

# Preaching at the Intersection of Church and State



By H. Stephen Shoemaker

and church must be careful not to endorse a candidate or party. But “politics” does not necessarily equate with party politics or electoral politics. It has more broadly to do with the welfare of the city, the *polis*, the community and nation. “Seek the welfare of the city,” Jeremiah said (29:7). Preaching the political dimension of the gospel means addressing the issues of public morality that affect the common good. The realm of the “public” includes more than electoral politics. It includes cultural values, economic health, education and more. Martin Marty has described the calling of what he called the “public church”: “*The public church is a family of apostolic churches with Jesus Christ at the center, churches which are especially sensitive to the res publica, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith.*”<sup>2</sup> Its goal is “to combine religious commitment with civility, spiritual passion with a public sense.”<sup>3</sup>

As I write these words, Jeremiah Wright, the former pastor of Barack Obama and fiery prophetic preacher of Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, is front page news across the nation. The I.R.S. is investigating whether Senator Obama’s speech at a U.C.C. denominational meeting has violated the tax-exempt status of the denomination. In the fall of 2004, preceding the presidential election, the former rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California, returned to give a sermon which criticized the war in Iraq. The I.R.S. began an investigation into that church’s tax-exempt status, charging that the sermon amounted to a political endorsement of John Kerry. The church contested the charge and was not cleared until September of 2007.

These are challenging times to address political issues from the pulpit. In a nation increasingly polarized along lines of political party and ideology, when a preacher addresses issues of public policy, it is easy for that minister to be accused of being pro-Republican or pro-Democrat.

A temptation of preachers and churches is either: 1) to identify their faith with the cause of the political right or left; or, 2) to refrain from all serious discussion of the place of religious values in the public square. The first is a form of idolatry; the second is a form of moral irresponsibility. One cannot identify one political party or movement with the kingdom of God. Neither can one divorce the gospel from issues of the public welfare. As E. Stanley Jones once said, “The personal gospel without the social gospel is a soul without a body. The social gospel without the personal gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost, and the other is a corpse.”

How then do we walk this tight wire? Preaching on political issues is a complex and risky venture. I’ve been reflecting deeply on this matter since September 11, 2001. These reflections led to a book of essays and sermons titled *Being Christian In An Almost Chosen Nation: Thinking About Faith and Politics*.<sup>1</sup> This article continues my thinking on the subject.

1. Because of the constitutional separation of church and state, the preacher

2. Good preaching on political issues helps the church enter the public realm with its moral witness in such a way that civic conversation is enhanced. It honors the pluralism of our nation with its many religions and its people of conscience who have no religion. This pluralism is not only “out there” but also “in here,” inside of us and in our pews. As you preach, imagine a Jew, a Muslim, or a secularist sitting in the congregation. Imagine your political opposite. Imagine the President of the United States. It will sensitize you; it will make you a better preacher. It will help model for your congregation how to carry their moral and religious values into the public square. When I have preached against the war in Iraq, I have preached as if President Bush were in the congregation.

3. Good preaching combines conviction and humility. An extraordinary embodiment of this combination was Abraham Lincoln, who exemplified what I’ve called “reverence as a spiritual and political virtue.” Lincoln had the con-

viction that slavery was an evil, but he never demonized the southerners who owned slaves. He sought to do the will of God, but he never presumed to know it fully. In his famous Cooper Union speech he said, "Let us have faith that right makes might and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

4. In his monumental Second Inaugural Address he said: "Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained... Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other... The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." We

can learn from Lincoln's combination of conviction and humility.

The Hebrew prophet, so writes Harvard's Paul Hanson, was one who had received a vision from God and sought to apply that vision to the realm of "plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality."<sup>4</sup> But this application, then and now, is an inexact science. It is a human enterprise that is some days right and some days wrong. Preaching politically takes this risk. The poet William Stafford writes of those who decline "to be willingly fallible in order to find their way."<sup>5</sup> The preacher accepts a willing fallibility in order to find his or her way and to help members of the congregation find their way. And when we're wrong, admit it! Rowan

Williams writes that there's a profound difference between "wanting to be right" and "wanting to be truthful." I, you, we all, want to be right. But under God we want more to be truthful.

