

A HOUSE UNITED

★ ★ ★ STUDY GUIDE ★ ★ ★

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In June of 2018, a Democratic public official in Houston, Texas, shouted obscenities at three young girls in a busy ice-cream shop because the teenagers let on that they supported Donald Trump. Two months earlier, FOX News and Republicans openly attacked high-school kids who had recently survived a mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, because the students pled for gun control. The United States of America is hardly united, as every sentient being knows, and we're getting meaner. A two-decade rise in political polarization blew up around us during the 2016 presidential campaign and made both our political divisions and their social harms blatantly obvious to all.

A House United asks the simple question, Can the church help? Can Christianity change a two-thousand-year-old habit of division and divisiveness and be a part of God's solution to the tribalism that has split our nation? This missional vision offers American Christians and churches a new way of doing our difference together and a new purpose in the world.

In these pages, we will navigate our way through the facts (chs. 1–2), causes (chs. 3–4), and harms (ch. 5) of early twenty-first-century American political polarization, before outlining ways that Christians might respond faithfully (chs. 6–8) and missionally (ch. 9) to that challenge. Along the way, we will consider the personal and intellectual issues of polarization and the tangible steps available to assist those who hope to kick the habit. This study guide is designed to deepen your experience of the book and to move you and your book club or study group forward into ways of relating to people with whom you disagree politically.

INTRODUCTION

Christians in the United States often ally themselves and then choose either freedom of religion or abortion or family values (on the right) or racial justice, climate change, or any of a number of social-justice issues (on the left) as their righteous cause. By telling the Barth-Bonhoeffer story, Allen Hilton here presses the question, “What is the most urgent project facing a Christian or the Christian church in the United States in our time?”

1. As you begin reading the book, how would you answer that question? What is the most urgent task of Christians in our time?
2. The author proposes that the most urgent problem facing American Christians (and Americans, for that matter) in our time is the social harm being done by our political division—because that keeps us from working together on the other problems. At this early point in your reading, what is your response to that assertion?

In this era, a presidential election won by the other side can throw vast parts of the population into a sort of exilic reality. Liberals declare, “I’m moving to Canada!” Conservatives cry, “I don’t even recognize my country!” The author remembers this happening as far back as the George W. Bush reelection of 2004, when he was living in blue Seattle, then on the right after Barack Obama’s reelection (in his red Minnesota suburb), then much louder after Donald Trump’s win in 2016, as many insisted, “He’s not my president!” In the Bible, this experience of not being at home in one’s country is called exile.

1. What has the power to make you feel at home or out of place where you live? Do you feel like an exile in your own land?

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2. Jeremiah 29 features the prophet's admonition to the exiles in Babylon, who are no longer at home in their land: "Seek the welfare [Hebrew: *shalom*] of your city!" How are you currently seeking the welfare of your neighborhood/town/city/region/nation?
3. How does polarization matter for your assessment of what your city needs?

CHAPTER ONE: THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

This chapter chronicles the widening political divisions in the United States and the increasing meanness with which we treat our political opposites. As you begin reading, stop and reflect on your own experience of political division.

1. How does polarization matter in your everyday life?
2. Do you have friends or family or coworkers or neighbors with whose politics you strongly disagree?
3. How has your relationship with these people changed over the course of the last five years?

CHAPTER ONE: THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein calls politically based prejudice “partyism,” and Stanford studies have discovered that Americans attach no stigma to exercising that form of prejudice. Sunstein and others identify the prevailing attitudes of many Americans toward their political opposites as a sort of bigotry.

1. How does that assessment land with you?
2. Does your own view of people from the other party feel like bigotry? Do you see it in the people around you?

One of the ways Americans have responded to our political differences in recent years is to choose our place of residence with the conscious or unconscious hope of finding neighbors who vote the same way we do. Bill Bishop’s book *The Big Sort* tracks this trend.

1. How often do you encounter and talk to your politically opposites?
2. Do you live in a politically homogenous neighborhood? Or a politically diverse one?
3. How does that political dynamic impact your experience of your neighborhood?

