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Lessons for the upcoming electoral season

William C. Mims column: What does the Third Commandment have to do with politics?

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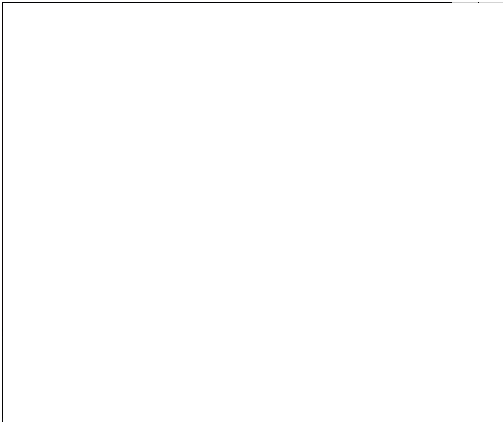


DWAYNE CARPENTER/TIMES-DISPATCH

Politics is the great American contact sport, with the Red Team and the Blue Team continually clashing. Can partisans who follow Jesus agree upon ground rules to prevent a comparison to mud wrestling? Perhaps two faith-full Irishmen — C.S. Lewis and Bono — can show us the way.

There are many reasons why political discourse has become so divisive. People of faith must accept part of the blame. Too often we improperly mix our faith and our politics.

Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, puts it this way: “Our task should not be to invoke ... the name of God by claiming God’s blessing and endorsement for all our ... policies and practices — saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, as Abraham Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God’s side.”



Many years ago, C.S. Lewis took aim at the desire in England to create a “Christian Party” like those in other European nations. Lewis viewed that particular mixing of faith and politics as violating the spirit of the Third Commandment. In effect, he argued that we take the Lord’s name in vain when we invoke it in the political arena.

In America, many of us wrap our political dogma in our religion, in effect claiming our party is the “Christian Party.” In so doing, we become estranged from our brothers and sisters in faith: “*we*” become “righteous.” Our preferred candidates become “God’s chosen leaders,” no matter how flawed they are. And “*they*” — meaning everyone who thinks or votes differently — are misguided or worse.

Lewis minces no words here. When one confuses partisan dogma with articles of faith he or she “implicitly accuses all Christians who don’t [agree] of apostasy and betrayal. [T]he temptation [is] claiming for our favorite opinions that ... degree of certainty and authority that really belongs only to our Faith.”

Here’s an example. A passionate defender of the Second Amendment, the right to keep and bear arms, once informed me that constitutional right was grounded in Scripture and endorsed by Jesus himself. “How so?” I asked. His response was because when Simon cut off the Roman soldier’s ear, Jesus ordered him to *put* away his sword, rather than *throw* it away.

So what are the lessons we can learn as the current electoral season begins? Here are three suggestions.

First, we should prayerfully and carefully discern when our faith speaks to our political positions. Scripture speaks to certain matters and not to others. For example, I can find no guidance about corporate tax rates in the Bible. But God does direct us repeatedly to care for those who are poor. This imperative was the first thing Jesus taught as he began his ministry (Luke 4:18). All people of faith should be able to agree on its centrality even when disagreeing on how to address it.

Here's an example of letting faith guide one's positions rather than a political party's platform. When I served in the General Assembly, two of my colleagues were devout Roman Catholics. One was a liberal Democrat; the other, a conservative Republican. They disagreed on many issues. But two issues they agreed upon were abortion — both opposed it — and the death penalty — again, both opposed it. The Democrat was criticized by many in his party for voting against abortion, and the Republican was likewise criticized for voting against the death penalty.

The take-away is not that all people of faith share those positions. They don't. Rather, it is that these two men were guided by the tenets of their faith rather than the pressures of their partisans.

Second, we must reject tribalism masquerading as partisan loyalty. Early in my career, I was chief of staff to a conservative Republican congressman. My closest friend was chief of staff to a liberal Democrat. We remain friends to this day. We are from different tribes, so to speak. But we will spend eternity together. What binds us is far stronger than what might separate us.

This is one example of “the intentional formation of unpredictable relationships.” Jesus models that for us. Roman centurions, tax collectors, Samaritans, even lepers — Jesus repeatedly formed unpredictable relationships. We should follow his example in the public square.

Third, in the words of Steven Covey, “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” The main thing, according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is “to glorify God and to enjoy him

forever.” I *do* glorify God when I love my neighbors as I love myself, even when they speak or vote differently than I do. I *do not* glorify God when I treat my neighbors with different opinions as enemies. Politics is important. But being God’s messengers is infinitely more so.

Let’s return to Jesus’ example. How often did he speak against the Roman government and its policies? Almost never. Why? Because such matters were not important? No. Scripture shows that many political issues are near to God’s heart — caring for the homeless and the hungry; redeeming the prisoner; affirming the dignity of every person formed in God’s image; and many others.

Jesus was about the business of *transforming* people, not *reforming* government. For him, the main thing was to keep the main thing the main thing. He calls us to do likewise. When we allow the Spirit to transform us, and we love our neighbors regardless of their political views, we *might* reform the government. But more importantly, we *can* transform the world.

I’ll close by giving that great moral philosopher, Bono, the last word: “The left mocks the right. The right knows it’s right. Two ugly traits. How far should we go to understand each other’s points of view? Maybe the distance grace covered on the cross is a clue.”

William C. Mims is an occasional contributor to these pages. He also serves on the Supreme Court of Virginia. This column is adapted from a sermon he delivered at Third Church in Richmond.