



Pastor's Update

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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).

This election cycle is once again disheartening and depressing. While there are a plethora of surpassing issues that need to be debated and decided, much of the attention of the campaign is given to what Martin Luther called "adiophera," by which he meant "trivia." When I hear the candidates, I am often reminded of two little boys sitting in a mud puddle throwing dirt at each other, seeing how much will stick. Where is the enlightened discourse, the intellectual grappings, the focus on substance? I continue to hope that the debates will finally give us such a respite.

A growing concern I am overhearing in Christian circles is that neither candidate nor party truly reflects the width and breadth of the biblical and Christian sensibilities. Both Republican and Democratic philosophies are only partial responses to the Gospel, both seem to pick and choose those parts of the Bible they like and ignore the rest. Each of them gets some things right, but also some things quite wrong, spiritually speaking. So how do we make decisions about our voting?

I heard a Roman Catholic bishop expressing some of his frustration. He said that the U.S. Bishops have taken very strong stands on many issues, but two are in the forefront. The first is a prohibition of abortion, the taking of human life, especially the life of the unborn. (For many bishops, of course, pro-life also means opposing capital punishment). The second is focused on justice issues, that God has a preferential bias toward the poor, the kingdom of God is often described as a place where the rich and powerful are brought low and the poor and powerless are lifted up. Note Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1. So, this particular bishop said that he was struggling to decide how to vote.

Amplifying this theme, I was intrigued to read an article this week in the Christian Century Magazine by Professor Mark Noll of Wheaton College in Illinois, which was taken from his book One Electorate Under God. I was very curious which direction he would go, Wheaton College is a conservative, evangelical school best known for alumnus Billy Graham, but the Christian Century is a liberal Christian publication.

As I quote from his article, I will state that I do not agree with his conclusion, that he will cast his vote in this elec-

tion for "None of the Above." But I appreciated his attempt to elucidate a Christian moral position. He says that for him there are seven key issues, each of which has a very strong moral dimension. That means there is a biblical and theological dimension to each of these issues, but he concludes that neither political party is a making serious effort to address these concerns. Here is his argument for the 7 issues.

1. **Race.** From 1619 when the first slaves were off-loaded in American colonies, until the 1960's American political institutions wavered in deciding whether African Americans could be full and equal citizens. This meant not only to treat them equally under the law, but that the accumulated wrongs from the past be addressed by sustained remediations. We pay a high price for our history in injustice. Specifically, full attention should be given to the racially infested plight of impacted urban areas, a Marshall Plan in some shape or form, is certainly the least that could be asked of major political parties as recompense for America's long lasting and most debilitating political crime.

2. **Life.** He is militantly pro-life, because he does not want Americans to commit the social suicide that results when nations allow personal preference to trump human life. Personal preference is always dangerous when it operates without reasonable restraint. Life should always be favored over death.

3. **Taxes.** The U.S. needs to base its income tax policy on broad views of justice and equity, which means sharply progressive income taxes. The ability to create wealth does not depend only on personal initiative, personal intelligence, personal work and personal luck. It also depends on a social infrastructure that can result in the creation of wealth. It is a matter of justice that those who benefit the most from the social infrastructure should pay the most to maintain it.

4. **Trade.** The U.S. should continue to define principles of free trade. It can be painful for individual segments of the population and they need to be provided temporary assistance, but free trade opens up entrepreneurial activity that creates jobs and expands markets. It binds nation to nation with the cords of commerce. It provides

long term solutions for problems exacerbated by poverty. And it makes us safer by promoting new jobs in poverty-stricken regions of the world.

5. **Medicine.** Basic medical coverage, supplied at minimal cost and with minimal hassle should be offered to all citizens. America's history of free competition has contributed to the splendor of American medicine. But locking these splendors away from a growing portion of the American populace is a problem of the first order.

6. **Religious freedom.** All of modern world history reinforces the proposition that people must be allowed to exercise the basic human right of worshipping God, or not worshipping God, as they choose. The violation of this right has proven destructive of social well being, corrosive of social harmony and stultifying of human flourishing. Religious freedom is a most basic human right.

7. **International rule of law.** In an increasingly complex world, the U.S. must act with scrupulous justice in its actions overseas. Policies based on unilateralism, whether in trade, diplomacy or war can only make the international arena more dangerous for us all. Since we are the strongest nation in the world, the new Rome of the 21st century, we should ponder the overextension, the short sighted presumption, the failure of imagination and the unilateral use of force that caused such difficulties in the latter phases of the Roman Empire. Self interest is a legitimate reason for the use of force, but only when the strictest standards of justice are observed. So says Professor Noll.

I am not sure I would have chosen exactly the same seven, but I do know that I would have added three compelling moral issues to the mix. Let me number them 8 through 10.

8. **Education.** I was rather surprised that an educator would not have included education, since it is so basic to the thriving of all Americans. Every child, every adult should have access to a high quality, low-cost education. There is nothing that can lift people out of poverty and hopelessness like education.

9. **Environment.** Genesis 1 declares that God created the heavens and the earth, and saw that they were very good. We were instructed to take care of the earth. But what we have done to our environment is deplorable, and if not remedied, perhaps fatal. Today is almost impossible to know that the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe is safe or whether toxics will cause future disease.

All Christians should seek to leave the earth in better shape than we found it.

10. **World hunger.** We have a crisis of staggering proportions throughout the world, where hunger and malnutrition and extreme poverty are epidemical. Long term solutions are necessary, as the Professor mentions in terms of jobs, but short-term people need basics just to live. Twelve percent of children in America live in poverty, the percentage in the world is much higher. For Americans to spend wildly in the pursuit of pleasure and materialism while ignoring the plight of the poor is neither biblical nor Christian. Read Matthew 25:31-46).

With these issues as background, how do we decide in this election? Some will choose the candidate or party which shares a majority of concerns. Others will find that one or two issues trump all the rest and the candidate who is "right" on those pivotal issues will prevail.

So I am disappointed, along with the Catholic bishop and with Professor Noll that neither candidate nor party seems to take seriously the whole of the biblical message. This raises the question, Is such a consistent biblical approach to moral issues even possible, or is this just Pollyannaish? If politics is the art of the compromise, then perhaps this is as good as we can ever expect. I hope not.