KATHY KHANG &
MATT MIKALATOS

Loving Disagreement



FIGHTING FOR COMMUNITY
THROUGH THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

I did not enjoy reading this book. Mostly, it pushed my emotional and theological buttons to such a degree that I was forced to think about things I don't want to face. Which is why I needed this book. You may not like what's within—but you *need* what is within. More than anything, Mikalatos and Khang disrupt just about every one of our false notions of tranquility by inviting us into the tender difficulties of the extravagant kindness of God.

A. J. SWOBODA, PhD, associate professor of Bible, theology, and world Christianity at Bushnell University and author of *After Doubt*

The beauty and brilliance of *Loving Disagreement* is not just the wisdom and thoughtfulness of its content but also the way in which Kathy Khang and Matt Mikalatos model how to have kind, God-honoring discourse that deepens their understanding and respect for one another. In a church and world in which divisiveness and defensiveness are the norm, *Loving Disagreement* provides welcome reassurance that it is possible this side of heaven to experience unity without sacrificing or abandoning our unique opinions, heritages, and convictions. I'm so grateful to Kathy and Matt for having created this gracious, honest, and unique resource, because this is a book we need now more than ever.

HELEN LEE, speaker and coauthor of *The Race-Wise Family*

I've spent the last few years wondering what it actually looks like for "us" (in the grand sense of the word) to live together. A lot of that wondering comes from a place of sadness and disillusionment, namely because of my experiences of online interactions. I find myself sincerely hopeful after reading *Loving Disagreement*. Matt and Kathy write from a place of sincere interest and lived experience. They actually like people.

I love the way the book is creatively structured, and I love the clarity with which they present pieces of lived wisdom *as well as*

questions and concerns they're still working with. In short, I finished this book feeling not only less alone but also reenergized to help build and make room for loving community.

JUSTIN McROBERTS, author of *Sacred Strides*

Some people love disagreement and seek it with vengeance. Others hate it and do everything they can to avoid it. Matt and Kathy, in this book, offer a third way. They challenge the status quo as living examples of people who disagree in a loving way, a posture that finds its roots in the teachings of Jesus. Their back-and-forth conversation helps us see how much our culture, gender, upbringing, and life experiences influence our perceptions. This book is a life study that applies the sacred teachings of Jesus to our humanity through a practical spirituality that can lead us to a genuine unity.

TERRY M. WILDMAN, lead translator and project manager of *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*

Reading *Loving Disagreement* felt like sitting around a dinner table, over a warm meal, with good friends. Kathy and Matt show us what it looks like to honor and learn from each other. Personal stories are beautifully woven into each chapter, and I was profoundly moved as I read the humility in the back-and-forth responses between the authors. Thank you for the reminder that cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives and communities is a worthy cause.

JOHNNA HARRIS, cohost of *The Bodies Behind the Bus* podcast

In *Loving Disagreement*, we join Kathy and Matt for a vulnerable, brave, and timely conversation that meets our complex cultural moment. They will challenge us to bypass the brittle tools of toxic people-engagement into a subtle, surprising invitation through the fruit of the Spirit: a more faithful *metric* for engaging conflict. Through personal stories filled with wit and grace, Kathy and Matt

share hard truths in ways that feel winsome and prophetic. Their conversations explore relational themes ranging from the importance of language; to toxic Christian culture; to race, gender, and ableism. Yet in the end we are left with hope in God's multifaceted love that can weave people together . . . even make them friends. I encourage everyone to pick up several copies of this book, hand them to your friends (and frenemies), and let the conversations begin.

JOSÉ HUMPHREYS III, author of *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem* and coauthor of *Ecosystems of Jubilee*

Why does meaningful connection to other people feel like a vanishingly rare experience? Maybe it's the very fact that we're more connected than ever that has revealed we have deep, significant differences that can't be chalked up to agreeing to disagree. How do we build relational bridges across such real gulfs? Khang and Mikalatos use the fruit of the Spirit to dive beyond clichés and into the real work of relationships. Their wisdom is not easily applied, but for those who want to experience the kind of oneness Jesus promises to his followers, the picture they paint is inviting and full of hope.

JR. FORASTEROS, author of *Empathy for the Devil*

Khang and Mikalatos stir the imagination for a different way to engage with differences and conflict. Funny, candid, and refreshingly frank, this book is helpful because it unveils the postures we accidentally assume are Christian and replaces them with the fruit of the Spirit. The book's dynamic format allows us to listen in (and learn tons) as two insightful and witty folks who really have an eye on society converse. It's like getting to sit at the table in a restaurant that is having the most fun. Khang and Mikalatos reveal their own disagreements in modeling a new way forward that gives me hope for the future of Christian presence in the public sphere. Thank you!

