

## ENDURANCE

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
November 14, 2004

I was listening to National Public Radio yesterday morning, and a commentator was describing the recent presidential election as ultimately a contest between the religious right and the secular left. Earlier in the show Author Alain De Boton had explained, from a European perspective, how dangerous he thought it was for religion to be involved in politics, noting that historically it leads to the likes of the Spanish Inquisition.<sup>i</sup> On Thursday, I had received a hand-delivered letter from an eminent Stanford professor I know, complaining how the outcome of the presidential election was tainted by religious bigotry, and how I am personally complicit in a threat to American freedom that comes from firmly held religious dogma.

So, religion (and, in particular, Christianity) in America is now being widely portrayed as right wing, bigoted, leading to a new Inquisition, and threatening American freedom. And apparently, as the Stanford Dean for Religious Life and as a firmly committed Christian myself, I'm complicit in all that.

In this morning's gospel lesson from Luke,<sup>ii</sup> Jesus warns his disciples that they will be hated because of his name, that they will be persecuted, that they will be denounced by friends and relatives, even siblings and parents. What Jesus counsels is endurance: "By your endurance you will gain your souls."<sup>iii</sup> His follower James, who ultimately is stoned and clubbed to death for refusing to repudiate Jesus,<sup>iv</sup> puts it this way: "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces

endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."<sup>v</sup> Earlier in Luke, Jesus in his parable of the sower speaks of seed falling on a trodden path, on rock, among thorns, and in good soil. He explains that the seed is the word of God, and that if it falls in the wrong place it may not take root, or may be choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. But, for people who represent good soil, they hold the word of God "fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."<sup>vi</sup>

In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus also warns of the dangers of false prophets: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."<sup>vii</sup> Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, stated in January of this year that "I'm hearing from the Lord it's going to be like a blowout election in 2004. The Lord has just blessed [George Bush]... It doesn't make any difference what he does, good or bad..."<sup>viii</sup> A Roman Catholic bishop in Colorado stated that in deciding how to vote in the election, for Christians "abortion outweighs every other issue."<sup>ix</sup> In fact, exit polls showed that 22 percent of Americans nationwide cited "moral values" as their top issue,<sup>x</sup> and as many commentators have explained, "No doubt about it, abortion and gay marriage were the wedge issues that separated the [Republicans from the Democrats] in the voting booth."<sup>xi</sup>

But I'm a professing Christian among many, who on religious grounds, is pro-choice on abortion and in favor of gay marriage. I don't think our president is blessed no matter what he does, good or bad. I don't consider myself either a member of the religious right or the secular left. I do think religion has an important role to play in the public square; during my formative college years in the nineteen-sixties, I was religiously motivated by the likes of the Rev. Martin

Luther King, Jr. and the Rev. William Sloane Coffin to get involved in the civil rights and antiwar movements. Where do I, and lots of others like me, fit within American Christianity and the American political system in the aftermath of Election 2004? Am I following false prophets, or am I one myself? As a politically active Christian, am I part of a threat to American freedom, leading inexorably to a new Inquisition? If neither false prophet nor threat, do I have the endurance, both religiously and politically, to face persecution myself from various quarters as a follower of Jesus and be denounced by certain friends and family for my beliefs and actions?

We had a baccalaureate speaker here last June who's been an enormous help to me in negotiating these questions, the Rev. Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine. He was the main mover behind an advertisement appearing in a number of newspapers and magazines leading up to the election, which Joanne Sanders described in her September 12 sermon here in Memorial Church. Titled "God is not a Republican or a Democrat,"<sup>xiii</sup> the ad supported the importance, for Christians, of looking at the presidential candidates through Christian lenses, while also reminding us that sincere Christians can conscientiously choose to vote for either President Bush or Senator Kerry for reasons deeply rooted in their faith. Responsible Christian citizenship involves identifying all the religious issues which have political implications, getting thoughtfully involved in the election process, and avoiding becoming a single-issue voter.

Abortion, for example, was contextualized in this way within the last of seven broad areas discussed in the ad: "We believe that a consistent ethic of human life is a religious issue. Do the candidates' positions on abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, weapons of mass destruction, HIV/AIDS -- and other pandemics -- and genocide around the world obey the biblical injunction to choose life? (referencing Deuteronomy 30:19). The other six broad areas that the ad

encouraged Christians to consider were: caring for the poor, protecting the natural environment, being peacemakers in the face of war, truth-telling, defending human rights (especially relating to torture), and responding to terrorism without using language of righteous empire and by seeing evil not only in our enemies but also in our own policies.

Tens of thousands of Christians endorsed these principles by signing an online petition. And these weren't only Christian liberals like me. There were plenty as well from organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, and now representing millions and millions of conservative and moderate Christians across the country. Last summer this organization issued an unprecedented "Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility."<sup>xiii</sup> Noting that evangelical Christians now make up fully a quarter of all voters in the United States, the document calls for shaping public policy in ways that could improve the well-being of the entire world. It decries single-issue voting and restricting political concerns only to matters in the private and domestic spheres, reminding us that Jesus followed in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets in announcing a kingdom of God "which would be marked by justice, peace, forgiveness, restoration and healing for all."

The Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility looks at process for Christian engagement in politics, as well as areas of substance where Christians should be concerned. For example, it states that "As Christians engaged in public policy, we must do detailed social, economic, historical, jurisprudential, and political analysis if we are to understand our society and wisely apply our normative vision to political questions." It explains that social problems can't just be addressed by personal choices; unjust systems must be challenged and wise structural changes made, as for example by legislation to increase economic opportunity for all. It recognizes that

evangelicals will differ with other Christians and with non-Christians over the best policies.

