

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

RELIGION AND POLITICS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: AN EXAMINATION OF
CLERGY INFLUENCE OVER VOTER DECISIONS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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BY
ELIZABETH A. SUSKOVIC

ST. PETER, MINNESOTA

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Introduction

Throughout United States history religion has been tied to political decisions in many different ways. During America's history the connection between religion and politics has not been inherently good or bad, but simply has been a fact of the country's political structure. The connection between religion and politics has created a relationship in which religious values have an influence over political decisions. There have been times in America's history when this influence has greatly benefited society, and times when it has greatly harmed society. The connection between religion and politics was a benefit in the 1960s when it was an influence in the fight for civil rights. However, the influence of religion also has the potential to be negative.

Religion continues to influence politics today in very visible ways. The presence of religion in our political world has caused much controversy, and many argue that its presence should be removed. However, the connection between politics and religion is something that has never been broken. The structure of that connection has been changed and strained throughout history, and it will continue to change and evolve, but that connection will never break.¹

One aspect of the connection between religion and politics exists in the local churches of the United States. There is a connection between the beliefs of the local church and clergy and the political actions of the voters who attend those churches. This influence at the local level is much stronger than the influence of a national organization. This is because people connect most to that which is immediately closest to them. It is the local congregation and the community that is established in that community that directly connects to the lives of

¹ A. James Reichley, *Faith in Politics*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 366.

voters on a routine basis, and has the ability to frequently reinforce values to an extent that a national organization never could.²

One of the most fundamental ways in which the relationship between clergy and the voters in their congregation can be viewed is through the decision of those voters at the poll. Clergy can sometimes influence voters to support a candidate that the clergy views as the most morally desirable, creating a relation of influence between the clergy and congregation. This relationship of influence by the local clergy over the decisions of the individual voter can have both a positive or negative influence on politics. Both the local clergy and the individual voter have a responsibility to keep this relationship healthy by ensuring that the clergy and church help foster the faith and moral values of the voter so that he or she can make an independent choice at the polls, while still considering the moral teaching of the local church.

² Robert Booth Fowler, "Religion and the Escape from Individual Liberalism" in *Religion in American Politics*, ed Charles W. Dunn, (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc.), 43.

Chapter One

Religion in American Politics

According to Kenneth Wald, a prominent professor of Political Science and author of the book *Religion and Politics in the United States*, in recent history political scientists have fostered a “wide spread myth” that religion as a political influence is dead in the United States.³ This myth has entered into our school text books, meaning that students are being taught that religion should have absolutely no influence in, or affect on United States politics. Because of a belief in this myth, people have come to assume that it is no longer necessary to consider any benefits that religion might have in the political world. People have also come to believe that religion’s lack of power in the political sphere is positive. They believe that United States politics and religion should continue to be kept completely separate, and they have become afraid that this is no longer the case in American politics.⁴

Because the American public has accepted this myth, the visible emergence of religion in the political world in the past few decades has been a difficult concept for many to comprehend. They have become widely concerned about the supposed power that religion has gained in the political world. To many scholars this power is detrimental because it represents a deviation from logic. Today it seems that many in the political world who promote a religious message often refuse to use logic in their messages. People often assume that anyone influenced by religion would allow all logical reason to go out the window. To many the influence of any religion over politics is a “triumph of

³ Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2003), 223.

⁴ Reichley, 351.

belief over fact” and promotes the influence of backwards “moral values”.⁵ What these people do not realize is that religion does not provide one single moral basis and set of ideas. The religious creeds of some fundamentalist or evangelical Christians may be considered by many as backwards; however, these are not the only religious beliefs that are represented in United States politics.⁶

Throughout the country’s history, religious values have been tied to many different political issues. In the years between the formation of the American government and the Civil War, many Protestant activists in the North strongly pushed for the abolition of slavery. After the Civil War, America experienced an increased rate of immigration. Many immigrants were not Anglo Protestants, and Protestants feared the loss of power. They used moral arguments, among other things, to try and limit immigration so that their moral values and practices would not be so highly challenged. In the 1960s, religion was used as a justification for the idea that all humans are created equal under God in the Civil Rights Movement.⁷ Religion has influenced politics in both very positive and very negative ways, and it will continue to do so. This can be seen by the fact that in American history the connection between religion and politics has changed, and has even at time been strained, but it has never broken.⁸

The religious group that has been most visible in today’s world and has recently caused the most controversy in the political sphere is the contemporary conservative Christian movement. The Religious Right has taken a highly conservative stance on

⁵ Colin Dayan, “Meville, Locke, and Faith,” *Raritan*, 2 no 3 (2006), 30.