NIKKI TOYAMA-SZETO, executive director of Christians for Social Action

This book is a tool and resource for those trying to understand the art and gifts of bridge building and courageous conversations. The many things that divide us will eventually burn, and what will be left? Khang and Mikalatos do an excellent job of showing us that what truly matters is our collective connection to one another because of our citizenship within the Kingdom of God. Imagine if discourse began with this truth, with the reality of our connected humanity.

LATASHA MORRISON, author of *New York Times* bestseller *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*

KATHY KHANG &
MATT MIKALATOS

Loving Disagreement



FIGHTING FOR COMMUNITY THROUGH THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

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Loving Disagreement: Fighting for Community through the Fruit of the Spirit

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Kathy: *To Peter, Bethany, Corban, and Elias for loving me and one another. And to all the haters: God loves us all.*

Matt: *To everyone who ever disagreed with me or loved me, and especially the people who did both.*



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Introduction

Good Intentions Aren't Enough

Matt

A while back, my dear friend and editor Caitlyn reached out to me with a question, one that emerged from the angst and human discord we see and know all too well: "Could you write a book about how to get along when we disagree?"

She and her team had been talking about civility in the church. How should Christians interact with one another when they have disagreements? How should followers of Jesus interact in an increasingly polarized political climate?

She said I was someone who came to mind as trustworthy to write about all that because she's seen me strive to host kind, nuanced discussions about difficult topics on my social media. It's something I have a particular passion for, whether we're talking about abortion, theological differences, LGBTQ+ issues, or politics. My social-media community has grown to (mostly) respect each other even when they seriously disagree.

I'd been asked to write that kind of book before, but I had always turned those requests down. I wasn't convinced I had enough insight.

But Caitlyn and the wise folks at NavPress had another idea too: What if the book had two authors? What if the coauthors had

different experiences, approaches, and ideas? What if they even disagreed sometimes?

Then Caitlyn floated the name of a person I love and respect a great deal: Kathy Khang.

Kathy is an activist, a voice for change, a person who speaks her mind and is ferociously protective of the vulnerable. She's the author of the amazing book *Raise Your Voice*,[1] among other things, and despite our mutual affection for each other we're vastly different people. I'm a white man born in the United States, while Kathy is a woman of color, an immigrant, and a naturalized citizen of the US. She lives near Chicago; I'm on the west coast.[2] I'm inclined to explore different possibilities in a conversation or issue to the point of uncertainty, and Kathy's quick-minded clarity cuts through the uncertainty with assurance and direction.

We have a lot in common, too: We both love Jesus; we have some similar concerns about Christian communities today; we've both been full-time missionaries in the past; we both have families; we both love to write; and despite our really different approaches, we both deeply care about people. All of which to say: I immediately knew both that Caitlyn had chosen the perfect cowriter and that Kathy would never agree to do it.

Although Caitlyn had pitched a compelling idea and an amazing coauthor, I decided not to mention it to Kathy. I planned to politely decline on behalf of us both. But then our mutual friend JR. asked me a wise question: "Why are you saying no for Kathy?"

Kathy

This book almost didn't happen because I almost didn't know about it. Matt was going to say no before asking his potential coauthor. When Matt and I talked about why he'd at first decided not to ask me, it dawned on me that we had stumbled into part of the issue we are trying

to address in this book. We are well-meaning. We have good intentions. We think we know each other, what each other's motivations are, and ultimately what we would do in each other's situation.

But we don't.

Thankfully Matt talked with JR., who talked some sense into Matt. Matt asked me, and, although we are friends, my answer was not what he expected. And when we talked about how this all came about, Matt was a little embarrassed that he thought he could speak on my behalf. I told him that as a woman of color and a former campus minister, I was completely used to it. Christian "brothers" have always thought it was their job to protect me, speak for me, and correct me.

Sure, I had been telling him and our podcast cohosts/friends that I wasn't sure if I would continue writing in the Christian space, whether I had anything else to say, or if I had the energy. But what Matt didn't know was that the invitation to tackle the public bickering and fighting together was the perfect project—because what I do have energy for is to build a few more bridges of understanding between people, between Christians.

