

## FIVE

### WHAT ARE WE *FOR*?

#### *Issues Christians Should Care About*

**W**e need to reverse the established trends of the religious right to attack opponents. Even well-respected and usually thoughtful leaders of the religious right vilify other Christians when they disagree with them, without first getting their facts straight. We have adopted the methods of talk radio and cross-fire TV, and diminished the art of debate so that we are fighting only *our* version of their side.

For example, in a May 2006 radio broadcast, a nationally known Christian leader mischaracterized and misquoted a well-respected evangelical leader about global warming. Richard Cizik, the Vice President of the National Association of Evangelicals (a 30-million member organization) was attacked for his stance ... only it wasn't his stance. The Christian leader quoted Richard as saying things that none of us (including Richard) would ever agree with, including, "global warming is the most important social issue of our day"; "those who are skeptical of global warming are immoral"; "he and his associates want to roll back the use of fossil fuels, oil, to the 1998 levels or even earlier, which would paralyze industry and put millions of people out

of work ... the net effect is anti-capitalistic and an underlying hatred for America.”

Wow! Does that sound like what any of us would be for? Putting concern about global warming above the sanctity of life instead of being another expression of it? Putting millions of people out of work? Hating America? What? No!

I use this example not only because I was one of the original signers of the Evangelical Climate Initiative along with Richard (and therefore know what we are recommending and what we are not), but because this kind of rebuttal is such a clear example of what so many debaters are doing in the media: radicalizing someone’s position so that they can knock it down more easily. The leader did not contact Richard to verify his facts, and then he accused Richard and his associates of trying to divide evangelicals.

I do not attribute malicious intent to this individual. He just got some wrong information and believed it. The point is that a harmful habit has crept into the way the religious right approaches points of disagreement.

So what should we do? We need to debate *ideas* accurately and respectfully!

Global warming is certainly a complex issue. Those who do not believe it is happening, or that humans do not contribute to it and can’t fix it, or that there are no impending dangers connected with it, believe that because there is some evidence to support their argument. Those who do believe that global warming is real, that humans can be helpful in addressing the problem, and that it might well have some effects that are not gradual but currently volatile, also have evidence. Let’s encourage the debate!

But first let me ask, is a debate a prerequisite to doing everything we can to be good stewards of creation? Do we really need to settle the scientific debate before we stop accepting pollution as a necessary evil and diligently work to devise better forms of energy usage? The issue to evangelical Christians isn't global warming; the issue is whether or not we will exercise a moral and biblical obedience to a direct command of God (Genesis 2:15). How we do that, personally and policy-wise, is something we can all work on together. We just need to keep working on it together, and that will require seeing our differences as informing instead of inflaming.

### **Expand the Issues and Emphasis**

Conservative Christians need to be more ambidextrous rather than just "Right" or "Left" oriented. The Bible is more wholistic, more fulfilling to all of life's needs rather than heavy-handed on what is morally right or compassionately left. We need to expand our repertoire. Before we expand, though, let's sing some praises for the foundation that has been laid.

The issues that have defined evangelical voters up to this time are biblical and moral ones that will always be primary for us. The protection of all life, especially the most vulnerable, the protection of the biblical (Genesis 2:18-24) definition of marriage as between one man and one woman and the nurture of the family, the advocacy of religious liberty, and the advocacy of sex only within marriage are crucial issues for the Christian in addressing his or her culture.

There is another constituency, though, that is looking for leadership on other important issues in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). These are usually

younger Christians, or more liberal ones who have learned that in order to effectively deepen our impact on society we must broaden our team.

What are these other areas addressed in the Bible that are also important to God?

- **Peace** – Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers...” (Matthew 5:9). Though conflict is sometimes necessary, it is never God’s ultimate choice. Ambrose and Augustine outlined a “just war” theory; its purpose was not to justify aggression but to limit it. The primary question for a Christian is never, “Do we have the right to go to war?” The primary question for a Christian is, “How can I work toward peace?”

When the Bible talks about peace, it is not just talking about the absence of conflict, but also the building up of all of life. Peace is a term for betterment and fulfillment. So the basic value that we must voice and vote is this: How can I take the present situation (or issue or candidate) and support what will bring not only the solution to conflict but the reconciliation of people?