5. I generally offer the political implications of texts as part of a larger sermon on a biblical text, rather than preaching an entire sermon on a particular political issue. As you preach the "whole counsel of God," as you faithfully preach your weekly assigned texts, let the political applications arise. Of course, there are those moments of public crisis when the whole sermon must be directed to the great issue of the day. I think of the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and of Martin Luther King,

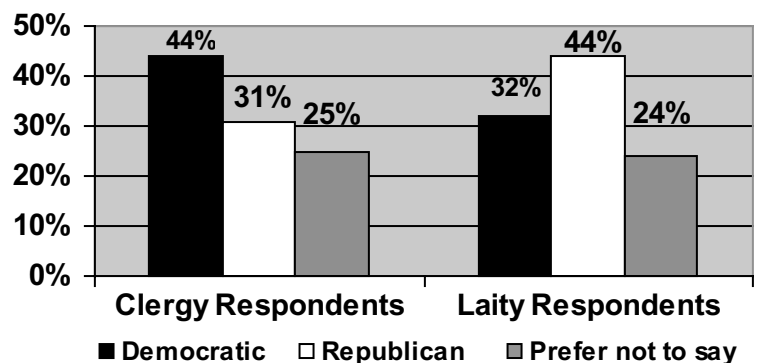
## Pastors may be more politically active than congregants realize, survey shows

A recent survey asked United Methodist pastors and laypeople about their opinions on and experiences with politics in the pulpit.

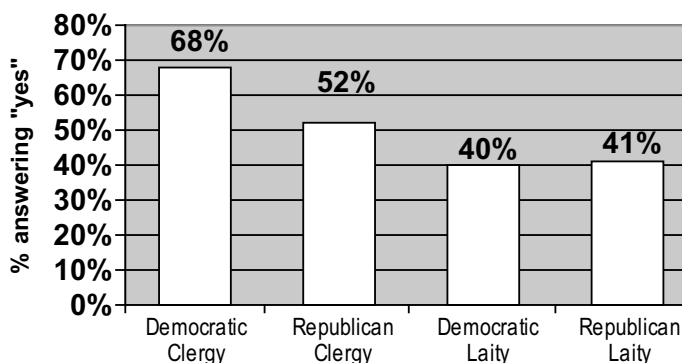
- 47% of pastors surveyed say they preach on issues related to the presidential election or politics in general, yet 80% of laity surveyed say their pastors do not preach on such issues.
- 53% of clergy and 51% of laity say pastors should not mention their political views to congregants, even outside the pulpit. Despite that opposition, 74% of pastors surveyed say they do discuss political issues with congregants outside the pulpit. Nonetheless, only 24% of laity say they know their pastor's party affiliation.
- While respondents were divided almost evenly on issues of preaching about political issues, an overwhelming majority said pastors should preach on "social issues Christians should consider when voting," offer discussion groups or book studies related to political issues, and "discuss the proper relationship between church and state from the pulpit."
- 11% of respondents—9% of clergy and 14% of laity—said they believe it is acceptable for pastors to endorse candidates for president or other elected office.

Survey conducted by Cokesbury Research, March 2008, n=1478. Margin of error: 2.6%.

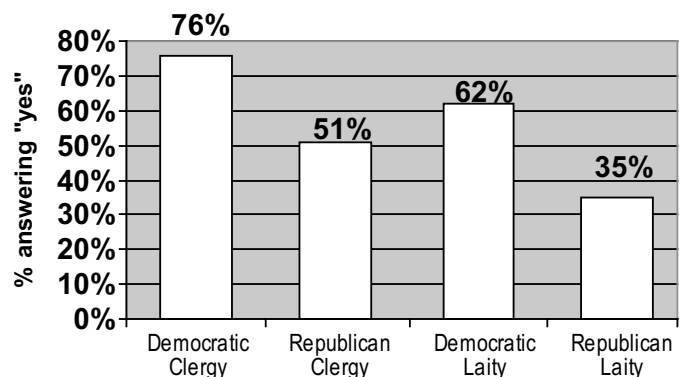
### Do you more often vote for Democratic or Republican candidates?



### Do you think pastors should preach on issues related to the presidential election or politics in general?



### Do you think pastors should be politically active in the community, attending protests or political rallies?



of September 11, or of the launching of a war. But this is the exception.