Matt

As Kathy and I started talking, we quickly realized there was one more issue. That original word, *civility*, isn't something of particular use for Christians. Civility is about politeness. It's about courtesy within society and politics. Civility not only is an astonishingly low bar for Christians, who are called to much more than politeness, but it has also been used as a tool for the powerful to ignore the cries of the vulnerable. If a person in poverty, for instance, cries, "You're literally killing us with your ravenous greed!" we might respond, "Well, that's not the correct way to approach us about this issue." Civility says, *Your approach seems unpleasant, unkind, unfriendly. See if you can politely share your grievances.*

Civility can get in the way of helping those who need help. In the ER, for example, there's not always time for politeness. A doctor may not ask the name of a patient in respiratory distress before intubating them.

Sometimes, when polite requests for justice go unanswered, we have to move on to more aggressive requests (or demands). Kathy's experiences as a woman of color certainly give her deeper and better insights into this than I have. I'm far more likely to get what I need through civil discourse than she is. That's interesting and important and one of the reasons we wanted to write this book together: Disagreeing well as the people of God doesn't look just one way. Kathy's and my different approaches give just a glimpse into the complexity of what it means to live Spirit-formed lives in a fractured culture.

Kathy and I came back to the NavPress folks with a modified idea. What if, instead of talking about civility, we talked about something more difficult, more painful, and more honest? Followers of Jesus are called to something more impressive than simple politeness. We're called to things like love, patience, kindness, faithfulness. But how can we possibly be kind in the midst of these horrific disagreements? How can we move past anger and hatred and find patience and love?

That's what this book is about.

Most of us are tired of the incessant bickering and backbiting, even when it's focused on important issues. But Kathy and I believe there's a way to live out effective, productive, loving disagreement that moves us closer to Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

Kathy

A final and important note: As we go through this book, we will remind you that I am not white. I came to the United States when I was eight months old and became a US citizen more than thirty years later. English was originally my second language, even though now

it is my primary language. White authors historically and still presently dominate the published author space, even though there have been recent blips of willingness to talk about race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, and gender. Matt and I are both published authors, but the publishing world, while slowly changing, is *slowly* changing.

How we draw attention to this reality is going to emerge in this book in a few different ways. One is how we handle non-English words. I am in my fifties, and for my entire life I used the term *broken English* to describe my parents' English language skills. It wasn't until recently that the phrase began to irritate me. It's demeaning and dishonoring to my parents and all the other people whose primary language isn't English. A country that does not have an official language still operates under an assumption that there is a correct way to write and speak English. English is the default, the norm.

Traditionally in English-language books, non-English words are italicized, signaling to readers that this word or phrase is "not your normal." My coauthor is the one who brought this to our editorial team's attention, and we've decided to do away with that practice. Matt and I both live in the United States, but we are also part of the global church. No single language is the default, the norm.

This might seem like a small change, but it is part of the reason for this book and our approach. God did not create us to live and thrive independently. We are to be in community with people, and I am so thankful to be in community with Matt, my chingoo, my friend.

I wanted to write this book with Matt because this will be an opportunity to reach new readers who privately wonder why people like me make everything about race or gender when, in Christ, we are no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.[3] This is also a chance to remind myself and My Dear Readers that Jesus always invites us to love one another—even when we disagree, even when another Christian questions our faith, even when we question another Christian's faith. So as I write into issues that may feel unfamiliar to

you or uncomfortable for you, know that love is what drives me. White people are not my enemy. Systems of power and the principalities of this world that prioritize some groups of people above others—those are our common enemy. Racism, sexism, and homophobia hurt everyone, including the people who perpetuate those things. When we do not see each other as fully human, we misunderstand what it means to be fully human ourselves.

I wanted to write this book with Matt because in the kind of angry discourse we see online and in Christian circles, Matt should and could be my enemy. He is a white man with social power. The system that upholds the often-unconscious belief that being white is both superior and the norm—what we're going to refer to as white supremacy in this book—affords him access and privilege. (Check out the glossary for a longer explanation of this and other complex terms.) And if the mention of white supremacy makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, I'm asking you to keep reading. You started this book because you wanted a better way. That starts with being okay with that discomfort and being open to listening to an unfamiliar voice.

Growing up reciting the Lord's Prayer in two languages has always meant there were many voices in my life forming my faith and daring me to ask questions not only about what I believed in but in how I would express those beliefs day-to-day. That's what we are doing in this book—offering two voices from two vantage points. Matt and I have some common experiences and we both love Jesus and hold some similar beliefs, but we approach disagreements—both in our physical environments and on social media—differently. We have very different ways of looking at and experiencing the world. You'll see some of that as you read on, and we hope as you get to know both of us you'll experience the freedom and gift of learning about and from different approaches. Because in that middle space where our differences and similarities intersect, where loving disagreements often happen, faith moves between the spiritual and physical and into our daily interactions.