- **Basic Human Rights, Including Religious Liberty** – Every person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Each person, therefore, deserves life, liberty, and to be treated with respect. Any form of oppression that subtracts from the dignity and freedom of people is wrong. These forms include:
  - Any restriction of religious freedom
  - Any permanent class or caste system
  - Human sex trafficking and slavery
  - Failure to search for the cures of any disease that

would disable large segments of the population

- Any long-term restriction of a free market system
- **Poverty** – The Scripture doesn't just talk about giving to the poor, it talks about empowering the poor so that they can be poor no more! The famous verses found in Deuteronomy 15:11-18 (from which Jesus quotes) are really about equipping the poor so that they can be free from the benefactors some day. So the question on legislation is not merely, "What temporary relief can we give people?" (although that is often needed) but "What does this bill or candidate promise to do that will end the cycle of poverty?"
- **Creation Care (environment)** – As I have mentioned, in Genesis 2:15 God gives a simple command to mankind about the earth: "Cultivate it and keep it." That is to say we must not only be concerned with production, but also with the protection of God's creation. Dominion is never given for the purpose of exploitation. Christians, of all people, should be thankful enough for the grace of God and His immeasurable gifts that we would not want to pollute such gifts. The question for us is, "How does this candidate or bill seek to balance production with protection, or how can I be a part of preserving the earth for the generations to come?"
- **Justice Issues** – In Isaiah 61:8, as well as many other places in the Bible, God declares, "I, the Lord, love justice." Of course this has everything to do with each person being made in the image of God. It also has to do with God being a holy God Who demands that right prevail.

Ron Sider does a fine job in writing about an approach to justice. Particularly interesting to me is his definition of “Distributive Justice,” which he defines as “how the numerous goods of society are divided.”<sup>1</sup> Of course there are other types of justice, such as retributive and procedural. But the latter are more the concerns of the courts and the former more a concern of legislation.

The question from a biblical standpoint for a Christian to consider is, How much does the community or state or nation have an obligation to equip the individual for the good of all? Or, more personally, Will this legislation or candidate result in the kind of redistribution of wealth that strengthens all of society?

### **Improving Our Aim**

We must focus on spiritual growth rather than winning elections; the aim is not power but service.

Question: How long will these election results last? Answer: Until the next election.

Question: How long does a life changed by faith and practice last?

Answer: Forever.

We all should know that addressing social policy is part of our necessary service as Christians. What may be difficult to keep in mind is that policy does not transform life’s most important and precious areas. It will change circumstances, but it will not change people.

Is it a waste of time then? By no means! What Jesus had in mind when He told us to “render to Caesar” was not immediately the conversion of Caesar. Conversion of political leaders doesn’t

happen because citizens are contributing their voice and vote.

Jesus had in mind at least these three things: First, that the movement of Christ-followers would not be seen as political dissidents whose goal was to get out of civic responsibility (1 Peter 2:13-15). Second, that caring about government would result in the kind of environment where the Gospel could be more easily spread (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Third, that our public demonstration of our faith and service would strengthen and confirm that faith in us (James 2:17-18).

We experience a distinct kind of spiritual growth when we are serving to better the world rather than just to know God more intimately. There's a noticeable spiritual difference in a Christian who won't venture outside a small group study and a Christian who is working to improve his community (serving in a homeless shelter, participating in a campaign involving moral issues, etc.).

Of course we want our side to win. But if God is sovereign, and He is conducting the affairs of state (Daniel 2:21), then what do we have to worry about? Our main job on earth is to spread the Gospel and to help Christians mature into servants who will make others want to know the God we worship. Politics is a great venue for such service.

### **Advanced Intellectual and Moral Training**

In the Syntopicon (a listing of great ideas) of *Great Books of the Western World*, the word "politics" is not even listed. That is because politics is simply a venue for much more important and foundational ideas to be expressed and embodied. We need to educate people about the ideas and ideals that are deeper than the issues of the day.

The religious right is known for quick reaction to pending and dangerous issues, but most conservative Christians would be more confident (and more like Christ) if they had a deeper understanding of political ideas. Societies are not changed by single political issues; issues are set by prevailing values in the culture. How do those values originate? Whoever is putting forth the “big ideals,” which come from the big ideas, are the thought leaders of the culture. And when those big ideals filter throughout enough of the population, the culture changes and the political leaders follow.

Christians need to be thought leaders. We need to identify those who best express the whole of biblical values, and then we need to transfer the tools to think deeply and clearly to the general Christian population for their use in addressing the issues of the day.

Identifying intellectual and philosophical thought leaders who will clarify and advance basic Christian values is a treasure hunt. They may not be the people who are most visible and many are not even our contemporaries. But if we can read their works from time to time, we can re-orient ourselves to the eternal rather than be tossed about by every wind of current doctrine.

Of course, nothing can replace a familiarity with the classics. From Augustine to Jonathan Edwards to C.S. Lewis, from Adam Smith to Cardinal John Henry Newman, the span and depth of thought relating to culture literally cuts new pathways in our brains.

More contemporary conservative/cultural thought leaders such as Catholic intellectuals Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus (*First Things* journal) and Peter Kreeft, and Protestant intellectuals including Os Guinness and James Davison Hunter are starting points to examine the more permanent ideas behind

the ever-changing political contests.

