



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

I simply cannot comprehend the lack of common sense in our decision-makers. Why didn't anyone consider coordinating the time-change ritual with the election? In other words, when we surrounded ourselves with bowls of popcorn and peanuts and sequestered ourselves in front of the TV to watch the election returns, wouldn't it have been great to have an extra hour to vegetate? The results of this lack of foresight, of course, is that all week long I have seen colleagues trying to prop open drooping eyelids in the aftermath of what turned out to be an almost all-night vigil. Thank goodness it is only every four years.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that it is much too early to write anything even remotely intelligent and perceptive this soon after the actual event, but there are still some feckless writers (I resemble that description) who will try and wade in before even all the votes are counted. Four years ago it was not so much of a problem, I am not sure all of the votes were ever counted, but that was then and this is now.

So what can be said about the bitter struggle between President Bush and Senator Kerry that helps us interpret what took place? More importantly, what can be said from a religious and specifically a Christian perspective? The old adage is that we should never talk about religion and politics, but in these Updates we throw caution to the wind and talk about both.

In the June 18, 2004 Update I quoted from an article by Susan Page which demonstrated the increasing connection between church attendance and voting patterns. She described the rather seismic shift which has taken place in the past three decades, where the majority of regular church attenders now vote Republican, and a majority of casual attenders or those who attend not at all are voting Democratic.

"Forget the gender gap, the religion gap is bigger, more powerful, and growing. The divide is not between Protestants and Catholics, as it once was, or between Jews and Gentiles. Instead it is between those who go to services regularly, and those who attend religious services rarely or never."

She continues, *"The religion gap is the leading edge of the culture war that has polarized American politics, reshaped the conditions that make up the Democratic and Republican parties and influenced the appeals which the presidential candidates make. The debate over same-sex marriage*

makes the gap even wider this year. Gay rights, partial-birth abortions, definitions of patriotism and other values issues are likely to exacerbate the divide between the most observant and others." How right she was.

One final quote from the June 18 Update, "Before 1972 voters who said they went to church regularly did not vote any different from those who did not. From 1972 to 1992, the gap was in single digits. But the gap exploded in 1992, largely because of Bill Clinton. Those who attended church regularly, not including African Americans and to a lesser degree Hispanics, were much less likely to vote Democratic. In 2000 frequent churchgoers chose Bush over Gore by 20 points." In this most recent election I believe the percentage difference is now 22 points.

I also suggested in the afore-mentioned Update that unless the Democratic Party could appreciate and appropriate some of the language and values of the faith-community, everything will be trending away from them. Of course this is what happened. (However, it is abundantly clear that the media has little understanding of what is happening. It is not just fundamentalists or conservative evangelicals who are trending Republican, as we continue to hear, it is also overwhelming numbers from mainline denominations. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, etc.)

There is yet another dynamic at work which I have not heard mentioned in any post-election debate. In the July 23, 2004 Update I talked about the radical changing nature of the American church, quoting from Bill Easum. His thesis was that mega-churches are transforming the American church culture. In 1970 there were only 10 such churches in the U.S., by 1984 only 24, but in 2003 there were 845. More than 3 million people now attend such churches, and their influence as teaching congregations is growing. Most of these are evangelical churches and I would guess that most of them, excluding the African American congregations, voted overwhelmingly Republican.

And most of these new churches are located in the vast sea of red states which we saw on the election map for 2004. The two coasts are largely blue states, but the rest of the country is almost all red states. Equally important, in the past most of the large metropolitan areas were overwhelmingly blue, but now with the explosion of new mega-churches and other independent and charismatic congregations, blue is turning to red. I see no hints that this trend will be reversed anytime soon.

What will happen if the number of these churches doubles in the next four years? This is entirely possible, with most of these churches which worship 2000 or more now giving birth to daughter churches. Once a congregation learns how to grow a mega-church, it is not beyond the realm of possibility to do it again, only in a different location. Many of these congregations have become the organizing troops for the Republican Party, much as unions have done this work for the Democratic Party.

If the above analysis is accurate, then why in the world is this happening? What has shifted since 1972? Perhaps we can learn something from the exit polls. The number one issue for people this year was not the war in Iraq, not the economy, not even terrorism, but rather "moral values." And almost everyone who cited moral values at the top voted for President Bush. Many pundits are now trying to slice and dice the meaning of "moral values," but those who said they mattered most know exactly what they mean.

What are moral values? Certainly they are abortion and gay marriage. But they are much wider than this. Moral values are about the deteriorating moral climate on TV and in the movies. They are about Janet Jackson and Michael Jackson, Hugh Hefner and Howard Stern, Brittany Spears and Paris Hilton. They are about the explosion of pornography on the internet, and our most respected hotel chains hawking X-rated movies in every room. They are about obscene music lyrics and raunchy advertising.

The list is long and tawdry. And one of the few times that people get to protest the worsening social climate is in an election. Certainly some Democrats get it, but it is clear that Republicans have been much stronger on "moral values."

With this said, some cautions should be noted. God is neither Republican nor Democrat. Whenever Christians become imbedded in one political party, we lose the capacity to criticize, to stand in judgment upon a very human institution. There are many things about the Republican agenda that Christians need to challenge. For instance when I see the rich are getting much richer and the poor are become poorer under this administration, I call this unbiblical, an offense to God who has a preference for the poor. We had better always remain at arms-length with any political party or any human institution, lest we lose our sense of being a church.

One other warning. Usually the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. But looking back we find that whenever one party becomes too powerful, too dominant, arrogance and hubris are never far behind. Lyndon Johnson won overwhelmingly in 1964 and soon he thought he had a mandate to destroy communism in Viet Nam. Richard Nixon devastated his opponent in 1972 but when he tried to punish and destroy his enemies he lost his office.

When Ronald Reagan won a huge victory in 1984 it was only a short time when Iran-Contra almost destroyed his administration. And when Bill Clinton won a huge second-term election, his scandalous behavior was not far behind. The old adage goes "absolute power corrupts absolutely," and so there is always the danger of over-reaching.

I saw a fascinating debate on public television the night after the election. Rick Warren from Saddleback Community Church and Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners Magazine, were two of the participants. Warren talked about how the media just doesn't understand evangelical Christians, about the meaning of moral values. Already there were commentators saying either that these Christians are just hopeless throwbacks to the 1950's, or that Democrats merely have to find a better candidate or have a better ground game to win. But Warren said that there is a huge movement taking place among Christians, this year alone was The Passion of the Christ, millions studying his book, Purpose Driven Life and now this outpouring on behalf of moral values. God is doing something profound, and we better not miss it.

Jim Wallis, who promotes social justice, challenged Warren to expand the concept of moral values to include concern for the poor and hungry. Warren agreed, saying that if we could find a way to embrace both moral values and social values a candidate could win 80% of the vote. Wouldn't that be novel, a biblical position that cared deeply about moral values and which embraced an ethic which believed that every person in the world should have abundance to eat, a decent place to live, a place to work where one's gifts could be used, and a life filled with dignity and purpose?

Pray for President Bush and his team, the Senate and the House of the Representatives, that God might work through them. And pray that America might embrace the whole biblical message, which is wider than any political party or any denomination or any congregation or any individual.