CHAPTER 1

WAR! WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Disrupting the Polarization of God's Kingdom

Matt

I've gotten my share of hate mail over the years, and all of it was from fellow Christians. I'm not talking about pleasant disagreements or even harsh but well-intended critiques. I'm referring to emails and physical letters filled with name-calling, threats of violence, even veiled references to hurting my children. Kathy's had that and then some, including a heckler who shouted at her from the audience while she was teaching at a chapel.

The reasons for those hateful letters varied. Sometimes it was because of a (in my eyes) small disagreement with something in one of my books. Sometimes it was because of a difference in politics. Occasionally the writer didn't like a speaker I invited to a conference. And more than once, it was because of a misunderstanding—I hadn't said or done what they thought I had.

I was a missionary for about twenty years, and sometimes my hate mail came from fellow missionaries. When I resigned from our mission organization and moved into writing full-time, I received an anonymous greeting card that ended with a statement along the lines of "I'm glad you're leaving the organization, and I'll see you in heaven (maybe)."

Is Christian Culture Getting Worse?

I have a lot of friends in the church whom I disagree with about a lot of things: politics, theology, whether this or that movie is actually good. Our friendship makes those disagreements easier to set aside because we love each other. But as society continues to fracture, as our media monetizes polarization and normalizes it for the rest of us, it's fair to ask whether the church is being affected.

From my point of view, the answer is almost certainly yes. If you're uncertain whether that's true, say something "controversial" on your favorite social-media platform and watch the replies, the critiques, the angry folks with torches and pitchforks. I've seen pastors—who presumably know better—get in name-calling competitions with strangers online. I saw a woman with a Bible verse about love in her profile call someone names so vile that the moderators of the social-media platform had to step in.

We've also gotten to the point where disagreements on secondary[1] theological issues (which can range from really important things, like the role of women in ministry, to relatively unimportant things, like whether you believe the Rapture comes before, after, or during the Tribulation—or not at all) are being called "heresy."[2] Too often I see brothers and sisters in Christ suggesting that everything they believe is a "gospel issue," implying that disagreement with them is disagreement with Christ himself. And we're collectively wrestling with some difficult theological and ethical questions as a church, too, so it's only

natural that we might have some disagreements as we're trying to figure those things out.

Politics aren't helping, especially in the United States. A few years back, I was speaking at a men's retreat, and during a Q and A one of the brothers was pushing hard to get me to take a public stance on a political issue. (I had thoughts on the issue, but this was a retreat about spiritual disciplines.) So I asked the group a question: "Which do you spend more time doing—getting spiritual nourishment or watching your favorite news and political commentary?" Nearly every person (including me) had to admit they spent more time with their political commentators than the combined time they spent reading the Scriptures, praying, participating in church activities, doing ministry, and so on. Is it any wonder that we might sometimes discover we're putting politics or nation building above our brothers and sisters? And when our news sources start conflating their politics with our religious points of view—as many of them do—is it any surprise we start to think that someone who's "wrong" politically is also wrong spiritually?

It's not like we've never disagreed within the church before. Sometimes we've done it well, and sometimes we've done it poorly. I love the example of the United Methodists. The simple version of their story is that various denominations in the Methodist tradition had fractured from one another over theological and ethical questions as diverse as whether a Christian should participate in enslaving people to whether a Christian could join a "secret society" like the Freemasons. Over the decades, different pieces of the fractured community discovered they could at least minister together, and eventually some of those pieces came back together—liberals and conservatives and neoorthodox—and formed the "United Methodist" denomination. It's a great example of how listening to Jesus and loving each other and staying in communication tends to help us find our way back to each other, even amid serious disagreements. (Of course, as I write this, the

same denomination is in the midst of yet another messy schism. How long will it take us to find our way back to each other again?)

But really every denomination has experienced some version of this. When I was a kid growing up in a Baptist church, it split when the pastor had an affair and started his own spin-off church. And for a few years in college, I attended a denomination that started because of a disagreement over whether it was necessary to stand up when reading Scripture aloud.[3]

Is the church getting worse, or is this something we've faced our entire history as imperfect people seeking to follow Jesus together?

