

Politics—difficult but not inherently dirty, panelists agree

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AUSTIN—A former White House insider and a Texas Baptist pastor with a long track record of public service agreed Christians have a responsibility to become politically engaged and to advocate for the common good.

“Politics matters” because elected officials deal with “great issues of moral consequence,” Michael Gerson, syndicated columnist and former top aide to President George W. Bush, told a Texas Baptist gathering. And politics matter most to people who are denied justice, he asserted.

“Politics can be difficult business but not dirty business,” Gerson said. “It actually impacts people’s lives at a fundamental level. It’s a noble pursuit. ... It can embody moral purpose.”

Gerson and Michael Evans, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield and president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, participated in a panel discussion during a Christian Life Commission Advocacy Day event at Woodlawn Baptist Church in Austin. Ferrell Foster, director of ethics and justice with the Texas Baptist CLC, moderated the dialogue.

Evans, who has served on his local public school board and on a community college board, recalled speaking frequently at public hearings prior to pursuing public office.

However, he realized about 15 years ago he could make the greatest difference for the common good by helping to craft policies, not just critique them.

“I learned if I became an elected official, I could do more than just talk,” he said.

‘Advocate for the least and the lost’

Evans affirmed the role of the Christian Life Commission in speaking to moral issues and challenging Texas Baptists to advocate for those who otherwise would go unheard.

“I appreciate being part of a body that has the courage to advocate for the least and the lost,” he said.

At the same time, he urged Texas Baptists to “leverage” their diversity and encourage people from varied racial and ethnic groups to speak from their distinct perspectives.

Challenging times offer opportunities for “individuals who allow themselves to be used by God to be a prophetic voice,” Evans said.

Speaking broadly about evangelicals in the United States, Gerson raised concern about those whose views about issues in the public square are determined more by party affiliation and political orientation than by distinctively Christian principles.

“It is so easy to be a tool in the power games of others rather than an authentic voice—a critical and prophetic voice—that is determined from a set of assumptions about the moral influence and impact of Christian faith,” he said. “The question is: What is driving what? I’m afraid politics is driving too much and morality driving too little.”

Evans emphasized the importance of “allowing truth to stand against hypocrisy” and living by “a true moral compass.” He stressed the importance of keeping Christ central and understanding who Christ is.

Looking at the economy, Gerson characterized it as a “mixed bag,” with some areas experiencing growth while others struggle. He identified the lack of social mobility in the United States—the inability of Americans to advance socio-economically—as a significant problem.

Evans voiced agreement, saying, “We still find ourselves in a place where we have individuals who are caught on an island of hopelessness.”

Find hope in ‘unexpected coalitions’

Gerson voiced hope in the possibility of building “unexpected coalitions” that transcend party lines around issues such as efforts to eradicate human trafficking, AIDs and hunger.

In spite of the difficult and divisive atmosphere in political life today, it is neither as bad as it could be or as bad as it has been, he added.

“The divisions are deep and real, but they are not unprecedented,” Gerson said.

He pointed to the birth of the Civil Rights Movement in the African-American church as a picture of how Christian faith can shape society positively.

“Sometimes the people who need justice are the carrier of the ideal itself,” Gerson said.

Africans came to the United States as slaves and adopted the religion of their masters. In time, their ancestors demonstrated an understanding of Christianity far beyond that of their oppressors, he noted. And in the process, ancestors of slaves enabled the nation to “save its soul” by reclaiming the vision of its founding documents, he concluded.

“That’s the best moral story outside the Bible, as far as I’m concerned,”

Gerson said.