

Jesus trumps tribalism

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American electoral politics is deeply tribal, and Donald Trump's success in the presidential primaries represents tribalism pushed to a frightening extreme. His supporters seem unfazed by his rhetoric, with its toxic stew of hubris, vulgarity, personal insults, and patent lies. They don't mind his lack of relevant experience, or the stream of evidence that he hasn't thought much about public policy and doesn't really care. His talents lie elsewhere: as a media-savvy demagogue who stands boldly against those who are outside the white conservative tribe, even if he doesn't really stand for anything at all.

Yet this election cycle has also shown the limits of tribal politics on the right. While many Trump supporters identify themselves as evangelical Christians, most evangelical leaders are not buying what Trump is selling. A steady parade of pastors and other evangelical figures has denounced Trump in no uncertain terms. Some have gone out on the ultimate limb in a partisan nation: declaring that even if Trump wins the nomination, they won't vote for him in November. They'd rather be governed by a liberal than an unprincipled bully.

We appreciate these evangelical leaders' efforts on behalf of their faith—and ours. Whatever differences mainline Christians may have with evangelicals in matters of theology or politics, we share in the task of Christian formation. Mainline church leaders too are trying to make disciples of Jesus, not members of a cultural tribe.

Last month pollsters at the Barna Group found that those whose beliefs align closely with evangelical Christian teachings have a lower view of Trump than do Americans generally. Where Trump does better is among more nominally religious people, those who identify themselves as evangelical—or, like Trump himself, as mainline Christian—but lack deep formation in faith.

Such formation fixes people's eyes on higher things. Trump's media strategy centers on the entertainment value of spectacle; Christian disciples learn to look away. Trump's rhetorical approach conflates brazenness with truth telling; Christian disciples can tell them apart. Trump's demagoguery runs on tribal fear of difference; those formed in Christ trust in a love that casts out fear.

These stances go beyond partisan or tribal commitments. They are marks of discipleship, crucial for all Christians. Evangelical leaders are calling their constituents to embody their professed faith by resisting Trump and his unchristian appeals. We applaud and admire their efforts.