⁶ Wald, 182.

⁷ Charles W. Dunn, *Religion in American Politics*, (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1989), xv-xvii.

⁸ Reichley, 366.

political issues and placed a great emphasis on issues such as abortion, school prayer, and homosexuality. Because of its conservative position, the Religious Right has attracted to its ranks both fundamentalist Christians and evangelical Protestants.⁹ Due to the inclusion of evangelical Protestants into the ranks of the Religious Right movement, many people become confused over what an evangelical Protestant is, and tend to use the term for all members of the Christian right. However, evangelical Protestants are only one part of the Religious Right, and they are defined by a “born again” conversion experience, and a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible.¹⁰ In many sources however, the authors do not keep this narrow definition of evangelicals in mind, but instead often refer to all Religious Right as evangelicals. Another important piece of information to realize when reading about evangelicals in sources is to realize that when scholars speak of evangelicals, they usually are speaking only of white evangelical Protestants. This is important to note because there is also very strong African American evangelical movement.¹¹

In the 1970s and the 1980s the United States was reminded of the power that religion can actually have over politics when the Religious Right became directly involved in political activity and today that influence still exists. This emergence gained prominence with the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. It continued with the emergence of religious leaders forming political coalitions such as Pat Robinson’s Christian Coalition. It continues today with the Presidency of George W. Bush.

⁹ Todd A. Baker, Lawrence W. Moreland, and Robert P. Steed, “Party activists and the New Religious Right,” in *Religion in American Politics*, ed Charles W. Dunn, (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1989), 161.

¹⁰ Robert Booth Fowler and Allen D. Hertzke, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices*, (Boulder, Co: Westview Press Inc, 1995), 36-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

The emergence of the evangelical Protestants as a part of this Religious Right political force was a shock to many who saw it as coming from out of the blue. Evangelical Protestants seemed to abruptly change from being preoccupied with heaven and having an otherworldliness quality to being incredibly politically active.¹² This turnaround was the result of the political and social situation of the time. Many Americans believe that evangelical Protestants, as well as others in the Religious Right movement; have become involved in politics after a lack of involvement due to the situation of the society.

The reason that evangelicals were able to gain power is because of the social situation of the time. Around the 1970's the society began to change and once again allow for the open connection of religion and politics. Jimmy Carter helped promote the idea that US politics needed to be reintroduced to the concept of trust honesty and morality after a period of dishonesty from the government. The American public, after experiencing the governmental dishonesty of the Vietnam War, and Watergate, was willing to accept the concept of religious morality.¹³ They saw this political dishonesty as proof that the society had turned away from necessary morals and that those morals needed to be reinstated.¹⁴

What makes this emergence of the Religious Right to power so upsetting to political scholars is that leaders have made political conflicts into battles of good versus evil. For example, in the 1992 presidential election, the Republican Party made the claim that it was the party that represented morals and values. According to according to

¹² Wald, 207.

¹³ Ibid., 223-224.

¹⁴ Ibid., 207.

Republicans who try to gain support from the religious right, the Democratic Party, unlike the Republican Party, had turned to sin and evil because it had “forgotten God, family and decency”.¹⁵ This concept of good versus evil was again promoted in the 2004 presidential election. Robert Weissberg states that when one reflects on Bush’s campaign, it is revealed that his tactics reflected the sentiments of a country made up of religious leaders and voters who had become obsessed with morals. Evangelical voters who listened to the political messages of their religious leaders were taught to believe that their decision at the polls was nothing more choosing the candidate who represented God or the one who represented the Devil. Weissberg reveals that some scholars feel that conservative Christians, in their connection with the Republican Party in the 2004 election, have reduced political decisions down to an avoidance of modern and intelligent thinking and “fear of scientific progress.”¹⁶

The Religious Right movement receives a lot of notice in today’s political culture because it is the most open in its belief that religion and politics are inseparable. Many leaders of the Religious Right have no qualms about telling their congregations that by being a Christian and following the ways of God, one is expected to take certain political actions. This does not mean that other churches do not call their members to political action in some way. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a single religious organization that does not at times support a political action based on religious theology.¹⁷ However, in today’s media it is the Religious Right and evangelical Protestants that give the most blatant and controversial calls to action and who therefore

¹⁵ Wald, 173.