CHAPTER ONE: THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

4. Chapter 1 identifies an increasing American habit of seeing the other side of the aisle as at best useless and at worst destructive. Where do you see this phenomenon in your experience?
5. Can you name positive aspects of the people and the ideas of the other party? If so, list the positive value “the other side” contributes.

In the summer of 2016, when a Bernie Sanders supporter shot up a Republican baseball practice in Alexandria and a host of progressives celebrated the death of Justice Scalia, they behaved like people at war. In 2017, Foreign Policy magazine asked former US State Department diplomats (who had served in places like Rwanda and Sudan) to identify a percentage chance that the United States will enter a second armed Civil War within the next two decades. The average probability they named was 30–35 percent. That prospect sounds far-fetched to many.

1. When you watch partisan politics play out, both in the US government and in popular culture, what would be your answer to the Foreign Policy question?
2. Give reasons why you don't or do imagine Civil War II lies ahead for the United States?

The fractures in the American body politic scream out a need for help, and Christians might seem like the natural heroes. After all, we're called to love one another and Jesus prays for our unity. But two thousand years of division and divisiveness tell a different story. Let's look at the church's track record in chapter 2.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TALE OF TWO PRAYERS

The second chapter of *A House United* shows how complicit and even causal Christians have been in division—both throughout church history and in our current American political division. From the earliest Christian writers through very recent American church leaders, the Jesus people have been a divided and often divisive lot. It's our habit, in the face of difference, to seek the people with whom we agree and separate ourselves from the rest.

1. Have you experienced this Christian tendency in your life? In your church(es)?
2. What shape has that experience taken? Has it limited your field of possible friends?
3. What role do you see American Christianity playing in the current political divisions of our nation?

As the origins of the fundamentalist versus liberal controversy of the twentieth century developed, J. Gresham Machen and Harry Emerson Fosdick served as symbolic leaders of the two tribes, and their conflict represents the chasm between Left and Right in American Christianity.

1. Did you find yourself drawn to one of these two characters more than the other? What drew you?
2. Did you notice that both the fundamentalist and the liberal in this picture define Christianity in a way that excommunicates his opposite—Machen with the title of his book *Christianity and Liberalism*, and Fosdick when he celebrates the utter absence of fundamentalists in his congregation?

CHAPTER TWO: THE TALE OF TWO PRAYERS

3. Have you ever had someone effectively excommunicate you because they disagree with you?

4. How does that urge to excommunicate show up in you?

5. A very important question: Given track records, is Christianity—and maybe even the practice of religion itself—inherently divisive? Or can you picture that changing?

Allen Hilton will eventually claim that the Christian Right and Christian Left have much to learn from one another. Some Christians—mostly on the left—have worried that the author’s case presents “false equivalences.” By this they mean that a leftward tilting *New York Times* headline is much less damaging than an out-and-out falsehood from the Republicans in the White House. At its best, this criticism hopes to set records straight. At its worst, it becomes a middle-school-level blame shift. Blame shifts like this move us toward their origin in “The Righteous Mind.” On to chapter 3.

CHAPTER THREE: RIGHTEOUS MINDS

Where did we get this self-righteous tendency? Chapter 3 names possible causes, both evolutionary and then sociological, for our predisposition to identify a safe in-group (as with the infants in the Sheffield study who preferred the racial features of their caregiver within three months) and then feel superior to an outgroup (by nine months, everyone else).

1. What is your earliest memory of a “we versus they” consciousness? Was the divide familial? Racial? Geographical? National?
2. What are the advantages of this tribe-defining equipment?
3. What are its downsides?

This human tendency to define in-groups and out-groups obviously includes an attraction to and involvement in groups. Sociologists have identified a plethora of factors that draw us to groups (e.g., the affirmation of being included, the available reality check of eyes and opinions outside ourselves, and the affirmation of being around people who see the world the way we do.)

