

Reflections On Congregational Life

ELECTION 2012[©]

by

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My D.Min. thesis was to design a system to determine the issues and challenges facing the community in which a congregation exists. My system offered an alternative to expensive professional demographic experts, books on trends and changes in America, and professional journals. My system measured column inches in the printed news media. The theory was that the news media had a finite number of column inches which it filled only with current issues and challenges. After two or three months of measuring, a clear picture would emerge about the current needs of a community in which a congregation exists.

As preparation for a presentation to church leaders, I began measuring "the news" by column inches in late August 2010 in the Cincinnati Enquirer. As I measured, I continually asked, How can a congregation use this information in planning future ministries? Following is one use of this system.

The election and the economy were the top two stories for September and October 2010. The election had about three times more coverage than the economy. In fact, the election had approximately 11,294 column inches compared to 3,630 inches for the economy.

I am sure some congregations in Cincinnati actively addressed the election. Some pastors preached on particular issues. There were forums where members met the candidates. And, some churches helped members get to the polls. All of these were worthy efforts in trying to make the church relevant in the midst of an election year.

The election campaign ended on November 2 but the news coverage continued. The Enquirer speculated on: How would the Republicans rule? How would the new Speaker of the House (John Boehner) behave? Would the new Congress and President Obama be able to work together in order to lift the country out of its recession? Finally, would the Tea Party, and its candidates, compromise its principle of cutting the federal deficit when it came to budget cuts in each candidate's district?

The end of the election brought changes in the President's staff. David Axelrod announced his leaving Washington to begin planning for the re-election of Barack Obama. Perhaps congregations should take a hint from Mr. Axelrod and begin to proactively plan how they are going to minister to members and non-members in the months leading up to the 2012 elections. In such planning I suggest congregations consider pos-

ing and answering the following questions: 1. What are the responsibilities of Christian citizenship? 2. What does the separation of Church and State really mean theologically? And, 3. How can Christians advocate for civility among candidates and civility in staunch loyalists of political parties? These questions address the complaints that political ads are mean-spirited, candidates are untruthful, and the whole election process is at best offensive.

I have begun to ask two questions: 1. If the church would write commandments for Christian voters, what would they be? And, 2. If the church taught these commandments in the fall of 2012 through a sermon series, curriculum for adult Sunday School and small groups, on a weekend retreat, put them on Facebook, and text them to members, would the climate of the election change for congregational members and the general public?

To answer the first question, I offer:

8 COMMANDMENTS FOR CHRISTIAN VOTERS

Because God, through his son Jesus the Christ, made you a new creation; therefore, as a Christian voter, you shall...

This prologue to the commandments for Christian voters mirrors Exodus 20:1 "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The prologue to the commandments on voting recalls Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, everything is new." In Christ we are made new, we are ambassadors who exhibit new behaviors in campaigning and voting. Both Exodus and 2 Corinthians are the indicative of God's grace. What follows in both texts is the imperative God's grace requires. The commandments for Christian voters are the imperative of God's grace for them.

Believe that God is God

First century Christians used political titles to describe Jesus in order to indicate they were Christians who happened to be a Roman, Greek, or Jew rather than a Roman, Greek, or Jew who happened to be Christian. This practice challenges 21st century Christians to determine if they are Americans who happen to be Christians or Christians who happen to be

Americans. In other words, who do we turn to for guidance and help when facing the challenges of a recession or the joy of finding a new job - God or Washington?

Believe that God has hopes and desires for this election and for the world

The second commandment for Christian voters reflects the call of Abraham. Through Abraham, and his descendants, the world will be blessed and a better place in which to live. A component of Christian stewardship is to make the world a better place to live through voting. The Christian voter prays for God's guidance on which candidate will better represent God's hopes and desires for the world.

Pray for every candidate because every candidate is a child of God

The third commandment calls for prayer for candidates. It is easy to pray for those with whom we agree. It is much more difficult to pray for those with whom we disagree. In Luke's sermon on the Plain, Jesus asks "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" To paraphrase, If we pray for those who agree with us, what credit is that to us? In prayers for those with whom we disagree, we use that candidate's name and ask God to bless that candidate's efforts to fulfill God's hopes and desires for this world. When we pray for a candidate by name, that prayer changes our attitude towards that candidate. Prayers during worship should also use the names of those who are seeking elected offices.

Vote in every election

The fourth commandment for Christian voters takes seriously Paul's and Peter's admonishment for Christians to be good citizens. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul calls for Christians to perform their citizenship duties. These admonishments are also in 1 Peter 3:11-17. One way of paraphrasing these admonishments is in the words of John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you, rather ask, what you can do for your country." Being a good citizen is voting and being involved in making the country a better place in which to live in Jesus' name.

Be well informed about a candidate's character

The fifth commandment for Christian voters takes seriously the biblical call to examine a person's character to determine who he or she really is. Psalm 24 offers four character attributes, "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who do not lift up their soul to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully." This text encourages conversations about a candidate's behaviors and the way a candidate treats others - especially his or her opponent.

Be well informed about the issues

The sixth commandment for Christian voters

requires an informed vote be cast. The Bible has no direct teachings about being an informed voter. Nevertheless, Christian voters do not rely simply on party affiliation to determine where a candidate stands on any issue.

Vote for the good of the country and not your own pocketbook

The seventh commandment for Christian voters raises the biblical admonishment of society's obligation to minister to the powerless, the poor, and to those without hope. The prophets challenge kings, Jesus tells a story about those who have to build bigger barns, and James warns that a faith without care for the hungry and cold is a dead faith. This commandment requires voters to ask, Will this tax for the schools, or for the mentally ill, or for health care make our community a more caring place? If the answer is "yes," then a positive vote is cast.

Be a voter of integrity and honesty

The eighth commandment for voters mirrors the 8th Commandment in the decalogue, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Luther's explanation of this commandment is: "...we should not tell lies about our neighbor, nor betray, slander, or defame him, but should apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does." Paraphrased, to be a voter of integrity and honesty, one checks the accuracy of all statements by a candidate against his or her opponent and the accuracy of all e-mails sent about a candidate. When information is inaccurate, it is not distributed to others. In addition, negative images of a candidate are not distributed via e-mail, Facebook, or any other source. As voters are concerned about a candidate's character, they need to be equally concerned about their own.

In summary, it is my contention that if a congregation builds a coalition with other congregations to write, teach, and publish in the larger community its commandments for Christian voters in 2012, then the (local) election in that community would be positively effected. If my contention is to be correct, the process begins today with prayer, study, discerning the commandments, planning, and establishing a timetable for implementation.

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