¹⁶ Robert Weissberg, “When God Goes Bad,” *Society* 42 no. 4 (2005): 30.

¹⁷ Wald, 182.

receive the most publicity. This spot light on the political involvement of the Religious Right is so strong that many people in American society consider all Christians involved in politics to be conservative Protestants, because they make the assumption that no other Christians are involved in the political world.

Religion and Politics in American History

United States history proves that religion has always been involved in the political sphere and refutes the idea that religion could ever totally remove itself from politics. Throughout the country's history, different religious groups have chosen to enter into the political sphere because they feel that their values are being threatened by actions made by the government or other individuals. They choose political involvement as a way to ensure that their values are being promoted.¹⁸

One example is the importance that religion had for those involved in the antislavery movement. The antislavery movement was heavily based on beliefs fostered by evangelical Protestantism.¹⁹ Members of the antislavery movement turned to their religious values to discover their "sacred obligation" as members of the American society.²⁰ These abolitionists often discovered that their religious values were in conflict with the institution of slavery, and so they began to question the legal status of slavery. Many abolitionists believed that slavery went against the Bible. They fought against slavery and against the government because it upheld an immoral legal institution.²¹

¹⁸ Wald, 115.

¹⁹ Ibid., 201.

²⁰ Ibid., 312.

²¹ Ibid., 312.

A second example of how politics has been influenced by religion is the Civil Rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. King saw the call to fight racism as both religiously and socially motivated. He believed that religion was involved in a “dialectical” relationship with politics. His involvement in the civil rights movement and the promotion of social justice was based on his personal belief that as a Christian he had a moral obligation to refuse to cooperate with evil systems as well as to promote good ones.²²

Lewis V. Baldwin, a professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University, believes that the work of Dr. King shows that he believed the Christian had to become involved in politics so as to support the divine will and sacred human rights, such as equality, in the face of oppressive human laws. Baldwin argues that King saw government and politics as an aid for men on earth. Christians need to use government as a tool to enforce laws, restrain sin, and prevent harm so as to promote those heavenly values.²³ To King the church and its leaders would often be in conflict with the state, but they still must be involved with the state and politics so as to bring criticism to any unjust institutions and essentially become the “conscious of the state”.²⁴ Not everyone may agree with Baldwin’s interpretation on how Dr. King was personally motivated by religion to become politically active in the civil rights movement. However, one does not have to agree with Baldwin to realize that Dr King did view religion as an important

²² Lewis V. Baldwin “On the Relation of the Christian to the State,” in *The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.: The Boundaries of Law, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Lewis V. Baldwin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 78.

²³ Ibid., 78-79.

²⁴ Ibid., 97.

influence for many in the political sphere, and he used the Bible and natural law to appeal to those who were influenced by religion.

These historical events show that religious people are willing to become highly involved in politics for moral reasons. They also show that the United States has always been, and will continue to be a country of religious people. Currently, approximately 85% of Americans identify with some religious belief.²⁵ This country of religious people will continue to become involved in politics because there will never be a point when our society is not dealing with issues that threaten the moral values of some religious organization.

Some Americans who have a desire to completely separate religion and politics argue that if there is any connection between the two, it violates the concept of separation of church and state established in the Constitution, however, this is not true. Many fall back on the idea that the Constitution establishes a “Wall of Separation” between the government and religion. In actuality, this concept of a “Wall of Separation” exists nowhere in the Constitution. The concept was first established when Thomas Jefferson explained his personal interpretation of the First Amendment while President of the United States 20 years after the Constitution and Bill of Rights were established.²⁶ In reality, the First Amendment, dealing with religion and the government, simply bars against the establishment of a state sponsored religion, and guarantees citizens the right to freely exercise their own religion.²⁷

²⁵ Reichley, 1.