1. To what groups do you belong?
2. What draws you to them?

CHAPTER THREE: RIGHTEOUS MINDS

3. What sacrifices and benefits are involved in belonging to those groups?

The rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls humility “the orphaned virtue of our age.” Given the human tendency to self-righteousness, what makes “our age” especially persistent and accomplished at it? Sacks traces it to specific elements in our individualistic, self-promoting, Western culture. On we go to survey the American version of that humility-killing distinctive in chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PERILS OF ECHO CHAMBERS

If chapter 3 established the reasons that humans as a species tend to divide into self-righteous groups, this fourth chapter focuses on the heightened force of tribalism in the politics of this American age. How did we move so quickly from 4 percent of parents worrying that their child might marry cross-party (1960) to 43 percent (2010) and how has the number escalated even more since then? This chapter’s answer is captured in the well-worn adage, “Birds of a feather flock together.”

1. Hank and Heather, our sample Righty and Lefty, get their info from starkly different sources. Where do you most often get your news, and which sources do you most trust for political information?
2. Do you have live friendships with people from the opposite political inclination from your own? How many? How close?

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PERILS OF ECHO CHAMBERS

3. Can you describe what those friends believe and why they believe it? Jot down a bit of that description here.

An NPR interviewer asked a young British actress why she had played such widely different kinds of roles—a proper Jane Austen-ish character in one film, a biker babe in another, a corrupt businesswoman in another, and so on. Was the strange variety intentional? The actress answered: “Do you know the kind of person who, once you know that she’s a vegetarian, you know everything else about her? I don’t want to be that person.”

1. In a business environment that relies on knowing what we bought in order to sell us more of the same, how surprising are you?
2. How surprising will you let your neighbor be? Use your imagination to picture how Jesus’s Golden Rule—“Do to others as you would have them do to you”—might apply in our political setting.
3. What would need to happen for you to understand people who watch “that other news channel”?
4. Are you willing to make that happen?

The best way to pry people out of our sameness may be to offer benefits that come with cross-difference engagement. We turn now to survey those benefits in chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE DIVIDENDS OF DIFFERENCE

In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul shares the good news that God intentionally distributes different talents across the church for the common good of all (1 Cor 12:7). He then paints the church as a body that fortuitously has a variety of different parts—a fifty-eyed body without legs would not work.

1. When Paul mentions the variety of gifts and different body parts, what kinds of differences do you picture?
2. In what areas of your life have you found the variety of people around you to be a plus?
3. When have you found these differences a detriment?
4. In these passages, Paul pictures these “gifts” as abilities and functions that find a home within a worshipping community. Could ideological differences (like being conservative or liberal) be gifts of God? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FIVE: THE DIVIDENDS OF DIFFERENCE

Business and military leaders increasingly value difference as an asset in their pursuit of a better bottom line and the successful completion of missions, respectively. Yet university faculties have lately trended quite progressive, church staffs are usually recruited along lines of theological sameness, and our politics now feature very little engagement across lines of difference.

1. Why do you imagine that educators, church leaders, and politicians often continue to see difference as oppositional and threatening, rather than constructive and helpful?
2. Is there something about those three idea-based realms that will continue to gravitate to pure types, over against mingled difference?
3. In other eras of American politics, compromise and bipartisan collaboration have been more common. What has changed to decrease those practices?

CHAPTER FIVE: THE DIVIDENDS OF DIFFERENCE

It's all good to talk about difference as an asset, but there is one crucial issue in this conversation that Hilton doesn't address extensively in *A House United*: What about truth?

Some of the conflict in Christian history and much of the conflict in American political culture is about what is true. Isn't that a proper reason to disagree—and in some cases even to divide? This is a crucial line of questioning. As you read the book, you may wish to consider the following questions for yourself.

1. Which of your own beliefs merit a “nonnegotiable” tag?
2. Does a “nonnegotiable” belief require separation from those who believe differently?
3. If so, why? And if not, why?

Equipped with an enlightened self-interest, then, and aware that engaging across difference has its benefit, we now turn to discover how that might happen in chapter 6.

