

This commentary by Cal Thomas suggests that it may be time for the religious right to examine its tactics. This article appeared on DispatchPolitics.com, a division of *The Columbus Dispatch*.

Religious right should put politics aside

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When Barack Obama takes office in 2009, he will do so in the 30th anniversary year of the founding of the so-called religious right. Born in 1979 and midwifed by the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, it was a reincarnation of previous religious-social movements that sought moral improvement through legislation and court rulings. Those movements, from abolition (successful) to Prohibition (unsuccessful), had mixed results.

Social movements that relied mainly on political power to enforce a conservative moral code weren't anywhere near as successful as those that focus on changing hearts.

Thirty years of trying to use government to stop abortion, preserve opposite-sex marriage, improve television and movie content and transform culture into the conservative evangelical image has failed. So, should conservative Christians redouble their efforts, contributing more millions to radio and TV preachers and activists, or would they be wise to try something else?

I opt for something else.

Too many conservative evangelicals have put too much faith in the power of government to transform culture. The futility inherent in such misplaced faith can be demonstrated by asking these activists a simple question: Does the secular left, when it holds power, persuade conservatives to live by their standards? Of course they do not. Why, then, would conservative evangelicals expect people who do not share their worldview and view of God to accept their beliefs when they control government?

Too many conservative evangelicals mistake political power for influence. Politicians who struggle with imposing a moral code on themselves are unlikely to succeed in their attempts to impose it on others. What is the answer, then, for conservative evangelicals who are rightly concerned about the corrosion of culture, the indifference to the value of human life and the living arrangements of same- and opposite-sex couples?

The answer depends on the response to another question: Do conservative evangelicals want to feel good, or do they want to adopt a strategy that actually produces results? Clearly partisan politics have not achieved their objectives. Do they think they can succeed by committing themselves to more of the same?

If results are what conservative evangelicals want, they already have a model. It is contained in the life and commands of Jesus. Suppose millions of conservative evangelicals engaged in an old and proven type of radical behavior. Suppose they followed the admonition of Jesus to "love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison and care for widows and orphans," not as ends, as so many liberals do by using government, but as a means of demonstrating God's love for the whole person in order that people might seek him?

Such a strategy could be more transformational than electing a new president, even the first president of color. But to succeed, such a strategy would not be led by charismatic figures, who would raise lots of money, be interviewed on Sunday talk shows, write books and make gobs of money.

Scripture teaches that God's power (if that is what conservative evangelicals want and not their puny attempts at grabbing earthly power) is made perfect in weakness. He speaks of the tiny mustard seed, the seemingly worthless widow's mite, of taking the last place at the table and the humbling of oneself, the washing of feet and similar acts and attitudes; the still, small voice. How did conservative evangelicals miss this and instead settle for a lesser power, which in reality is no power at all? When did they settle for an inferior kingdom?

Evangelicals can take the path that will lead them to more futility and ineffective attempts to reform culture through government, or they can embrace the far more powerful methods outlined by the one they claim to follow. By following his example, they will decrease, but he will increase. They will get no credit, but they will see results. If conservative evangelicals choose obscurity and seek to glorify God, they will get much of what they hope for but can never achieve in and through politics.

Cal Thomas writes for Tribune Media Services.

And, from the *New York Times*, this article which suggests that the American Catholic bishops, who are meeting this week in Baltimore, may also have to engage in some serious examine of their pastoral effectiveness.

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BELIEFS

Catholics and Choice (in the Voting Booth)

By **PETER STEINFELS**

Anyone constructing a list of the big losers on Tuesday would probably include the nation's Roman Catholic bishops. Will that fact be candidly addressed when the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) meets next week in Baltimore?

After a presidential campaign in which it was widely perceived that the dominant message from the bishops was that Catholics were morally obliged not to vote for a candidate supporting abortion rights, exit polls show that Catholics voted 52 percent to 45 percent for Senator [Barack Obama](#). That was seven percentage points more than the Catholic vote in 2004 for Senator [John Kerry](#), a fellow Catholic.

Hispanic Catholics, a group the bishops often hail as representing the future of the church in the United States, led the way. Latinos voted 67 percent for Mr. Obama, 16 percentage points more than their vote for Mr. Kerry. Latino Catholics, usually more Democratic than Protestant Latinos, almost certainly voted for the Democratic nominee at an even higher rate.

Exit poll figures for young Catholics are not yet available, but much information indicates that they also voted at high rates for Mr. Obama.

If the bishops sweat a little over these figures next week, the reason won't be worry about their political prowess but about their pastoral and moral effectiveness. By appearing to tie their moral stance on abortion so closely to a particular political choice, have they in fact undermined their moral persuasiveness on that issue as well as their pastoral effectiveness generally?

In 2004, a distinct minority of bishops established the public posture of the church by excoriating the abortion rights advocacy of Senator Kerry and in some cases urging that he or even Catholics who voted for him should be barred from Communion.

The result was disarray among the bishops and a backlash among a considerable number of Catholics. To keep that from reoccurring in 2008, the bishops painstakingly reframed the brochure they issue every four years to guide Catholics in contemplating how to vote.

Responding to complaints that previous statements insufficiently highlighted abortion among the church's many concerns, the new version emphasized that issues involving "intrinsically evil" actions could not be equated morally with others. Abortion was the prime example, but euthanasia, torture, genocide, unjust war and racism were similarly labeled.

Catholics, the bishops taught, could never vote for a candidate because he or she supported any of these evils but only despite such support—and only for proportionately grave reasons.

There were further nuanced reflections on the complexity of political choices and the place of prudential judgments in applying general moral principles to particular circumstances or to particular candidates. The bishops repeated longstanding disavowals of single-issue politics and of telling Catholics how to vote.

In November 2007, the bishops voted overwhelmingly for the document, titled "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." During the election season, most of them publicized it in their parishes and stuck with it in their own statements.

But faced with the prospect of a victory by Senator Obama and particularly disturbed by the support he was getting from Catholics whose anti-abortion credentials were undeniable, many other bishops began to insist on giving their own interpretation. Some estimates place 50 to 60 bishops within this group, almost certainly a larger minority than four years ago. And they were the ones responsible for the public's perception of the bishops' role in the election.

Sometimes their declarations were dramatic. Archbishop Raymond L. Burke, recently transferred to Rome from the Archdiocese of St. Louis, declared the Democrats "the party of death." Bishop Robert J. Hermann, the church's interim leader in St. Louis until a successor to Archbishop Burke is named, invoked "Judgment Day" a half-dozen times in a column leaving no doubt that Catholics should decide their vote on the basis of abortion alone.

Bishop Joseph F. Martino of Scranton, Pa., required all pastors to read a letter from the pulpit stating that abortion superseded all other issues for Catholic voters, and he effectively suggested that Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, should not receive Communion because of his support for abortion rights.

“To the extent it was perceived that abortion was the only issue that should determine a Catholic’s vote,” Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany said this week, “I don’t think it was true to ‘Faithful Citizenship’ itself, and I don’t think it resonated with the Catholic people.”

The danger may go beyond not resonating.

Many Catholics may understandably feel that the bishops are talking out of both sides of their mouths: Catholics are not supposed to be single-issue voters, but, by the way, abortion is the only issue that counts. The bishops do not intend to tell Catholics how to vote; but, by the way, a vote for Senator Obama puts your salvation at risk. Catholics are to form their consciences and make prudential judgments about complex matters of good and evil — just so long as they come to the same conclusions as the bishops.

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