²⁶ Ibid., 93.

²⁷ “Find Law,” *Establishment of Religion*, n.d.,
<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment01/02.html#1>>.

A. James Reichley, and other scholars, believe that in general the founders never had any intention of completely separating religion and politics. In fact, while almost all of the founders agreed that the federal government should be secular, most also believed that the country had both a “spiritual and political need for religion” to be an active part of political decisions.²⁸ They saw the First Amendment as simply preventing “sponsorship, financial support, and active involvement of the sovereign in religious activity”.²⁹ The founders believed that “religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of learning shall forever be encouraged, and any one who believes that “religious and moral education, should be promoted to foster a healthy democracy would not try to cut off all cooperation between religion and politics.”³⁰

The meaning of separation of church and state, as established by the founders in the Constitution continues to be debated by scholars today.³¹ There are several reasons that scholars suggest the establishment clause was created. The first reason was that there was no feasible way to realistically establish a single denomination as the national church because there was far too much pluralism in the United States. Americans valued having the freedom and ability to practice their own religious beliefs, and the founders would have been hard pressed to try and convince citizens to accept a central faith.³² The separation of church and state was established also so that no religion could gain status as the majority religion and become supported by the state. Several founders, such as

²⁸ Reichley, 104.

²⁹ “Find Law,” *Establishment*.

³⁰ Reichley, 111.

³¹ Fowler and Hertzke, 9.

³² Reichley, 105.

Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, looked to history as an example of the dangers of having a state sanctioned religion. These founders desired that church be separated from politics so as to avoid the corruption that religion had brought upon politics in Europe.³³ They saw the “superstition, bigotry, and persecution” a church could instill if it gained a position of power and influence in a country’s government. By refusing to allow any establishment of a state religion the founders believed that they could avoid falling under the control of a tyrannical church.

Religion and the Supreme Court

Since the establishment of the First Amendment, the Supreme Court has further expanded on the concepts of establishment and free exercise. In the first 50 years of existence the Supreme Court did not consider the First Amendment. 1878 marked the beginning point in the Supreme Court’s consideration of the meaning behind the Amendment with the case of *Reynolds v. United States*. In this case the Court made the decision that, while religious beliefs could be unrestricted, religious actions could be restricted by the national government. The Court also made the important step of adapting Thomas Jefferson’s metaphor of the “Wall of Separation” as an appropriate relationship between the church and state in this decision. At this point in America’s history the Court did not consider the relationship between individual states and religion, and would not do so until 1940.³⁴

³³ Fowler and Hertzke, 9.

³⁴ Reichley, 119-120.

In 1940 the Supreme Court began to truly consider what the relationship between the state and churches could be.³⁵ It was at this time that the Court heard the case of *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, and began to realize that the first and fourteenth amendments can be interpreted rather broadly. *Cantwell v. Connecticut* involved three Jehovah's Witnesses who had been going door to door proselytizing, and as a result were targeted and charged with illegally soliciting funds for a religious cause.³⁶ This realization of a possible broad interpretation began the "complex tangle" of law regarding church and state that we are experiencing today where traditional beliefs mix and clash with the pressures of our modern society.³⁷

Again in 1947 the Supreme Court considered the issue of the First Amendment in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*. In this decision the Court established that it was acceptable for parents in New Jersey, who chose to send their children to private religious school, to be compensated by the state for the cost of busing their children to school. The court established that this was not an example of state support.³⁸ The true significance of this case comes from the fact that it was at this point that the Court began to reconsider the meaning of the First Amendment. The Court unanimously changed the original interpretation of the First Amendment, and it made the decision that the role of the Court was not simply to prevent religious persecution and a national establishment by giving preference or aid to one religion over another. Instead the Amendment further restricted the state by forbidding it from providing any aid to any or all religions. This

³⁵Reichley, 6.

³⁶"Find Law," *Free Exercise of Religion*, n.d.,
<<http://www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment01/-2.html#1>>.

³⁷Reichley, 115.