Therefore, it counsels that "we [evangelicals] must practice humility and cooperation to achieve modest and attainable goals for the good of society. We must take care to employ the language of civility and to avoid demonizing those with whom we disagree." It recognizes that power tends to corrupt and that everyone, including Christians, often abuse power for selfish purposes. Therefore it commends a constitutional system that decentralizes power through separation of powers. It affirms the principles of religious freedom and liberty of conscience and declares pluralism to be foundational to the religious liberty of all.

In terms of substance, it makes some rather strong prophetic statements to which many Christian liberals would agree, such as these:

-- "God identifies with the poor [and]...God measures societies by how they treat people at the bottom."

-- "Our primary allegiance is to Christ...not to any nation."

--Reduction of global poverty [should be] a central concern of American foreign policy."

-- "Because the Creator gave human beings liberty...people must be free to express their vision for a just social order without fear of torture or other reprisal."

-- "America has a tragic history of mistreating Native Americans...slavery...segregation and exploitation... To correct the lingering effects of our racist history, Christians should support well-conceived efforts that foster dignity and responsibility."

-- "God did not call Christians to bring in God's kingdom by force... We urge governments to pursue thoroughly nonviolent paths to peace before resorting to military force... We urge followers of Jesus to engage in practical peacemaking locally, nationally, and internationally."

-- "We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part."

So, what about those concerns with which I began, as expressed on National Public Radio and

by the eminent Stanford professor? Here's a final laundry list of responses and suggestions:

There's no doubt that religious bigotry had an impact -- perhaps a critical impact -- on this election. It's the duty of all of us, religious and non-religious alike, to resist and overcome that bigotry. To talk longingly of America as a "Christian nation" is to deny the pluralism and freedom of conscience that is our national heritage. It is factually inaccurate and a great disservice to all of us to see the political right as religious and the political left as secular.

Religion must speak its ethical vision in the public square, on the right and on the left, because pastoral care and liturgy and religious education behind closed doors are not enough; we've always needed the voice of the public prophet to tell us when we're enslaving and oppressing each other, and to encourage us so to act in the world as to help bring about what Isaiah calls a new heaven and a new earth, where no more shall weeping be heard and the wolf and lamb shall feed together.<sup>xiv</sup> False prophets must be named and countered. No president nor other leader should ever think he or she has been given divine sanction -- been blessed by God -- no matter what he or she does, bad or good.

When Christians are developing public policy, they must make sure they are doing so on the basis of detailed social, economic, historical, jurisprudential, and political analysis, not just on Christian ideals. When engaging in public dialogue, religious perspectives must be translated into a common civic language and made subject to challenge and debate by those of other religious, as well as non-religious, perspectives; religion should never be a trump card or a voting block. The "other" must never be demonized, which can be a special challenge if you are convinced that he or she is literally going to hell.

Even after all of this has been done, we Christians need to be aware of Jesus' prediction that

we will be hated, persecuted, and denounced. Unfortunately, that will come at the hands of fellow Christians of different stripes, perhaps more than anyone else. But it will also come from certain people in other religious traditions, from certain people who identify themselves as secular, and from certain people who are unapologetically anti-religious. We will also find that our most heartfelt personal commitments and visions for the world are regularly denigrated, devastated and demolished. Then, our solace must be in Jesus' words of hope: "By your endurance you will gain your souls."<sup>xv</sup> For as the prophets have always promised in the name of God: "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating: for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight...They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit...They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. Thus says the Lord."

## NOTES

- 
- i. "Conversation on Religion in American Life," Scott Simon speaks with Morris Fiorina and Alain De Botton on Weekend Edition, November 13, 2004. See [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4168707](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4168707)
- ii. Luke 21: 5-19.
- iii. Luke 21: 19.
- iv. Peter Calvocoressi, Who's Who in the Bible (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 75. On disputes about the authorship of James, see HarperCollins Study Bible (New York: 1993), p. 2269; Oxford Bible Commentary (Oxford: 2001), p. 1256; Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), pp. 369-370.
- v. James 1: 2-4.
- vi. Luke 8:15; See, for the whole parable of the sower, Luke 8: 4-15.
- vii. Luke 21:8.
- viii. Pat Robertson, AP/Fox News, January 2, 2004 (As cited in Sojourners Magazine (October, 2004), p. 35).
- ix. As cited by John Buchanan in "Poor Priorities," Christian Century (November 2, 2004), p. 3.
- x. Gary Soulsman, "'Moral Values' Key for Many Voters," The News Journal (November 4, 2004). [www.delawareonline.com/newsjournal/local/2004/11/04moralvalueskeyf.html](http://www.delawareonline.com/newsjournal/local/2004/11/04moralvalueskeyf.html)
- xi. David Batstone, "God-talk and Moral Values," SoJoMail (November 9, 2004). See also Jim Wallis, "The Religious Right Era is Over," Sojourners Magazine (October, 2004); and the words of Diane Kippers from the National Association of Evangelicals in CNN, "Fight Over Faith" (October 25, 2004), <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0410/25/cp.01.html>
- xii. "God is Not a Republican or a Democrat," Sojourners Magazine (October, 2004), p. 35.
- xiii. National Association of Evangelicals, "For the Health of the Nations: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" (last revised on September 9, 2004).



---

xiv. Isaiah 65: 17, 19, 25.

xv. Luke 21: 19.