I honestly don't know the answer to this question. I can say that it feels worse sometimes to me. But then again, there are some really encouraging signs too. When I was growing up, lots of my Baptist teachers told me Catholic believers were not Christians. I haven't heard that in a long time—after all, large portions of the church have been learning to work together on things that matter to all of us, and part of what brought Catholics and conservative evangelicals together seems to be an agreement about abortion. On the other hand, this same topic, among other things, is causing breaks in communion among conservative and progressive believers today.

Disagreements, fighting, and hatred. These things seem common in the wider community of Christendom today. Politics, theology, even personal preference create seemingly insurmountable rifts. I've seen this referred to as "war in heaven," which is such a fascinating phrase to me. The biblical "war in heaven" was between the angels and the demons (and was won handily by the angels at God's command). When we use that phrase of human beings, we build a narrative where I'm presumably on the side of the angels and my opponents are demons, and we lose sight of how we're all made in the image of God. But still, it's hard not to see ourselves "at war" when we are working hard to destroy each other.

We're not doomed to be stuck here, though. There is, Kathy and I believe, a twofold path out of this destructive war, out of seeing our

brothers and sisters as enemies and demons—and into a spacious place of loving each other even as we disagree.

The first part of the path is our citizenship. The Bible says we are citizens of heaven.[4] Not of the United States or Canada or South Korea or any earthly kingdom. Our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God. For me and Kathy, this idea resonates as key to this complicated question of disagreement.

The next step on the path—one we're going to spend most of this book on—is what Paul describes about the reality of being citizens of the Kingdom, equipped and empowered and motivated by the Holy Spirit as we engage with (and, yes, disagree with) one another. As followers of Jesus are planted in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit grows and bears good things in our lives—and relationships and communities are changed.

Citizens of Heaven

I was traveling overseas when I got stopped at a border and was asked a lot of questions about how many passports I have. The border guard was questioning me to make sure that I hadn't traveled to another country they were at war with and hidden that fact by using a second passport. And while some people have "dual citizenship" and may be citizens of two countries (and thus have two passports to choose from), I only have citizenship in the US, and I only have one passport.

Passports bring with them the advantages, privileges, and expectations of citizenship. For instance, if I had sought Greek citizenship when I was younger (something I'm qualified to do because my grandfather was Greek), I would have been expected to serve for a time in the Greek military: It's mandatory for all male citizens. But also, as a citizen of an EU country, I could have traveled within the EU, gotten a job there, or gone to school without a visa.

Paul talks about how he is a "pure-blooded citizen of Israel" in

Philippians 3:5 (NLT). He goes on to say that while some people only think about "this life here on earth" (verse 19), Paul isn't able to do that, and he doesn't think other Christ followers can do that either. We are citizens of heaven. We have dual citizenship here on earth, but we also have responsibilities, obligations, and privileges connected to heaven.

Jesus also talked often about the Kingdom of heaven and how his followers were part of that Kingdom. Because that citizenship is eternal, our loyalties and values should be placed first and foremost there, not centered in the places of our earthly citizenship.

When I lived overseas, those of us with shared citizenship back in the US felt a special bond. We loved things about the culture we lived in, but when we were with fellow citizens from "back home," we instantly gravitated toward what we had in common, even if we didn't know each other. The local consulate would host parties on the big holidays that all US citizens were welcome to attend. If you ran into another US citizen in a restaurant there was a lot of "Where are you from?" and "Remember Doritos? I wish we could get those here." When you share a homeland, you also share some cultural values, preferences, thoughts, and ideas.

This is one of the reasons that what's come to be known as "Christian nationalism" is so antithetical to what Scripture describes. As citizens of heaven, we owe our first allegiance not to a flag—any flag—but to Christ. The Kingdom of God doesn't have borders. It exists in every nation in the world. Full allegiance to an earthly nation demands that I prioritize that nation's interests above those of people from other nations . . . including those who are citizens of heaven. If our faith requires us to embrace nationalism in the country we live in, then Christians in the Congo or Russia or China or Afghanistan would be nationalists in their respective nations, too, and thus potentially in conflict with Christians outside their national borders. And so our Kingdom citizenship, our Kingdom identity, would become fractured, little more than a series of political conflicts (sound familiar?) rather

than spiritual unity. But we are citizens of heaven. When our earthly nation and our heavenly Kingdom are in conflict (which happens often), Christians should always choose God's Kingdom.

Scripture even goes a step further, saying that we're not only citizens but ambassadors of Christ.[5] Which means that we have been sent into whatever nation we're in today as representatives of our heavenly Kingdom. Just as people overseas could see that I am an American and recognize some American values in the way I interacted, the people in the world should see the values, ideals, and culture of heaven in my life here.

