

EDITORIAL: 'How can you call yourself a Christian & vote like that?'_80904

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A young Texas Baptist minister recently encountered congregational conflict when a member of his church insisted affiliation with the minister's political party comes complete with a ticket to hell. Meanwhile, an older minister in another state created a furor when he apparently endorsed a presidential candidate from the pulpit.

This is only going to get worse.

Both major political parties have hired staff and launched initiatives to recruit conservative, church-going Christians to their cause. The presidential election is too close to call, and control of Congress is up for grabs. Both parties see Christians as the fulcrum upon which important outcomes will tilt. So, they're launching all-out efforts to win these voters to their side. The effort is so intense the IRS already has warned both parties not to influence churches to engage in political activity that would jeopardize their tax-exempt status.

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More than ever before, close observers are hearing a common refrain: "How can you call yourself a Christian and vote X?" And believe it or not, the question sometimes ends with "Republican," sometimes with "Democratic."

Hard as it is for the most partisan among us to comprehend, many voters affiliated with both parties have picked their political position precisely because of their Christian beliefs. The reasons for these decisions are as myriad as the voters themselves. But two common themes tend to stand out. The Republican Party attracts many Christians because of its emphasis on personal morality, particularly sexual ethics. They're galvanized by Republican opposition to abortion and homosexual marriage. The Democratic Party likewise attracts many Christians because of its emphasis on public morality, particularly economic ethics. They're energized by Democratic demands for social justice and advocacy for the poor.

With so much at stake, the political parties practically salivate over Christian voters, particularly “conservative evangelicals,” as if they were a monolithic bloc. The scrutiny Christian voters will receive, as well as the pressure placed upon them, will only increase during the three months leading up to Election Day.

Unfortunately, the politics of polarization will increase too. We live in an era of political incivility. Rant-inspired talk radio and made-for-TV political shouting matches provide millions of Americans with what passes for “news.” Over and over, politicians and pundits proclaim one party is absolutely right and the other is absolutely wrong. They've created ideological wedges that have divided America.

We should help our churches weather the maelstrom. Our churches should:

Encourage individual involvement. Christians should be engaged in government and politics. Separation of church and state does not mean Christians and other religious people remove themselves from politics and government. We should not abandon the public square to totally secular forces. We have much to offer.

✖ *Check politics at the church door.* Overt endorsement of a political candidate can jeopardize a church's tax-exempt status. More significantly, politicking in church can split congregations. Members of the same church may have religious reasons for supporting different candidates. As Baptists who affirm the priesthood of all believers, we should honor each other's convictions.

✖ *Back off the preacher.* Zealous partisans sometimes exert pressure on their pastors and other church staff to bless, if not outright endorse, a candidate, candidates or party. Pragmatically, this is dangerous, because pastoral endorsement of candidates could cost a church its tax exemption. Theologically and spiritually, this also is dangerous, because ministers must

serve all church members, no matter their party affiliation. If politics becomes a test of faith, members may not receive the pastoral care they need. And the pastoral task becomes harder than it already is.

✖ *Back off, preacher.* Likewise, pastors and other church staff should not abuse their positions of trust through partisan promotion. Of course, they should speak to moral issues, but they must acknowledge and respect the broad range of such topics. They, of all people, also should recognize the pastoral dimension of their calling transcends political pontification.

✖ *Facilitate discussion.* If done correctly, this will not violate the ban on politicking. Churches could sponsor panel discussions and other presentations on key issues. If all sides are presented by qualified representatives, the moderating is fair and the crowd remains respectful, the outcome can benefit everyone.

✖ *Promote education.* Beware; many so-called “voters' guides” are shrewd, misleading and partisan. But voters need free and fair access to information. Christians, who cherish truth, should lead in providing educational materials that help voters decide. A hallmark of such information should be breadth and non-partisanship. Materials that provide “scores” probably are partisan.

✖ *Lead in prayer.* We cannot overstate the importance of this election cycle. We must pray that God will guide us all-both to make wise choices and to reconcile our nation after the votes are cast.

-Marv Knox

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