

Ed Stetzer Talks Government Shutdown, Social Media and Political Rants

You can't blurt at people and reach people at the same time. This is true no matter how satisfying it feels to add your voice to the political rants on social media.

In the current political climate, with shutdowns and blame, I have watched the volume grow and the civility shrink.

I believe in the importance of civility for civility's sake. Yet I think it goes even further if you are a Christian who wants to reach those disconnected from the church. The way we handle political issues has a missional implication.

A few days ago, I posted this thought to Facebook (and a shorter version on Twitter): "Statistically, the unchurched lean heavily Democrat. So—and I know it's just me talking crazy now—if you want to reach the unchurched, maybe constant Facebook/Twitter posts about how stupid Democrats are might be a bad idea."

The post was shared hundreds of times on both social media outlets and appeared to draw a largely positive response, so I thought it may be appropriate to elaborate a bit on this idea and why it's important.

With the angry accusations flying around Washington, that's one of the reasons people don't like Washington, think it is broken and give it such low approval ratings. Yet as I observe the relentless mudslinging between professional politicians with less and less surprise, I've sadly concluded that Christians often are unnecessarily burning bridges on the altar of political partisanship.

In 2012, Election Day exit polls reported 12 percent of Americans who voted in the presidential election had no religious affiliation (otherwise known as “Nones”). Of those who have no religious affiliation, 70 percent said they voted Democrat.

It’s not just the “Nones.” There is a strong correlation between church attendance and political party. It’s been called the “God gap” in the media. As the Pew Research Center reported last year, “Those who attend religious services frequently have been more likely to vote Republican while those who attend religious services less frequently, or are nonreligious, have been more likely to vote for Democrats.” Even when some thought the gap might be narrowing, it showed up again last year just as before.

Now, I am not saying that all Christians are Republicans, that Democrats are of the devil, or whatever else people will read into this. But knowing the data helps us better discern our surroundings. Facts are our friends, and those facts have some implications that I think we need to consider—in this case, significant missiological implications if you really want to reach the unchurched and not just talk about them in an abstract way.

So, here’s the challenge in the age of political opinion frequently posted on social media: Constantly posting your opinions to a variety of social media outlets creates a barrier you may have not considered, particularly when your friends and family read them. When you don’t have to look at someone’s face while sharing your thoughts, you won’t notice the wall that is being built between them and you.

Yes, I am fully aware you have a right to your opinion, and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ensures your freedom to state that opinion. However, I am saying that it may be an appropriate missional decision to voluntarily restrict your own freedom to constantly blurt your thoughts

about politics in order to reach your neighbor who holds a different view.

Now, there are times to speak up, particularly when issues of justice are involved, but an endless stream of calling people fools or liars—people whom your neighbor voted for—just does not make sense for the Christian. Unless, of course, you just want to preach to the choir and not reach the unchurched. The end result is another stumbling block for those we are trying to reach.

You can complain on Facebook about who shut down the government, but you might just shut down a more important conversation. I'm not perfect on this, but I try to be careful and wise. Most of the people who connect with me on social media are not my neighbors, but I do know that my neighbors (and unchurched people) are reading my social media posts. And I engage in social media with that in mind.

People often ask me why I don't join in on some of the President Obama bashing that takes place on social media and at times even say something appreciative. Well, part of the reason I don't constantly bash the president is because I find it best to speak well when I can, leading some people to ask if I am a Democrat (which I am not). The other part of it is that I want my unchurched neighbors (who are statistically more likely to be Democrat) to know they are welcome in my home and my church and that I do not hate them or the president for whom they voted.

I suggest we tweet thinking more about Jesus and less about politics. That's just basic Christian prioritization.

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