It boils down to this: I should be living my life in such a way that when someone asks, "What is heaven like?" they should have a decent idea by looking at me. My culture and habits and thoughts and ideas should be foreign to them, unfamiliar . . . because I'm a citizen of another place.

Raising the Bar

The wrinkle for all of us is that every human citizen of the heavenly Kingdom is a naturalized citizen. None of us are physically born into it. Citizenship is available for anyone, but those of us who choose it have to go through a process of becoming. Which means that there are things for us to learn. When Kathy became a US citizen, she had to memorize dates and history and know how the US government functions—all things I never had to do as a birthright citizen, since I was born in California.

While becoming a citizen of heaven doesn't require a knowledge test, we're all in the process of learning what it means to grow and change and be shaped into someone who can be not only a productive citizen but also an ambassador on Christ's behalf.

Which is why, in the end, "civility" is not the ultimate goal of a believer in an argument. That's not to say we should actively be trying to be uncivil, but there are times when representing the Kingdom may seem rude to the world around us because the way of the Kingdom

confronts and presses on places in which the world would prefer to stay comfortable. James tells us that true religion is taking care of the marginalized—orphans and widows—and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world we're in.[6] Speaking up for the marginalized and refusing to stay silent in the face of injustice disrupts the status quo. And while ambassadors work hard to say things in the least disruptive and upsetting way possible, ambassadors also have a mission that drives what they do and how they do it.

Learning our heavenly culture and working as an ambassador to those outside the Kingdom takes time—a lifetime, probably. But we're not left to just figure it out on our own. There's a Person in charge of our training and ongoing education: the Holy Spirit.

Paul talks about this embodiment of the Spirit's work at length in the book of Galatians. The people at the Galatian church were in the middle of a gigantic argument: As Christ-following non-Jews, were they responsible for following Jewish law? No way, Paul said. And he had strong words for those who said otherwise.

But he also talked about how, as the people in the church disagree, there's an easy way to tell if someone is following Christ. It's not by looking at the external obedience to the law but by looking to the singular rule that sets us free from the law: "Love your neighbor as yourself."[7]

He then warns that if we continually bite at each other, eventually we'll be consumed. So what's the answer? How can we live in a way that we won't destroy ourselves with our arguments? Paul says it's simple: "Live by the Spirit."[8]

When someone isn't living by the Spirit, that should be obvious because the sins in that person's life will be obvious. Paul lists some sins that we like to talk about a lot when judging others, like sexual immorality, drunkenness, worshiping something other than God. But he also lists a bunch of things our Christian community seems to have found ourselves helplessly accepting of—even some things we defend or try to say are good. Angry outbursts. Hostility and acts of hatred.

Dissension. Discord. Factions.[9] So many of these things are "just the way it is" in Christian culture today.

When we find that someone or something—a friend, a spiritual authority, a TV show, or an internet personality—constantly pushes us toward anger, encouraging us toward hatred or hostility or even fear, that's a warning sign. That's not how the Spirit works.

Paul tells us exactly what it looks like when someone has allowed the Spirit to transform their lives. He uses the metaphor of the Spirit bearing fruit in our lives. Once the Spirit is planted in us, we should expect there to be continual growth that leads to "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."[10] That's far more difficult than mere civility.

So that's our path through the war we find ourselves in. How do we, in the midst of really important and meaningful disagreements, raise the bar on our expectations for how we treat one another and the people around us? How do we let the Spirit bear fruit in ways that are meaningful and real and matter for the people we know and the questions we confront?

At the end of every chapter, we're going to have a chat, friend to friend, human to human, about the ways we agree and disagree about what the other person wrote. We love each other, and we're not always on the same page—and we're better Jesus followers for leaning into these conversations.

Kathy

Matt, we agree that civility is too low a bar for Christians. I think the bar is too low for Christians who have thought of themselves as the majority in the North American context: white Christians who have historically held power and privilege, and men living in a world filled

with systems created by men. In our time of global disruption, many people who are used to being at the center of power are being forced to consider a future that looks very different.

With a broad brush, I will also say people of color have been more than civil. Historically, Christians in the United States have perpetuated harm against minority groups—through genocide, forced relocation, slavery, and much more. They have frequently justified these actions by appealing to their fidelity to Jesus, failing to grapple with how these actions have reinforced the dominance of a white majority culture, a priority that does not come from Jesus. The Christianity that coalesces around these biases then admonishes people to find their identity first and only in Christ, diminishing and marginalizing the distinctiveness of their ethnicity, culture, or race, and implicitly setting the norms of a white majority culture at the center of Christian expression. Ironically, the white Christianity that emerges then tells people of color to be colorblind.

