

Editorial: Can Jesus' followers really stay out of politics?

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Occasionally, a reader tells me to “stay out of politics” with my editorials. In a similar vein, readers have said pastors should “stay out of politics,” too. This is ironic in several ways. One is that the central figure of our news, opinion and preaching—Jesus—was smack dab in the middle of politics. As his followers, we will be, too.

One of the aggravating things about Jesus—at least to his compatriots—was his politics. It never seemed to be the right version for his followers, onlookers and critics. Jesus' politics led Judas to betray him, the religious leaders to arrest him and the Romans to crucify him.

We tend to consider politics with disdain, as something too earthly and polluted for Christians to address in the sanctuary. The word alone may put a bitter taste in our mouths and cause our jaws to clench. How could Jesus have anything to do with something that causes us to react like that?

Yet, Jesus did. From the beginning of his ministry through to the end, Jesus worked right in the center of the political turmoil of his time on Earth. It was unavoidable. It is for his followers, too.

Stay out of politics?

Perhaps what people mean when they tell us to “stay out of politics” is they are concerned for our wellbeing. They don't want us to get hurt like Jesus did. But there's no avoiding politics, and there's no avoiding its offense—not forever, anyway.

More likely, when people tell us to “stay out of politics,” they mean, “Don’t criticize my positions.” Such barbed responses typically include the respondents’ assessments of our intelligence, spiritual condition and presumed political allegiance. No, these respondents—faithful Christians all—are not in any way concerned for our wellbeing.

Others mean we should adhere to the historic Baptist idea of separation of church and state. We agree with them that forms of religious politics, such as Christian nationalism, are an unholy alliance of church and state. I do not advocate for such a blend of faith and politics.

Nor do I mean religious leaders should tell people how to vote. I don’t. I also do not mean church services should be political rallies. [They should not.](#)

To believe in Jesus, which means to accept and follow his teachings and his ways as true and authoritative, means such a follower of Jesus will find herself or himself involved with politics somehow, someway. To follow Jesus isn’t to “stay out of politics”—which indeed are an earthly mess—but is to honor him in their midst.

Jesus in the middle of politics

The following are just a handful of examples of Jesus’ involvement in politics.

Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized. We might think this was purely spiritual, but politics were involved, at least if Luke’s account is to be believed—and I think we believe Luke’s account.

Luke tells us tax collectors and soldiers went to John for advice (Luke 3), counsel that would impinge on politics. The act alone of going to John pegged them politically. Luke also tells us John “rebuked Herod” for a host

of “evil things he had done” (Luke 3:19-20). You might guess how that political action turned out for John.

John’s call to repentance—including the religious leaders—was inherently political. When Jesus went to John to be baptized, Jesus picked a side in the political struggle of his day, which was as much religious as governmental.

Following his baptism and his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus assembled a group of followers. As he did, he called people with differing—even polarized—political positions.

Some, like Peter, were blue-collar workers whose prime concern was making a living. James and John mounted an influence campaign for the top spots in Jesus’ kingdom. Simon was a zealot, what today we might call an insurgent. Matthew was a tax collector believed by his fellow Jews to be in collusion with the Roman colonizers.

If we think Jesus didn’t know what he was doing choosing these particular individuals and all that came with them, we probably need to get out more. Jesus knew he was surrounding himself and inserting himself in the political fight of his day.

Those Jesus chose did not see the world or its systems in the same way. Nevertheless, Jesus picked them and called them together, and at some point, Jesus paired them up and sent them out to spread his message. I wonder if he deliberately paired political opposites.

The beginning of Jesus’ last week was nothing if not political. Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt to the shouts of “Hosanna” from an adoring crowd?

Jesus might have rejected being made Israel’s earthly king (John 6:15), but he didn’t mind fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy about King David’s descendent: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! / Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

/ See, your king comes to you ... riding on a donkey, / on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

Some like to bring up Jesus' response to paying taxes. Jesus would have been reviled if he blessed paying taxes to Rome, and he would have been imperiled if he directed the Jews not to pay such taxes. His "middle way" of give "to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17) proved no less troubling and dangerous.

Keeping the main thing the main thing

To say Jesus didn't speak out on political issues or entangle himself in politics is simply to ignore or redefine what Jesus did through the entirety of his ministry. In making the choices he made—going where he went, saying what he said, associating with who he did—Jesus did not stay out of politics.

Jesus spent himself smack dab in the middle of politics. Not only was it unavoidable in first century Israel-Palestine, he assured his position by being obedient to God's will. How else was God's redeeming and reconciling work even going to begin restoring this world if politics were off limits?

Which brings us to today.

Jesus' followers today are called to the same messy work. Jesus' words in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount still apply: "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40).

Perhaps the rub is we are not fully trained. For to be fully trained is to "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5), who did not come to accomplish his will but God's will. And God's will is to reconcile the

world through Christ. This is our ministry, our message, our ambassadorship (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

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