

Discussion Guide

Golden Rule Politics

Reclaiming the Rightful Role
of Faith in Politics

A DVD from the Baptist Center for Ethics

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Introduction: Framing the Issue

For more than 25 years, the Christian Right has carefully constructed a political myth claiming that "GOP" stands for "God's Only Party." Conservative Christians quickly bought into the myth.

The New York Times in March 1998 quoted Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, as saying, "The go-along, get-along strategy is dead. No more engagement. We want a wedding ring, we want a ceremony, we want a consummation of the marriage [with the Republican Party]."

Christian Right leaders and conservative pastors have repeatedly said and implied that voting for Democrats means voting against God.

Newsweek quoted Texas Republican Judy Deats in 2006 as saying, "Right now, I wouldn't vote Democratic if Jesus Christ was running."

In his book *Faith and Politics*, former U.S. Republican Senator John Danforth wrote, "Christian conservatives believe that God's will can be reduced to a political program, and that they have done so. In their minds, there is indeed a Christian agenda for America, and in recent years, they have succeeded in pressing it upon the Republican Party. It is an agenda comprised of wedge issues, which, when hammered relentlessly in political forums, divide the American people."

Discussion Questions

- How do you respond to someone who claims that one political party "belongs to God" and another is anti-God?
- How does this myth harm the political process?
- How does this myth harm the faith community?
- Why has the myth persisted? What can individuals do to challenge it?
- Do you agree that political parties are neither thoroughly moral nor completely immoral?
- Why, and how, should people of faith be involved in politics?

Chapter 1: Politicians Speak to Faith

In February 2000, Republican Senator John McCain charged the Religious Right with being “agents of intolerance” and singled out Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as “corrupting influences on religion and politics.”

Seven years later, McCain is still suffering negative consequences for these remarks. Most members of his party have done little or nothing to challenge the myth established by the Christian Right. Many have actively advanced it.

In 2004, Republican Senate candidate Alan Keyes said, “Christ would not vote for Barack Obama, because Barack Obama has voted to behave in a way that it is inconceivable for Christ to have behaved.”

In August 2006, the Florida Baptist Witness quoted Florida Republican Kathleen Harris as saying, “If you are not electing Christians, tried and true, under public scrutiny and pressure, if you’re not electing Christians then in essence you are going to legislate sin.”

Judy Baker, a Democratic state representative from Missouri and wife of a Baptist pastor, sees her vocational role as part of her calling. Yet when people find out she’s a Baptist, she says, they assume she’s a Republican.

Other Christian politicians share Baker’s view, including Lincoln Davis, Artur Davis and Roy Herron.

Discussion Questions

- U.S. Congressman Lincoln Davis from Tennessee cites Matthew 25 (the great judgment passage that identifies the faithful as those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the prisoners) as indicative of how to judge a good government. Do you agree or disagree?
- Alabama U.S. Congressman Artur Davis views Democrats’ reluctance to speak about their faith as a problem. Do you agree with his assessment?
- Why did State Senator Roy Herron say he was reluctant to express his faith in politics?
- Must a politician be a Christian in order to legislate justly?
- Is one political party more moral than another? What can people of faith do to change that perception?

Chapter 2: Clergy Speak to Politics

This chapter opens with a clip of Tim Alexander, pastor of Smith Springs Church of Christ, Antioch, Tennessee, praying: "Holy God . . . Our hearts are heavy because in the past we have been silent as your name has been used as a political wedge. Forgive us for allowing that to happen. Strengthen our resolve to not use you. Help us, oh God, to be used by you."

Alexander and other ministers featured in this segment stress the fact that no political party can hold all truth or righteousness. Placing God on either political side is a serious distortion of the nature of the divine, a temptation to which many ministers and other people of faith have succumbed.

Yet these ministers believe the church can and should have a voice in the public square that comes to bear on issues.