CHAPTER SIX: MEETING THROUGH MISSION

Allen Hilton recommends in this chapter that we ought actually to meet and get to know our Christian opposites, rather than staying segregated from one another. But he knows that starting our cross-difference relationship on the debating floor is probably not a strategy for success. Instead, for the purpose of acquainting ourselves across theological and political dividing lines, this chapter offers an entry-level encounter doing something both churches would have done anyway—like mission.

1. What is your first reaction to the story of the progressive Cathedral of Hope in Dallas and the conservative Southern Baptist Church in Houston joining in mission?
2. In our current politically charged environment, can you even imagine people from a gay-friendly church working alongside people from a gay-converting church?
3. Have you ever joined forces with someone whose theology or politics you despise? If so, how did that go? If not, how do you imagine it would go?
4. What mission would you like to try with a Christian or church on the other side of the theological or political spectrum from you?

CHAPTER SIX: MEETING THROUGH MISSION

To understate, different ways of reading the Bible have often divided Christians. But the author suggests that the Bible actually drew opposites together on the Texas-Mexico border. Both of these very different churches followed Jesus's lead into that mission. They had heard Jesus say, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat" and they decided to feed Mexican children through education.

1. What role does the Bible play in the way you understand God and God's way in the world? How do you read it? More literally, line by line, or more as a general guide?
2. Could you imagine having a good time in Bible study with someone who reads the book differently than you do? Would it be risky? Why?
3. What possible advantages could there be to studying the Bible with someone who has a different approach to Scripture than your own?

Mission provides one way for Christians to meet around a common interest. There must be others, and where there's a will, there's a way. In our next chapter, we'll imagine other ways for God to bring unlike Christians into relationship.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CHRISTIAN MINGLE

“Christian Mingle” is the name of a Christian dating website. In this chapter, Hilton uses that phrase to describe what happens when Christians who don’t know each other find an opposites-attract moment—or at least an “opposites-don’t-hate-each-other” moment. This sort of relational adventure, and even the initiative to risk it, requires some courage. It also works best if the opposites know what their bare-bone essential beliefs are. As the saying goes, “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity.”

1. We saw in chapter 2 that fundamentalists get their name from a list of five essentials R. A. Torrey identified around the turn of the twentieth century. And progressives sometimes don’t realize that they have their own essentials, too—some theological and some political—though they don’t call them fundamentals. What are your essential, nonnegotiable Christian beliefs?
2. What Christian beliefs do you hold more loosely, as nonessentials?
3. What would you need to risk to cross lines and get to know your opposite? Does it scare you to think of taking that risk? What harms might you encounter?
4. When Jesus First Baptist Church hosted the progressive Christian Crosswalk America folks, Eric and Leslie were shocked that the pastor continued to welcome and affirm them, even though they knew he believed very differently than they did. Have you ever been surprised by someone you thought was your theological opposite? Your political opposite? What expectation did she or he defy?

CHAPTER SEVEN: CHRISTIAN MINGLE

Allen Hilton clearly doesn't like Left/Right Christian segregation. He tells the story of progressives Christians on Facebook trying to describe Evangelicals, when they had clearly never met one. In this chapter, he tells the story of A. J. Jacobs, who wrote *The Year of Living Biblically*. Jacobs, an agnostic Jew, clearly experienced some bizarre things when he got literal and hung with crowds who read literally. But the experience of encounter with these people, whom he had expected to be freaks, in the end actually gentled him toward them.

1. Describe a time when you've had a prejudice undermined by experience.
2. Brainstorm some ways for Christians from Left and Right to meet and know one another in ways that would break down stereotypes. List them here.
3. Now ask yourself, "Could I imagine myself/my church doing some of these? Could I go out of my way to cross the charged boundary between Left and Right?"
4. Take a minute to identify a specific Christian acquaintance and/or a specific church that you/your church might choose for a mingle. What project would most help you to meet and engage with one another? Can you imagine that project going well?

