

The Difference Between the Political Spirit and the Christian Spirit

Writing for *The Atlantic* on March 10, Shadi Hamid opined that in America today, “As Christianity’s hold, in particular, has weakened, ideological intensity and fragmentation have risen. American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it’s just that what was once *religious* belief has now been channeled into *political* belief” (his emphasis).

While this is certainly true, it is also true that religious belief has been *merged* with political belief. Yet, in many ways, the Christian spirit is very different than the political spirit. The two often make a very bad mix.

But before I explain what I mean, allow me to add the standard caveats.

I do believe that followers of Jesus should vote and be politically informed.

I do believe we should have a positive impact, as salt and light, on every aspect of American life, including politics.

I do believe there are godly and ethical politicians.

I do believe that some Christians are called to be heavily involved in politics or even run for office.

I do believe that the gospel intersects with politics.

I do not believe that everything political is inherently evil or bad.

At the same time, our general political system operates on very different principles than those laid out for us as New

Testament believers. That's why I said that the Christian spirit is very different than the political spirit, obviously meaning "political" in the negative sense of the word.

Thus, some of the negative definitions for "politician" include: "a person who acts in a manipulative and devious way, typically to gain advancement within an organization"; or "a person primarily interested in political office for selfish or other narrow usually short-sighted reasons."

Or, in the words of Ivern Ball, "A politician is a person who can make waves and then make you think he's the only one who can save the ship."

As for the world of politics, Machiavelli once stated that, "Politics have no relation to morals."

For good reason we often associate the word "dirty" with "politics." That's the way you play the game.

After all, as a general rule, if you don't bash and smash and demean and denigrate your opponent, you will not be elected. If you don't alarm your constituents to the terrible danger of your opponent's agenda, you will have a much harder time getting votes.

As expressed by H. L. Mencken, "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary."

Obviously, many of our concerns are hardly imaginary. But when it comes to the almost hysterical rhetoric from each party, Mencken was hardly exaggerating.

Thus, in 2020, both Republicans and Democrats warned that the last election was about the future of the democracy and that if the other party was elected, our democracy would be forever doomed. Only Trump (no, Biden, no, Trump, no Biden) can save

us!

The political spirit—again, in the negative sense of the word—stirs up anger. And hatred. And division. And ill will. And division. How much more opposite could it be to the Christian spirit?

Yet is all too common to find this merging of a political spirit with the Christian spirit, and virtually always, to the degrading of the Christian spirit.

In other words, rather than us raising the standards of the political realm, we become polluted and politicized. Rather than us lifting politics up, politics drags us down.

If you don't believe me, just visit Christian social media pages where political matters are discussed. We are far more political—nasty and abusive and divided—than Christian.

Think of famous Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV): "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Then, contrast that spirit with the spirit of a typical political rally, where kind words about your opponent will likely draw boos (or elicit no response at all) while hateful words will draw cheers of affirmation. (Correct me if I'm wrong, but a common refrain at 2016 Republican rallies was "Lock her up!" rather than "Pray for her!")

The world of politics is often driven by fleshly ambition and a desire for power, mixed together with compromise and corruption. Jacob (James) labels these attitudes (among others) to be "earthly, unspiritual, demonic" (James 3:15b). It is, he said, "the wisdom from below."

In contrast, he wrote that “wisdom from above” was “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17, MEV). Do you associate these kinds of attitudes with the spirit of politics? Hardly.

In the same way, if you write an article or preach a message on a political theme but in a political spirit—once again, in the negative sense of the word—you will demonize those you oppose, resulting in anger and hatred toward the candidates of the other party.

In contrast, if you write an article or preach a message on a political theme but in a Christian spirit, you will create a strong moral rejection of the other party’s wrong positions, coupled with prayer and love for the candidates you oppose.

And that’s where I believe many of us have gotten off track in the last few years. We have become way too politicized, as if all of us should be engaged in political issues virtually 24/7.

As a result, we have taken our focus off the greatest commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor, erecting partisan political fences and cultivating partisan political hostilities. That’s why I wrote (with irony and sadness) that we have become better known for our hate than for our love. (This is not just the opinion of the hostile media. I encounter it on the grassroots level all the time. We have become better known as backers of a particular candidate than as followers of Jesus.)

But the solution is not to hide in a monastery or abdicate our role in society. The solution is to get our priorities right.

First the gospel, then politics (and no, the two are not synonymous or interchangeable), always exercising a Christian spirit in all that we do. And where politics takes us away from that Christian spirit, we take a step back from politics.

If we want to see a real harvest of righteousness, both personally and corporately, we do well to heed these words of Jacob (James): “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18, NIV). {eoa}

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