Discussion Questions

- How have politicians, clergy and people of faith used God's name as a political wedge?
- Henry Parsley, Episcopal bishop for the state of Alabama, asserts that politics have co-opted religion and used it for political purposes. What evidence do you see of this?
- William Buchanan, pastor of Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, said: "God is neither Democrat, nor Republican...We've attempted to place God on one side or the other of this political battle. But if God is Republican, or if God is Democrat, then we have reduced God to humanity." Buchanan warned: "Humanity has its frailties, has its weaknesses. We have made God like us." What is the theological danger of reducing Providence to a political party? What does the "transcendence of God" mean?
- Pastor Tim Alexander says churches have "made the bargain of Esau" (a reference to Genesis 25:29-34 where Esau sold his birthright to his younger brother, Jacob). What do you think he means? Do you agree?
- Missouri Baptist pastor John Baker says the pulpit should be prophetic, "meeting social issues head-on if need be, in the community of faith." How well do you think pulpits do this? What are strengths you have seen in pulpits? Weaknesses?
- Can you come up with examples of how pastors worked through—or avoided—political issues in the church?

Chapter 3: Wall of Separation Protects All

One of the most hotly debated issues among people of faith is the separation of church and state. Christian Coalition Founder and televangelist Pat Robertson has said: "There's no such thing in the Constitution as, quote, separation of church and state. That term does not exist in the United States Constitution. It existed in the former Soviet Union's constitution, but not America."

Focus on the Family's James Dobson also asserts that the idea of the separation of church and state is not in the founding documents of the United States.

In this chapter, both ministers and politicians discuss the importance of this principle.

Discussion Questions

- What is the danger of removing the wall of separation that the founding fathers advocated and advanced in the religion clause in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.")?
- Do you see the separation of church and state being weakened or strengthened?
- How do communities maintain church-state separation while avoiding separation of "God and world," as Bishop Henry Parsley mentioned?
- Can you list examples of attempts to dissolve church-state separation? What about the Ten Commandments being posted in public classrooms and courthouses? What about biology classes teaching the theology behind intelligent design or creationism?

Chapter 4: Expanding the Moral Agenda

Pastor and author Rick Warren believes that “there can be multiple opinions among Bible-believing Christians when it comes to debatable issues such as the economy, social programs, Social Security, and the war in Iraq.” But in 2004, he identified five issues as “non-negotiable”: abortion, stem-cell harvesting, homosexual marriage, human cloning and euthanasia.

These five issues, Warren said, are “not even debatable because God’s Word is clear on these issues.” He encouraged voters to find out what political candidates believe about these five issues and “vote accordingly.”

Yet some ministers and politicians warn against such a narrow list of moral issues.

Discussion Questions

- How do you respond to those like Rick Warren who firmly identify a small list of “non-negotiable” issues for Christian voters to use in casting votes?
- Is such a list dangerous? Why?
- University of Alabama law professor Susan Pace Hamill refers to “high-sacrifice” versus “low-sacrifice” issues. The gospel’s message, she says, requires high sacrifice. Do you agree?
- Do you see faith communities embracing high-sacrifice living and issues? If so, how? If not, why?
- The ministers featured in this segment move well beyond the five “non-negotiable” issues listed by Warren and include issues like poverty, health care, family values, the environment, and war and peace. What other issues would you prioritize?
- Are you interested in advancing the common good? If so, how might you and your faith community do that?

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Rightful Role of Faith in Politics

In the concluding segment, politicians and ministers return to the question of the rightful role of faith in politics and speak to the way people of faith should engage in politics. They specifically identify the need to:

- uphold civility
- confront fears
- do justice

Discussion Questions

- How does Alabama Congressman Artur Davis suggest we can uphold civility in the political arena?
- Why is confronting fear one of the key roles for faith in politics?
- When you hear the word "justice," what do you think of? Discuss how the word is used culturally, legally, scripturally.
- Does the phrase "social justice" make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
- Think back to the introduction, in which Robert Parham quotes Reinhold Niebuhr as saying, "It is the sad duty of politics to establish justice in a sinful world." What do you think about this statement?
- What is the rightful role of faith in politics?