The big idea is one that we have heard before, but not many are paying attention yet: Christians don't need to be taught *what* to think; Christians need to be taught *how* to think biblically. Christians need to be able to transfer our ancient biblical and moral values to any field in which we choose to participate, including politics. We need to grasp the eternal concerns embedded in today's issues and political decisions. We need to recognize the recurring contest between immediate gratification and long-term consequences. And we need to be so thorough and confident in our analyses that we can promote thinking that will result in greater impact and less volume. And we need to realize that God has already put into place teachers, of millions of Christians, who can enable this process.

### **Mobilizing Churches, Empowering Pastors**

I am a pastor. That is what I have wanted to be since shortly after my conversion. The responses to that announcement were negative. Those who knew my background of pagan behavior thought it was "a religious phase" that would pass. Those who were college think-tankers with me wondered aloud, "Why would you want to waste your intellect and abilities on such a culturally irrelevant and impotent institution as the church?"

I am a pastor. I love the church, even with all of our blemishes. Do we have more than our share of wackos? Yes, we are the only institution mandated by our Lord to accept them. (So when no one else can tolerate you, come to church.) Do we have hypocrites, shysters, self-gratifying showmen? Yes, some of them are on national TV. Why do we stand for it? Because the church is mainly a collection of people who recognize we all need a lot of work.

I am just a pastor, but I know a secret: God is going to use the church to change the world. God enjoys using the weak for the very strongest of purposes (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). And pastors, or spiritual leaders of Christian groups, must lead the way.

Pastors are both the greatest disappointment and the greatest potential in addressing society's ills. The modern church, not unlike the Titanic, has thought itself to be unsinkable and has spent much time focused on inward activities. How isolating and inconsequential even if we don't sink!

Pastors are beginning to get involved in the "welfare of the city" to which they have been sent (Jeremiah 29:4-7). The church all across the land is waking up to the fact that we are to be a blessing to all fellow citizens, and pastors are beginning to see the excitement about doing community projects that reveal the love of Christ. That kind of direct congregational mission is a terrific venue of blessing for "outsiders" and spiritual growth for "insiders." But the common understanding of mission in the church has not yet included impacting social policy.

To be honest, pastors are scared to death of politics. Now I can hear a lot of saber rattling (Bible flipping?) out there. "I'm not scared! I'm wise and protective of my flock when it comes to divisive issues!" Uh, OK. But really, pastors *are* scared. We are scared of part of our congregation criticizing us, because politics is a volatile arena and we *will* be criticized by some for even going into such teaching. We are scared of division; we are scared of misunderstanding; we are scared of being wrong. And, minor concern, we are scared of losing our jobs. Hey, what can a pastor do in the real world? (Hint: "Do you want fries with that?")

But we pastors went into our callings precisely because we wanted to make a positive difference in the world as well as in

eternity. You don't become a pastor to get rich or to be praised or because you wanted to be popular and hide from controversy. (If you did enter the ministry for these reasons, then you got some really bad career counseling.) We became pastors because we love God and we love the people He loves. We became pastors because we want our lives, and the lives of those we lead, to really count for something in eternity. And we want to leave this world a better place.

So why is it, then, that the current leadership of the religious right has “church liaisons,” but is not positioned to expect pastors to take the leadership for their own congregations? Most Christians in the United States, and those in the rest of the world, as well, will never become involved in the public square unless they get periodic permission, training, and encouragement from the pulpit.

I believe we can effectively motivate and mobilize pastors and spiritual leaders if we empower them with three types of capabilities that they can pass on to their congregations:

1. Pastors can be given a basic understanding of how every Christian's involvement in the public square is a biblical expectation and a key to spiritual growth. Pastors care about building people who obey God.
2. Pastors can be given materials to teach people in their congregations theologically and philosophically how to discern eternal matters and apply them to contemporary issues. These materials should be relevant to teaching from the pulpit, or in a Sunday School class or in a small group. Obviously, the pastor should not be the only teacher, but the lead teacher. Part of the teaching material should reference helpful Web-based information (see chapter 10).

3. Pastors can be given a way to organize a reference (or case studies) group where they can go for counsel or “best practices” personal advice. Many of us need grass-roots colleagues when it comes to figuring out how to approach a topic in a positive, constructive, and actionable manner.

### **Moving Toward the Ideal**

When Jesus taught, He did not create action from “the next right thing.” He taught the ideal while recognizing we were working with a broken system. For example, when speaking on divorce, He first laid out the ideal, “Man ... wife ... shall become one” (Matthew 19:3-6). He then told why the law admitted exceptions for divorce (4-9).

We need not settle for less than the ideal just because we have failed so far. God has made us to be witnesses of His grace embodied in His Son (Acts 1:8) and through His church (1 Corinthians 12:27). And our witness is to extend into all areas of life, including the public square (Acts 26:26).

The church is still here to love people directly, and through godly public policy.

### Notes

1. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*, (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2005) 165.