People of color have shown great patience. But, Matt, I know you and I are both hopeful that enough Christians will be willing to take a breath, to extend to people of color the same civility as they do white folks, and see a path forward.

The language of citizenship is one of belonging and of privilege and responsibility. But an open door at church on Sunday rarely means belonging. It's just unlocked. Open doors don't mean an invitation to enter, to be an equal part of the community. Even if people of color feel welcomed or brave enough to walk through the door, rarely are we actually invited to shape what happens inside.

In many ways, we are writing this book because we individually and collectively have assumed we know what it means to be Christians, to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. But because we grew up in the church or adjacent to Christian culture, we never really had to think about the ins and outs, nor were we ever questioned and challenged about our beliefs.

My husband and I are both Korean American, but he and my children are all American born. They have always been US citizens, so it is jarring still when *any* of us gets asked—not once but repeatedly—"Where are you from? No, where are you really from?"

I've heard a lot of talk about who is and isn't a Christian, and that actually still angers me because it sounds a lot like that language I hear from birthright citizens who consider themselves "true" Americans. I carried around a green card for decades (it wasn't actually green, folks), and that definitely shaped my understanding of belonging, citizenship, and civic duty and how Christians are supposed to engage in the world and culture around us. Matt, how do you think your status as a birthright citizen shaped your understanding of and comfort in the church?

Matt

Green cards aren't green? I've been lied to all these years!

Here's the reality of being a birthright citizen (especially one who is part of majority culture): I have never once stopped to think about it. I've taken it for granted. I'm always amazed, Kathy, by how seriously you take voting—how you volunteer at every election and work to make sure ballots are fair and accessible to legal voters. I grew up rolling my eyes at the privilege: "Ugh! Time to vote again!" Or at most I'd canvass for a political issue or candidate I was trying to convince others they should vote for—which is totally fine but really different from the kind of service you do, which is designed to be for the good of all citizens rather than "what I think is best" for others.

So yeah. I'd say that birthright citizenship *and* my "birthright Christianity" growing up evangelical were completely unexamined other than the occasional thought of *Wow, I'm lucky that I happened to be born in the greatest country in the world and also the one true faith*. True American and true believer, right?

Blind to my blessings and blind to my own assumptions, probably, is the answer.

Kathy

Well, my first green card was from the early seventies when I was a baby, and that card was green. Decades later, when I updated the card, the new ones weren't green. You also have to turn in the card when you are naturalized, and I still think about the group of people at my naturalization ceremony each turning in our green cards before swearing our allegiance to the United States of America.

Matt, you write about living overseas and being asked, "Where are you from?" by other US citizens. You all knew you were US citizens because you were invited by the consulate, so my heart died a little reading that knowing that you were being asked the question as a way of connection. I still get asked that question, and it hurts the most when it comes from non-Asian Christians—because it's not a way to find common ground but to point out a difference. Sometimes it's even a way of "othering" me. Sure, I'm a naturalized citizen, but I am from the Chicago suburbs. That rarely is the answer people are looking for, though. Please speak for all non-Asian Christians and tell me why that is so often a starting place for conversation.

Matt

Hmm. Okay, I think this answer is going to go a little differently than you think, Kathy, but I'm trying to be honest here from a non-Asian Christian point of view.

First of all, we can just acknowledge together that the core assumption many of us have when we say "American" is that we're talking about a white person. If I say, "Picture a legal immigrant coming to America for the first time" (go ahead, try it), most of us

picture someone in the 1920s coming in past the Statue of Liberty, and almost none of us picture Angel Island or the slave trade or even modern immigration. (Refugees, for instance, are legal immigrants but probably not the first people we picture when we talk about legal immigration.) And it's not just white folks who do it! Kathy, you've told me before that you get the "where are you from" question from people of multiple ethnicities and races.

So, yes, part of the issue is that many of us look at someone with Asian features and the first thought is: *Where are they from?* We assume they're not "from America," even though, aside from Native Americans, most of us aren't "from America" in that sense. The second part is that this actually is an attempt at connection. It's wrongheaded, it's hurtful, and it reveals some unconscious internalized white supremacy, but none of that is intended. It's honestly an attempt to create common ground.