Now that we've imagined Christians who differ politically in contact with one another, let's look at how that contact can become conversation in chapter 8.

CHAPTER EIGHT: COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

One consequence of our political segregation in the United States has been a decline in our ability to talk to one another civilly and constructively across difference—even to fathom how anyone could believe what “they” believe. Congress is a case in point, but the inability stretches throughout the population, so that we sometimes find ourselves assuming that if someone believes differently than we do, she or he must be either evil or stupid. In this chapter, the author proposes a solution: practice. Courageous Conversations engage Christians across the spectrum in honest discussion about important, controversial matters. The goal is not necessarily to solve the issue—that’s hard to do in an hour—but rather to rebuild conversational muscles that have atrophied.

1. How do you experience the examples of courageous conversations in this chapter—a UCC and PCA pastor, people on both sides of the definition of marriage, etc.?
2. What would be the hardest topic for you to discuss with your theological or political opposite?
3. Can you imagine making that high-degree-of-difficulty dive and engaging an opposite in respectful conversation?

CHAPTER EIGHT: COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Hilton features the American founders as examples for Courageous Conversations—even though they were by no means exemplars of civility. The polemic and vehemence of debates between Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, and the rest almost singe the paper on which they're recorded. But they stayed at the table and hammered out the American Experiment.

1. How important is civility to you? Why? How does its value compare to the worth of intense engagement?
2. Can you imagine a good Christian conversation that features the sort of name-calling and ad hominem attacks that the founders (and Jesus's apostles) sometimes used?
3. Make a list of topics that are controversial enough to require Christian courage to engage them. (They can be political, theological, or other.)
4. What markers of progress would you look for in your own personal or your community's conversations over time as you practiced? What does success look like?

CHAPTER NINE: MISSION 4.0 (AKA MEETING AS MISSION)

It is striking that when Jesus mentions mutual Christian love (John 13:34–35) and Christian unity (John 17:20–23), he each time names the intended impact of all that Christian harmony on the world around us. In John 13, “everyone will know that you’re my disciples if you love one another.” And in Jesus’s prayer in John 17, Christians are to become one “so that the world may know that you sent me and that you loved them even as you loved me.” In this chapter, Allen Hilton reads Jesus’s picture of unity inside the church changing the world outside the church as a call to a new kind of mission. In his view, unity belongs right there next to evangelism, service, and justice as a sort of Mission 4.0.

1. In John 17, Jesus names unity with God as a prerequisite to Christian unity. “I in them and You in me, so they may become completely one.” Have you ever thought of your prayer life and spiritual life as means to building unified Christian community? How might that cause and effect look?
2. What various kinds of mission work have you done in your life (e.g., shared the good news about Jesus, fed the hungry and housed the homeless, advocated at the capitol)? List the different ways that you’ve reached out to the world on God’s/Jesus’s behalf.
3. If Christians were to build skills for navigating our differences through Courageous Conversations and other means, how might that matter in our divided land?

CHAPTER NINE: MISSION 4.0 (AKA MEETING AS MISSION)

Interfaith engagement has become increasingly important to some Christian communities, especially on the left half of the political ledger. Most of those relationships are built between more progressive Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In fact, it is easier for progressives from these different religions to talk to one another than for a progressive and a conservative Christian or Jew or Muslim to talk to one another.

1. **Imagine your church becoming the obvious source of help in a divided city. City Council members would muse, “We’re not sure exactly what those Christians do at their meetings, but they sure do know how to talk to one another!” Could you imagine your church learning to talk courageously with one another and then exporting that skill to other surrounding communities?**
2. **How would that form of service change the broader public’s perception of Christianity?**
3. **Imagine Religion with a capital “R” as the solution. What do you think would happen if pastors, rabbis, and imams across the United States focused their mission on internal Left-Right unity? What impact would that have on the daily workings of American democracy and culture?**

We’ve tracked American culture’s sickness, asked how to heal Christians of it, and outlined ways of engaging one another across difference, in mission, in worship, and in conversation. Now go forth and do. Friends, let’s build a House United together!