

The Establishment Clause and Political Agenda By David VanLandingham

The most formidable ally in the fight for the separation of Church and State may be Jesus Christ. As controversial as that may sound, I am attempting to establish an important principle. While the American system allows personal religious freedom, our principle of the separation of Church and State demands that politicians who use religion as a campaign tool, basis for legislation or philosophy of governance, are not exempt from the same critique appropriate for any political agenda. If a politician asks you to vote for him because he is a Christian and will vote a Christian agenda, you have the duty to verify that claim. That politician must be counted upon to vote in a predictable manner consistent with the standards he has accepted and promised. If he does not live like a Christian or his position on issues are contrary to Christian standards then it is reasonable to withhold your vote.

Exactly the same principle exists for the media and opposing political candidates. A “hands off” policy based on the establishment clause violates the principle of the separation of Church and State. The politician’s personal beliefs, and right to worship, are just that, but his political posture and promises must be aggressively examined. Politicians, sometimes obviously, have been known to adopt false doctrine to further their political goal and then rely on the establishment clause to restrain the media and their opponent from what would otherwise be the normal exercise of our political process.

By what standard should we judge the credibility of a Christian political agenda? The substantial majority of Americans are Christian but the variation of beliefs is extensive and sometimes extreme. Historically, these differences have been the cause of war, crusades, inquisitions, torture, and executions. The variations are so persistent that they occur not only between denominations but internally. J. Stanley Lemons, First Baptist church historian said, “Whenever two or more Baptists are gathered together, there’s a schism”. Our political critique must rely on Christian Doctrine to ferret out the snake oil salesmen but cannot use any particular denomination’s doctrine as the Christian standard. In any case we must avoid challenging the belief systems of particular sects or private

individuals. The solution is obvious; the historic document that established Christianity with the life and specific philosophy of Jesus is not the property of any particular sect and yet is universally accepted. If a politician campaigning on Christian values supports an agenda or lifestyle that is contrary to the specifics in the gospels his credibility is at stake. Christian Politicians should be judged by their own standards; are they consistent in their religious agenda and does that agenda reflect the very basic and universally accepted tenants of Christianity, the teachings of Jesus?

Some examples are appropriate.

There is a political movement for the public display of the Ten Commandments as a historic document representing the fundamental laws of our Christian heritage. Jesus never specifically endorsed or even mentioned the Ten Commandments, but more importantly, he established two other commandments as his fundamental laws¹, both of which are excluded from the Decalogue. The Ten Commandments do not represent Christ's philosophy and do not represent the essential ingredients for the attainment of eternal life as specifically detailed by Jesus². There is no confusion in the gospels on this issue; Christ's teachings are clear and repetitive. The credibility of some politicians who demand that the Ten Commandments be revered as the source of Christian law have the added inconsistencies of misrepresenting the commandment prohibiting work and the acceptance of services on Sunday and their failure to associate their other "hallmark issues" with what they portray as the basic Christian laws; e.g., adultery violates the Ten Commandments and is the foremost threat to the sanctity of marriage but is never a campaign issue while homosexuality violates neither the Ten Commandments or any specific teaching of Jesus.

Christian political agendas include the promotion of prayer in school. Jesus stated that prayer should be conducted in secret and be of short duration³. His premise was that

¹ Mt 22:36-40, Mk 12:29-31

² Mt 19:16-21, Mk 10:17-21, Lk 18:18-22

³ Mt 6:5-8

public prayer breeds hypocrisy, and repetitiveness was a characteristic of paganism⁴. Therefore, every child, everywhere, at any school, anytime can already pray in full accord with Jesus' philosophy; short secret mental prayers between the child and their God. The media and concerned citizens should be analyzing the rationale behind the push for public prayer when it clearly was not Christ's intent.

Neither evolution or creationism are important in Christ's philosophy, yet religious politicians are portraying the battle as between the God fearing and the Godless. Pat Robertson confirmed this when he told the citizens of Dover Pennsylvania they rejected God when they voted against the school board implementing the teaching of "intelligent design". A very substantial number of mainstream denominations support evolution, just as good Christians are on both sides of all of the issues discussed here. The drive to give "establishment clause" status to political agendas results in the obfuscation, perhaps intentionally, of the reality that the culture wars are not between Christians and atheists, who comprise a insignificant percentage of the voting population, but between various factions within Christianity.

"Sanctity of life" is a very complicated range of issues (choice, assisted suicide, Terri Schiavo) that cannot be reduced to the scientifically accurate rejoinder "life begins at birth," which is theologically irrelevant given Jesus' differentiation between physical and spiritual life (body and soul), with his disdain for the former, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing,"⁵ and his focus on birth, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."⁶ Christ's philosophy also contradicts the notion that we should "always err on the side of life" with his identification of "greater goods". The above passages are but two of many which demonstrate that any legislation floated under the banner of the "Sanctity of Life," restricting personal freedoms and choice, necessitates a frank and full analysis of Christ's philosophy (and perhaps even the lessons of the Old Testament to obtain actual practice and policies behind the commandment, "Thou shall not Kill").

⁴ ibid

⁵ Jn 6:63

⁶ Jn 3:3

We are not simply discussing philosophy or theology; it is life and death for potentially millions. Under a religiously oriented government we have had HIV/AIDS aid curtailed to US and foreign institutions. Abstinence and the discouragement of condom use in the fear that it encourages promiscuity are propagated as Christian Doctrine and as conditions to the provision of aid. Jesus demanded that the sick be cared for as a condition to entering eternal life⁷, he did not teach abstinence and he did not include sexual immorality in his list of commandments necessary for eternal life⁸. There is no justification in Jesus' philosophy, as he presented it, for a government to allow people to contract and die of AIDS in the name of sexual purity. The premise that abstinence is the greatest good, promiscuity the great evil, both trumping care of the sick, contradicts Jesus' life and teachings. The consequence of abstinence as public policy is potentially so devastating that it is insane not to debate the theological source when substantial proof exists demonstrating its contradiction of the standard.

Politicians will interpret the above issues differently, but Christianity has a standard, it is Christ. No politician should be deemed credible who attempts to claim that Jesus, although God, was not sufficiently articulate to make his point and that Americans should, instead, trust politicians to interpret God.

There are many other important issues arising from politicians with religious agendas which are of extreme importance to medicine, individual freedoms, science, and end of life situations. Virtual hate campaigns have been initiated against American citizens. These deserve debate from a Christian credibility viewpoint.

You may ask why a politician, would misrepresent Christ. Let me give you one short quote, "any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."⁹ I will take that one step further; responding to the question on what is necessary for eternal life, "'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and

⁷ Mt 25:31-46, Lk 10:25-37

⁸ Mt 19:16-21, Mk 10:17-21, Lk 18:18-22

⁹ Lk 14:25-33

you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”¹⁰ On the other hand, there are political figures who have actually gotten rich by taking money from the charitable donations of the poor.

There is no disrespect to any church or individual who give high credence to the Old Testament, St. Paul, Tradition, Joseph Smith, personal interpretation, etc; but an acknowledgement that the common denominator almost universally accepted among Christians is that Jesus, his life and his philosophy, is the source of Christianity and therefore the best standard from which to debate a Christian political agenda. I am not endorsing Christianity or any particular sub-division of that belief system, I am simply saying that it is our civic duty to verify the credibility of a politician who campaigns for our votes based on his avowed belief in Jesus and has as his political agenda Christian principles. The best verification is to judge him by his own standards.

The American media, opposing politicians and the voting public must recognize that religious freedom does not imply that political agendas based on religion are exempt from public debate or critique.

¹⁰ Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22