We can see evidence of this desire for common ground because if, for instance, you were to say "Korean," the person will go on to say something like "I love Korean food!" or "My cousin was adopted from Korea" or "Is it hard to write in Korean characters?" Now, again, these responses are all potentially problematic and hurtful, too, but I'm talking about intent here. The person has no idea this reveals prejudice. They have no idea this is "othering." They really, honestly, think they are being nice and kind and friendly . . . which is why it can be so upsetting to them (or I should probably say "us") when it's pointed out as hurtful.

The great irony here is that in most ethnic-minority communities, the connection to one's ethnic legacy, family, and family history is treasured and important, much more than in many majority-culture communities. So underneath the question is something that many Asian Americans would love to share, but the ask is so clumsy and hurtful that the possibility gets (rightfully) shut down.

On the flip side, these questions can be so painful because they

are rooted in assumptions about what is the default or "normal." Even the terms *majority/minority*, which I'm using here, are complex: people of Asian heritage, not white people, are a majority in the world. And as various people are assimilated into whiteness as a cultural norm, being "white" robs people of ethnic identity (I'm Greek and Irish, not just "white"), just like the term "Asian American" flattens a broad diversity of ethnicities and cultures into a single ("non-white") category. In situations like these, differences of terminology, understanding levels, experience, or our relationship to one another can create discomfort, misunderstandings, or conflict.

Our struggle to connect with and honor diverse backgrounds is a great example of how we can come to these points of conflict where we're hurting each other without intending to hurt each other. And then we get entrenched in our different positions and can't find a way back to one another. We end on the one side with people saying, "Don't be so sensitive. I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings!" and on the other side, people saying, "You could try not actively harming me and others!"

Where I land in moments like this: If I'm not trying to harm someone, I apologize for it and then try not to do it again. I don't ask the person who was harmed to take the initiative to "forgive and move on" over and over.

Anyway, Scripture says that one day every "nation, tribe, people and language" is going to be united in Christ.[11] I'd like to think that when that happens, our citizenship in Christ will be primary, and our nations, tribes, and languages will be things to be celebrated.

Kathy

Look at us. White supremacy and intentions in the first chapter. YES! White supremacy hurts all of us, including white people who may have lost most or even all ties to their cultural and ethnic

heritage, instead assimilating to a flattened culture that can fall under the term *whiteness*. I hope when we get interviewed about this book, someone will ask you about that loss and the impact you think it has on your understanding of your family and of God. As a child, I was often embarrassed by my parents' accent and "broken" English, but I also knew there was something about being connected culturally that was different from the experiences of so many of my friends.

It wouldn't be until later I would learn that difference was beautiful and gave me a more vivid understanding of that picture of every tribe, tongue, and nation. Even now when my parents and I are talking about me gook saram (Americans), we know we are talking about white people. We aren't even talking about my kids and my nieces and nephews or even my sister or husband, who were all American born.

All that to say, I am not that surprised by the direction you went. I do appreciate you bringing up intent and how you respond when you are the one causing the hurt. Too many times, the perpetrator of harm demands that their intent is what is most important. So long as you didn't intend to harm, everyone should move on. As a Korean American woman, I am admittedly tired of having to give people a pass just because something wasn't intended to be harmful. I'm still learning how to communicate to others that intent does not erase impact. Sometimes the most loving thing I can do is to call someone into conversation about the racist, sexist, ableist thing they've said.

I'm still learning that myself. I've been running a virtual yoga class for women of color for several years. It started shortly after the racial uprising in 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd. I saw so many of my activist friends, women of color, hitting the streets, organizing, educating, and I was concerned about their health. I send an email monthly with a few random thoughts and a link to the class. But in one of those emails, one of my own places of ignorance and prejudice came into full view.

My comments were ableist and rooted in white supremacy, and I received an email response. I'll be honest: My first reaction was *That's not what I meant*. I had to listen to my own advice. I stopped. I identified where I thought I was being misrepresented and why that bothered me. I got over myself and looked for where my comments had hurt and harmed this person and perpetuated stereotypes about mental health. And then I wrote back with an apology and asked if and how our relationship needed repair. I don't actually know this person. We are only connected through these weekly virtual yoga classes. But I also realized that this is how divisions can be sown or repaired.

I could've approached this situation with the posture of fighting an enemy. When I first read the email, I got defensive, felt hurt and misunderstood. If I had stayed in those emotions and reacted, I can guarantee my intent would've been to retaliate without concern for the relationship. But when we learn to cultivate lives rooted in the fruit of the Spirit, we're empowered and invited to engage in loving disagreements with a more Christlike posture, and the outcomes have the chance of reflecting the Spirit's deeper work in ourselves and between communities.