

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let's Talk About Our Relationship to Politics

It’s November! Maybe that means you’re buying your squash of choice. Maybe that means you’re remembering how good you feel when you practice gratitude regularly. Hopefully it also means you have either already voted or made plans to vote. And it means most of us cannot escape the relentless political ads. So today, because they’re following us around anyway, let’s talk about our relationship to politics.

Just to clarify, I am not writing to tell you which candidates you ought to support. I am not even writing specifically about the current elections. However, I want to address a deep misconception many people seem to hold about the separation of church and state. This separation is meant to exist in our legal system, not within our souls.

Historically, wealthy white landowning Christians in the United States have sought to protect their freedom to steal from Native Americans, enslave African Americans, refuse to hire Irish workers, pay Hispanic workers next to nothing, and much more. Somehow, we have found ways to separate the Jesus who cares for the poor from business regulations that frequently benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

John Wesley encouraged Methodists to engage with politics, but with compassion. During a particularly contentious election season in 1774, he advised those who could vote:

1. “To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy;
2. To speak no evil of the person they voted against; and
3. To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.”

The sentiment behind this advice is Wesley’s sense of responsibility as both a citizen of England and a citizen of the kingdom of God. He does not cease to serve Christ while he serves his country, and when forced to choose (say, after the American Revolution, when the newly independent states no longer have church leaders unless Wesley does some creative interpretation of the rules of the Church of England), Christ is his first priority. So he encourages people to vote and participate in the governance of the country, but to do so without ever yielding in their commitment to love their neighbors as Christ taught and modeled.

I believe we can do that without messing up the separation of church and state. So, how can we be responsible citizens of our country and also committed disciples of Jesus?

1. As we make choices about how we vote and what legislation we support, our Christian values like loving our neighbors and caring for the most marginalized can be part of our consideration.
2. We can abstain from slandering politicians we dislike. We can certainly share factual information, but feeding the rumor mill and supporting smear campaigns is not a Jesus-like way to get involved in the community.

We can offer each other grace, choosing to focus on what is excellent and worthy of praise in our neighbors, even if we have differing political views on certain topics

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.