

3 Principles for Settling Political Spats in the Church

When we see civic engagement as a limited strategy rather than a source of moral identity, we're better equipped to reach across the partisan aisle.

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Every election season, some Christians remind us that “Jesus is not a Republican or a Democrat.”

But every election season, other Christians tell us that it’s wrong to vote for a candidate who supports abortion, or that Christians should vote only for candidates who will fight racial injustice.

With issues of grave moral import on the ballot—human life, religious liberty, marriage, economic and racial justice, and health care for the vulnerable—surely God must care how we vote. Yet it’s also clear that Christians can’t agree on how to vote, even when issues related to biblical teachings are at stake.

Some Christians proudly wear MAGA hats, fly large Trump flags, and cheer Republican politicians when they visit their churches, partly because they believe the GOP is the only party that will stop abortion or defend the right of conservative Christians to act on their convictions regarding sexual ethics.

Other Christians write editorials arguing that support for Trump is a surrender of evangelical values, because they believe his actions and rhetoric (echoed by other Republican politicians) cannot be squared with the Bible’s injunctions to love the stranger, care for the poor, or treat other people as divine image-bearers.

How, then, should Christians relate to other Christians with whom they disagree politically? Is there a way for us to find common ground in the gospel, even while being open with each other about our political differences?

There is, but doing so will require us to move beyond an idea that has become pervasive in the United States: the assumption that our morality is defined by our political choices.

One 2020 poll showed that 38 percent of Americans would be “upset” if their child married a member of the opposing political party. “It’s not ‘just politics’ anymore. It’s a serious moral divide,” one person explained. And that was *before* the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, the second impeachment of Donald Trump, and the Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, which all made the partisan division over moral questions seem even sharper.

Followers of Jesus care deeply about opposing sin and seeking justice, and as a result, it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that we should be cautious about making our political choices a moral cause. But it's precisely because of our Christianity that we recognize the moral limitations of politics.

We can and should use politics to pursue justice. There's no question about that. But we also need to recognize our own fallibility in doing so. And we have to be extremely cautious about making our political choices a moral litmus test when dealing with other Christians who've made the opposite calculation. In other words, as Michael Wear argued in a recent CT article, we must avoid "political sectarianism."

In theory, at least, we'll be able to maintain good relationships with Christians of opposing political viewpoints when we recognize three key points:

1. Both of our major political parties reflect some Christian principles but also mix those with heretical distortions of biblical truth.

Because the United States has been heavily influenced by Christianity, both the Republican and Democratic parties have been influenced by plenty of Bible-believing Christians. Currently, there are ordained Christian ministers from each of these political parties sitting in Congress. The platforms of each side reflect decades of Christian lobbying.

The Democratic Party's concerns about poverty, racial justice, health care, and environmental stewardship have received support not only from mainline Protestants and Catholics but also from many Black and Hispanic Protestant Christians and some evangelicals of all races.

The Democratic Party has been deeply shaped by people of Christian faith. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal social programs of the 1930s were created by believers in the Social Gospel. The party's embrace of civil rights advocacy was never far removed from the concerns of the Black church.

Although Democrats' positions on some issues—especially sexuality and abortion—do not accord very well with those of theologically orthodox Christians, the party's championship of equality and diversity is rooted in an ecumenical Christian vision that was popular with late 20th-century liberal Protestants.

Likewise, the Republican Party has been deeply shaped by the language of Christian faith. The 2016 Republican Party platform mentions God 15 times and affirms the principles of religious liberty, protection for the unborn, and the importance of marriage.

Since its founding just before the Civil War, the Republican Party has been a bastion of mainline Protestant morality. But in the late 20th century, it also became the party of many white conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants who were attracted by the group's conservative stances on abortion, sex, and religion in public life.

As a result, some of the party's platform statements appear to be taken directly from the work of thoughtful conservative Christian academics. The platform, for instance, declares that "children raised in a two-parent household tend to be physically and emotionally healthier, more likely to do well in school, less likely to use drugs and alcohol, engage in crime or become pregnant outside of marriage."

But if both the Democratic and Republican parties have been shaped by Christian principles, they've also both distorted Christian truths, which means that believers who become avid partisans are in danger of confusing heresy with Christian doctrine.

The Democratic Party's strong endorsement of pluralism and equality, for example, has led the party to adopt strong affirmations of abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and other LGBTQ rights that cannot be squared with historic Christian orthodoxy.

And the Republican Party's invocations of God are coupled with numerous claims about American military power, American exceptionalism, gun rights, and the moral imperative of a pro-growth (less progressive) tax code that some Christians have taken issue with.

The realization that each major party affirms both Christian principles and heretical beliefs should give Christians the freedom to embrace other Christians who support an opposing political party.

As an American Christian, I know the political party that I support is deeply flawed, and I also know the other one contains some elements of Christian truth. I'm therefore heartened to see other Christians engaging with another political party or, perhaps even better, challenging both political parties to more fully reflect principles of justice.

2. Christians' political disagreements are often about strategy rather than moral principles.

Even when we argue over a political matter that relates to a clear moral principle, the commitments themselves might be clear, but the political strategies are not.

For instance, Christians may agree that abortion is wrong but disagree about which policies are most likely to save unborn lives. Some believe that saving the unborn means electing politicians who will make abortion illegal. Others believe that saving the unborn means voting for

politicians who will create expanded maternal health care policies and better family leave policies.

When we recognize that many disagreements are about policy rather than moral principles, we'll be better positioned to listen to Christians who've chosen a different political strategy and better aware that they may be just as orthodox and just as concerned about the underlying moral issues. If this is true about some aspects of the abortion debate, it's equally true about any other morally based political debate. The imperatives to treat immigrants with dignity, pursue racial justice, care for God's creation, support marriage, alleviate poverty, and seek peace are all undeniable aspects of Christian ethics. But believers can legitimately disagree about how to translate each of those mandates into specific policies.

While Christian theology can tell us the goals to strive for as we bring God's kingdom into contemporary society, we may have to turn to history, economics, political science, sociology, and other related fields to find out how to get there. And even then, the answers we arrive at will probably depend more on our presuppositions than we want to admit.

3. Any attempt to make society more moral through legislation will inevitably be selective and incomplete and may offer mixed results.

Which major political party in the United States is committed to addressing the problems of divorce, gambling addictions, marital infidelity, and alcohol abuse? Which party will do the most to protect the poor from being exploited through payday loans? Which party will fight against the pornography industry?

If you haven't seen any political ads this election season that address any of these issues, perhaps that's a sign of the moral selectivity in our current partisan politics. It may also be a sign of the limits of politics altogether. American Christians of previous generations created political campaigns to address nearly all of these issues, but without much lasting success.

As a result, politicians don't talk much about these issues anymore—but, of course, Christians should care about fighting these evils and a host of others besides. The more we broaden our vision of how to pursue God's justice in the world, the less likely we are to set our moral compass by the very limited and imperfect measure of a political party's platform.

The task of bringing the light of God's kingdom to our society is so much larger than a partisan agenda—which is why we should never confuse God's kingdom with party politics. Political choices matter, of course—but in most cases, for the faithful Christian, their significance is more a matter of wisdom and strategy rather than morality.

Political parties work well as highly imperfect tools for accomplishing particular aims, but they become horrific idols when we treat them as sources of our moral identity.

This election season, let's use the electoral tools God has given us but then embrace without hesitation a Christian sister or brother who happens to make a different political choice—secure in the knowledge that the other Christian likely shares our moral concerns but takes a different view on how to best apply them.

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