



THE VIEW

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CHURCH AND STATE: CHURCH OR STATE

BY

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The unexpected but necessary and welcomed respite from the current legislative session and the commencement of the most important week in Christendom, afford us the opportunity to ponder some real and timely issues that have been shoved aside for a while now. I am referring to the increasingly troubling entanglement between religion and politics. This writer is clearly mindful of the sage advice often given by one's elders to avoid at all costs the discussion of religion or politics. I am about to violate that wisdom on both counts.

For at least the past three Presidential elections we have witnessed the injection of "The Evangelical Vote" into the mix of electoral politics. In addition, we have seen discussed in great detail the potential political damage inflicted by the angry words of Barack Obama's pastor Jeremiah Wright and we have seen that countered by the criticism that Republican Presidential candidate John McCain received concerning his relationship with radical minister John Hagee. In short, the church, more specifically mainline Protestantism is clearly engaged in the political arena.

Two recent articles published in well respected organs of the print media serve to shed some light on where this entanglement of religion and politics may be taking us. Both articles allude to the significant and steady decline of membership in the mainline Protestant churches which are the focus of their discussion. "The Coming Evangelical Collapse" by Michael Spencer is adapted from the blog InternetMonk.com and it appears in the March 10, 2009 edition of *The Christian Science Monitor*. As one might expect from its title, Spencer's reasoning and predictions do not bode well for mainline Protestant denominations. Where does Spencer say that mainline Protestantism has jumped the track? He states that, "Evangelicals have identified their movement with the culture war..." "This", says Spencer, "will prove to be a very costly mistake." Spencer goes on to say that choosing sides in the culture wars has "depleted evangelical resources." He further states that so much time has been devoted to winning the battle over moral issues such as abortion rights, gay marriage, the role of government in the environment, and health care that growing numbers of evangelicals can no longer articulate the Gospel with any coherence. They are more adept at

speaking the language of secular politics. Spencer concludes this point by stating that “We (Evangelicals) fell for the trap of believing in a cause more than a faith.”

A second and somewhat related article is reported in the April 7, 2009 edition of the widely read periodical *The Christian Century*. This piece compiled by *Christian Century* news editor John Dart is titled, “Mainline Called Uncounted Force for Change.” Dart discusses the findings of a survey released on March 6 by Public Religion Research. The survey carries the title, “The Mainline Protestant Clergy Voices Survey,” which, according to the research team is the largest survey of mainline pastors in seven years. The survey generated 2,658 replies. It should be noted that the Southern Baptist Church was not included and there is no explanation as to why this was the case.

The results of this survey are indicative that, perhaps not surprisingly, the partisan debates of late have become an isle dividing our churches just as they have our organizations in the secular world. If Evangelical forces have demanded a lurch to the conservative side by mainline Protestant churches, the pastors of those churches seem to be heading in the other direction. While conservatives and Republicans protest what they label as a shift toward “big government” or even socialism by the new Obama administration, three quarters of the ministers in this survey agreed that the federal government “should do more to solve social problems such as unemployment, poverty, and poor housing.” In addition, of the responding ministers 67 percent favored government guaranteed health insurance for all citizens and 69 percent said that more environmental protection is needed. The ministers advocated these positions even if taxes had to be raised in both cases. Perhaps of equal interest to the reader, 56 percent of the responding clergy identify with the Democrats while 34 percent claim a Republican affiliation.

The combination of these articles may prove to be rather unsettling. They pose significant questions to conservatives and liberals alike as to what the meaning of the separation of church and state should be in a decidedly partisan world. This question must be pondered against the backdrop of ever declining membership of mainline Protestant denominations. Furthermore, these articles leave the reader with the question of whether politics should influence religion or should religion control politics. Where do we stand, then, in the political battle of conservative evangelicals and the more liberal clergy, and is the church the appropriate venue for that battle? More succinctly, is there a winning side at all for mainline Protestantism in the culture wars?



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