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5-28-2020

## "Are You for Us or for Our Enemies?" Making Decisions Among Contested Meanings

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### Recommended Citation

Bailey, J. (2020). "Are You for Us or for Our Enemies?" Making Decisions Among Contested Meanings. Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/1179](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1179)

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## "Are You for Us or for Our Enemies?" Making Decisions Among Contested Meanings

### Abstract

"Mask-wearing has become one more case study of our well-publicized polarization, one that probably anticipates a coming conflict over the details of how we reopen our churches."

Posting about the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and political ideologies from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square.

<https://inallthings.org/are-you-for-us-or-for-our-enemies-making-decisions-amid-contested-meanings/>

### Keywords

In All Things, coronaviruses, Bible, Joshua, masks, motivation

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# in things

May 28, 2020

## “Are You for Us or for Our Enemies?” Making Decisions Amid Contested Meanings

**Justin Bailey**

In the coming years, when we look back on our cultural response to the novel coronavirus, shifting attitudes towards mask-wearing will prove an interesting case study. It has been fascinating to watch how the meaning of mask-wearing has changed in so short a time. At first, many voices seemed to agree that wearing a mask would be ineffective against the disease. Perhaps this was motivated by a desire to alleviate shortages of N-95 masks for health professionals, who wear masks as a matter of course.

Next, buoyed by the valiant effort of ordinary heroes armed with needle and thread, masks became ubiquitous. There were significant exceptions, but for the most part mask-wearing was de-stigmatized, and even taken as a sign of virtue. I had multiple neighbors and friends who kindly mailed masks for our whole family.

Finally, as sheltering in place dragged on, and as minority reports (and conspiracy theories) began to proliferate, mask wearing became a political statement. Though wearing a mask in public is required in many places, in my small midwestern community it has always been prudential. Someone recently mentioned to me that her weekly visit to the grocery store was attended by dirty looks. She attributed this to her mask, since she was the only one in the store wearing one. It was almost as if donning the mask was a sign of tribal identification, a way of answering the question, *which news sources do you believe? Whose side are you on?*

My aim is not to adjudicate the meaning of masks, or even to advocate for when and whether we should wear them. Mask-wearing has become one more case study of our well-publicized polarization, one that probably anticipates a coming conflict over the details of how we reopen our churches. In any case, the broad consensus enjoyed for three or four weeks in the early days of sheltering has devolved into a familiar tribalism.

This is nothing new. I have had several interactions lately—completely unrelated to the current crisis—that have seemed less concerned with truth as with tribe. The common thread is an underlying question: “*Which team are you on?*” As Joshua asked the armed man: “are you for us or for our enemies?” (Joshua 5:13). I feel like I am being asked this question implicitly all the time.

At some level, taking sides is unavoidable. Justice takes sides, after all. But, it can often seem like both “sides” are selective in which injustices they are incensed about. In a hyper-connected world, our outrage can become less oriented towards injustice and more about managing our “brand identity” as people who care about the right things. We feel the pressure to demonstrate our belonging through the links we post and the perspectives we affirm. There are fundamentalists on all sides, with lots of condemnation and little grace. It is exhausting.

The temptation is to believe we can stay above the fray, that we can avoid the messiness. I want to be like Treebeard the Ent in Tolkien’s story, moving at his own pace and exempting myself from the war: “I am not altogether on anyone’s side, because no one is altogether on my side.” But, in reality this sort of strategy means a refusal to see those who are suffering, a refusal to share the pain of the vulnerable, a refusal to walk with those who can’t block out the barrage of injustice. Even Treebeard puts his life on the line for Middle-Earth in the end. Like it or not, all of us are already deeply invested, implicated in the injustice and ambiguity of the world.

How, then, do we make decisions in a world where we are always being asked to prove that we belong to the right side? I’m not sure I have a great answer to this question. But, I will share three simple questions to frame the struggle: who, why, and what.

**Who?** Or to put it more precisely, *to whom* do I belong? We are answering this question constantly, especially in our tribal moment. But, the truth is that all of us are under various authorities, accountable to significant relationships, and interconnected with the larger human family. As Christians, these loyalties (what we owe to others) are always secondary to our allegiance to the Lord (1 Cor 4:3-4). And yet, these secondary loyalties also situate that primary allegiance. “It is the Lord who judges,” as Paul reminds us, but this judgment takes into account whether we walk in the “more excellent way” of costly love, which is willing to offer *more* than we owe (1 Cor 12:31-13:13).

**Why?** In other words, *why act this way? What's my motivation?* Perhaps it is true that most of us simply follow the majority. This is not necessarily problematic, except when the "wisdom" of the crowd compromises the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Actions motivated by these virtues should be pursued. Actions rooted in self-preservation, vainglory, greed, wrath, competition, and paranoia should be called into question. What we *should have done* can only be recognized in hindsight. In the meantime, it is preferable to make the "wrong" decision, motivated by love of neighbor than to make the "right" decision, motivated by vain conceit (Philippians 2:3).

**What?** The question of human agency is "*what will you do now?*" We can't postpone living; we must act. All our actions are political, at least insofar as they are connected to our common life. Many of our actions, like whether or not we wear a mask, will be construed as being partisan, regardless of intent. This too is unavoidable. It is possible to wear a mask out of a desire to demonstrate "wokeness," but it is also possible to wear a mask out of a desire to love one's vulnerable neighbor. Humility is needed all around.

In any case, we would do well to remember the way that the armed man answered Joshua's question about sides:

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5:14-15)

Joshua's question changes from, "which side are you on?" to "to whom do I belong?" Living before this question means humbly taking off our shoes and listening for the voice of the ultimate judge. It means being quick to hear and slow to speak. It means remaining vulnerable and repenting frequently. It also may mean putting on a mask.