The members of the congregation come with a myriad of needs, more than just political ones. When I preach a whole sermon on political issues, I try to make sure liturgy, prayers, hymns speak to the broader needs of the worshipper.

Another reason I generally resist preaching whole sermons on political issues is that a sustained full-frontal assault can give the hearer no room to hear. Resistance is too high. As W.H. Auden wrote: "Truth, like love and sleep, resents / Approaches that are too intense."<sup>6</sup>

6. Be careful to discern the difference between the "righteous indignation" of God against evil and injustice and your own personal anger which may be psychologically fueled. One should not preach while mad! The congregation can feel battered more by the manner of a sermon than by the content of it. So we do our inner work so as to preach with as clear a heart as possible.

The best prophetic sermons are when a preacher feels the judgment of God him or herself along with the congregation, rather than presuming to be the voice of God aimed at the congregation.

7. Stanley Hauerwas has consistently reminded us that the most powerful political act of the church is to *be the church*. Faithfulness to Christ, embodying the way of Jesus, is a political act. The politics of Jesus apply first to us, the church—how we live truthfully and non-violently with one another. An example: the uncompromising insistence of Billy Graham that all his crusades be integrated even in the most segregated parts of the nation during the 1950s and '60s had a profound political impact on the nation in its progress toward racial justice.

8. Sometimes the political message of the gospel is to de-absolutize politics. Will Campbell and James Holloway call our tendency to make an idol of politics "Politics as Baal."<sup>7</sup> Every four years in the U.S., there is a messianic fever which believes that the kingdom of

God is about to ride in on the ballot box. To make the political realm the realm of ultimate meaning is idolatry. As Paul Tillich reminded us, the demonic happens when we raise something finite to the level of the infinite. The political dimensions of the gospel are important. They are as real as starvation and health care and war. But politics is not the ultimate realm. The one in heaven laughs at our pretensions (Ps. 4:2). Sometimes the preacher needs to poke fun at our political pretensions as human creatures. Laughter is a toppler of idols. (Take a look at the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah in I Kings 22 for a humorous look at the relation of the prophet and the king.)

9. In the summer of 2004 as the election year fevers were building, I preached a sermon "Being Christian in an Election Year!" It spoke to how Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals might live "Christian-ly" during such a time. Three different couples said later to me: "Thanks for the marriage counseling!" Some days we're more Democrat (or Republican) than we are American, and more American than we are Christian. The last point of the sermon was this:

*When Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, this includes—I hate to suggest it—our political opponents. Where this begins is by loving our enemy with our minds. That is, we take care to try to understand why our opponents think the way they do.*

This is easier said than done, of course. How can Democrats love Republicans with their minds and vice versa? One way is to understand how most of our moral and political virtues are balancing virtues. They complement each other and keep each other honest. Someone has defined a "heretic" as someone who has a complete grasp of a half-truth. We help keep each other from political heresies.

In our day, Republicans favor a small role for government and Democrats a large role. We need each other, or else government will try to do too much or too little.

In our day, Republicans tend to

emphasize personal morality and individual virtue, while Democrats tend to emphasize social morality and civic virtue. We need each other, or else our moral vision will be too small.

In our day, Republicans emphasize the political virtue of "freedom" and the Democrats emphasize the political virtue of "equality." "Freedom" left all to itself can end up in the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest, fattest, and most privileged. "Equality" left all to itself can end up in the totalitarian equality of communism, or in a culture which has lost all incentive for achievement.

We need each other and each other's competing and complementary virtues. This should not encourage moral and political complacency. It is a call to give voice to what is dearest to you. I think God will use that for the good.

In Philippians, Paul's letter to the Christians in a colony of Rome, Paul said: "Let your manner of life, your *politeuesthe*, your politics, your citizenship, be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:20). We could have a worse goal as we preach on politics. □



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1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

2 Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline – Evangelical – Catholic*. (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 3.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4 Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 11.

5 Kim Stafford, *Early Morning: Remembering My Father*, William Stafford (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2002), p. 63.

6 "New Year Letter" (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), p. 27.

7 *Up To Our Steeples in Politics* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1970), pp. 59-73.