³⁸Wald 90-91.

establishment clause jurisprudence has been upheld by all Supreme Courts since the decision in 1947.³⁹

In 1971 the Supreme Court established a general test for trying to decide if the relationship between a church and the government broke the Establish Clause of the First Amendment. The establishment clause prohibits the government from establishing any specific religion as the state religion or giving any specific religion preferential treatment which might suggest that it would be favored by the state above other religions. The case of *Lemon v. Kurtzman* established the “Lemon Three Part” test, which is still used today. The case revolved around the decision that the separation between church and state was violated when the salary of teachers at religious private schools contained a contribution from the state, even if it was to cover their “nonreligious” responsibilities.⁴⁰ However, the most notable factor of the case was the Lemon test which was created to decide whether the separation of church and state had been violated. Under the test there are three criteria that must be considered to decide whether appropriate boundaries are being passed. First, the purpose of the relationship must be established. If that purpose has anything to do with advancing or inhibiting a specific religion, then it violates the establishment clause. Secondly, the primary effect of the relationship must be established, and if that effect is the promotion or inhibition of a religion, the establishment clause is violated. Thirdly, the entanglement test is considered. If the relationship involves any “excessive” entanglement between religion and the state then that relationship violates the establishment clause.⁴¹

³⁹ “FindLaw,” *Establishment*.

⁴⁰ Wald, 93.

⁴¹ “Find Law,” *Establishment*.

In 1972 the Court worked towards further protecting the religious practices of Americans in the decision of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, a case in which an Amish father refused to comply with state attendance laws that had been specifically designed to require Amish children to attend ninth and tenth grade. The parent refused to comply with the law on the grounds that it violated his family's right to free exercise because it required the children to attend public school longer than their religion deemed was appropriate.⁴² The Court ruled that some illegal actions made in the name of a religious belief, such as refusing to send children to school after the eighth grade, can be protected under the right to free exercise. This free exercise is extended to illegal actions as long as the "vital interests of the state are not affected."⁴³ This decision has concerned many people who believe that it provides some groups, such as the Amish, with special privileges. There is the fear that this decision opens the door to the possibility of allowing for a selective establishment of a certain religion.⁴⁴

Recently, Supreme Court Judges, including Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, have argued that it is problematic. Justice O'Connor believes that there are too many variables in the relationships between churches and the state for a simple three part test to be sufficient. Instead she argues that the Court should accept that different situations call for different approaches. She argues that there can be different tests for different aspects of establishment. For example, if the case deals with government "speech" supporting or disapproving of a religion there should be the creation of an endorsement that would

⁴² "Find Law," *Establishment*.

⁴³ Reichley, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

judge whether a reasonable observer would consider the statement to have been made in support or disapproval of a specific religion.⁴⁵

In today's Court we can also see the constant pull of different and conflicting demands. In the 1980s the Court often granted broad, but not unlimited, freedom of religion and protection from any restriction by the state.⁴⁶ During the 1990s religions were much more vulnerable to the regulations of the state than they had been the decade before.⁴⁷ These two examples show that the concept of the connection between religion and politics in the Court are constantly evolving and changing, and that there will never be one standard that avoids any change.

Though the founders never actually placed the phrase, "separation of church and state" in the Constitution, the idea has become so integrated in the United States that it is assumed by many that the First Amendment does mean "separation of church and state."⁴⁸ Regardless of this assumption, the Founding fathers never established absolute separation of church and state as a constitutional principle and such a principle has never been established since the foundation of the Constitution.⁴⁹ John Adams made the statement that "the Constitution was made only for moral and religious people."⁵⁰ Some scholars believe that today we can comprehend the importance the Founders placed on the presence of religion in American culture by its location in the Constitution. They believe

⁴⁵ "Find Law," *Religion*,
<<http://supreme.lp.findlaw.com/constitution/amendment01/01.html#4>>.

⁴⁶ Reichley, 131.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁸ Paul J. Weber, "Strict Neutrality: The Next Step in First Amendment Development?" in *Religion in American Politics*, ed Charles W. Dunn, (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1989), 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁰ Reichley, 366.

that its location proves that the freedom of exercise was seen as just as vital to the creation of a healthy democracy as freedom of speech, press, and assembly because it is placed next to those other three freedoms which were also all considered to be necessary for a functioning republic.⁵¹

Religion has also been a necessary part of the political culture in the United States because many believe it provides people with the moral foundation necessary for making sound political decisions. Democracy in the United States is based on many values that can be found in a variety of religious beliefs. This is not to say that religion is the only place that these values can be found; there are secular ideas that provide these beliefs as well. However, most people find the necessary beliefs and values through religion. Because almost 85% of the US population identify with a religious belief, religion has been established as the central forum where the American people go to foster and shape the morals necessary for making sound political decisions.

