baited into demonizing one another!

Once again, to embrace such overflowing kindness does not imply being flaky about certain doctrinal understandings, but it does involve being quick to listen, slow to speak, and (to emphasize it a bit): very, very, very slow to get **angry!** If I'm **quick** to get angry (a very common, worldly tendency), at best I only "love" those who agree with me, or maybe those whom I can coerce with my anger! Why, even "unbelievers" can "love" at that level, right? Once again, as we have seen, our anger does not produce God's righteous agenda!

Love as a compassionate effort means willingness to be supportively "under" others, acting as real servants. We don't win anyone by "lording" something "over" them in a way that is disrespectful to their free will choices. God always honors free will; why are many Christians often so unwilling to really do so? Too many Christians act as if they are doing others a favor by **rapidly** spouting bombastic, "in your face" bullets, as if such a tactic will "set them straight."

We are to be quick to carefully hear them out, befriend them (despite possible disagreements) while slowly speaking information which might eventually help them see things more clearly. This might be difficult at times, but it is a doable challenge, without necessarily being pulled into "us against them" wrestling. I think about how strong marriages and mature friendships grow to calmly handle dealing with disagreements without bullying or strife.

However, growth in gentle, self-sacrificial love does not mean the falsity of being obsequious, and it does not exclude the occasional, timely use of sharp wake-up calls. Nevertheless, genuine compassion is absolutely free from the taint of cynical, eye-rolling, holier than thou grudges!

The “tongue” and the heart (of real thoughts and intentions) must be carefully renewed, by patient, obedient efforts to humbly acquire God’s spiritual help. Honesty is vital.

But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison.

With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. (James 3:8-10)

If even our “enemies” are just as much made in God’s image – as we are (who profess belief in the Messiah), there is **no one** upon whom it would be a waste of time to try being helpful by a sincere endeavor to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger! If we kid ourselves by assuming that hasty, abrasive speech means “taking a stand on the Word” when lightly chalking off others, we are missing the point. Even if we momentarily bide our time (thinking up sharp combative retorts) before verbally pouncing, we are quite far away from obediently being quick to listen with a humble, empathetic ear.

I know that the “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” concept cannot be used as a simplistic formula for automatic, effortless success, but it might help us greatly to continually keep it in mind. After all, getting pulled into “us against them” posturing is really an insidious “us against **us**” trap of collective self-sabotage, whether as fellow members of **one** spiritual body, or as fellow members of **one** human family - in which each person is equally designed to be a potential image bearer of the Creator. What does it really mean to love without partiality and without hypocrisy?

Whether the Satanically influenced world publicly pits “red against blue”, religion X against religion Y, ethnic group A against B, cultural norm C against D, tribe E against F, or whatever else, we are **definitely not** to get baited into fighting in their edgy arena! Although, as conscientious truth-seekers, we do not shabbily endorse all belief systems as artificially “one”, how can we slowly and thoughtfully speak up regarding God’s reality? How can we proactively **listen** first when it is very essential? How can we be peacemakers? How can we avoid going along with the flow of caustic dismissal of fellow Christians or of fellow humans? Unlike Jesus himself, we have all emerged from severely corrupt thinking patterns. “Evil” is not just something to point out in “them”; its tainting streak has run boldly and deeply through “us!” Let’s be diligent to be honest! As humble repentant ones, we should be aware that we are still in constant recovery from darkness, as we develop skills to extend our “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” hearts in service toward others. Such painstaking efforts are not in vain!