There are individuals outside of the Supreme Court who believe that American democracy could never survive without the presence of religious values, and so they argue that religion and politics cannot and should not be completely separated. Alexis de Tocqueville spent much time studying the United States Government, and he wrote extensively on the importance that religion has in the formation of moral values that fostered political involvement.⁵² According to de Tocqueville, democracy and all of its personal freedoms, tend to encourage a lifestyle of self-interest and material gain. People can become wrapped up with their own self-interest and well being that they forget or lose interest in working for the common good of the Country. He believed that religion,

⁵¹ Reichley, 110.

⁵² Ibid., 121.

and the values it establishes, provide a way to prevent Democracy from going bad.

Religion has a power to unite people and bring them towards a common commitment to seek the infinite and immaterial world.⁵³

Jimmy Carter is a political figure who has always been very open about how his own personal faith has helped to influence his decisions and actions in politics. A. James Reichley believes that this indicates a belief on Carter's part that there is harm in separating political decisions from the moral values connected to religions because it removes the opportunity for Christians to allow their personal values to reflect their political decisions. He cites Carter's campaigning in 1976 as proof of this belief, arguing that Carter's claim that American public policy, in the past decades, had often been based on immoral decisions. Carter argued that it was his responsibility, and the responsibility of other political figures to bring these values of trust, honesty, and morality back to public life. Reichley believes that this argument proves Carter believed that government cannot be separated from moral considerations, and he believed that there could be morally based criticism of public policy.⁵⁴

⁵³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 519.

⁵⁴ Wald, 223.

Chapter 2

The Political Culture Today: Clergy Influence

By looking at the intentions of the Founders, the history of the connection between religion and politics, and the decisions of the Supreme Court on religion and politics it is obvious that the concept that religion has never been a part of the political culture in America is a myth. That connection between religion and politics still exists today, and its existence often causes much controversy. There are many different opinions on what the best structure for religion and politics should be in today's world. The goal here is to establish what an acceptable connection between religious beliefs and political decisions is. To attain this goal, different opinions about the best connection must be explored to find that most acceptable one.

One of the most basic levels in which one can see the connection between religion and politics in America is when voters allow their moral values to influence them at the polls.⁵⁵ In today's political culture moral values are often a part of political issues. Hot button topics such as abortion and gay rights are centered on moral values. In American religion, the clergy are often seen as leaders in the church community, and moral instructors for the congregation. This view prompts one to consider whether the clergy has any influence over the decisions of voters at the polls. In a time where there is so much concern about the control of religion over politics, this influence at the most basic and local level must be looked at. This chapter explores the possible shape of clergy influence over voter decisions.

⁵⁵ Wald, 37.

Many people believe that the answer to this question of clergy influence is an absolute yes or no. They assume that church goers are either totally influenced by the political cues provided in their church, or they make complete uninfluenced decisions and simply join churches that uphold the political values they teach.⁵⁶ These are two extremes that ignore any middle position where some influence is possible. The two extreme opinions represent a popular sentiment that assumes people have to accept all or nothing. This sentiment ignores the fact that people have the ability to accept certain ideas while dismissing others.

A Relationship of Total Control

The first opinion is that the local church and clergy has the complete ability to sway the political decisions of individual voters. In this model, if the clergy made a comment that something like abortion was bad, and anyone who supported abortion should not be given any power, it would be assumed that the individual voters would take this to heart and refuse to vote for anyone who was not against abortion. This model of influence assumes that the individual voter comes into the congregation without a lot of strong political positions. The voter really has no idea how he or she would vote concerning moral issues. The voter is essentially a ball of clay that the local clergy and congregation can shape into anything it desires. If the local congregation supports conservative evangelical values then the voter will choose more conservative candidates,

⁵⁶ Lyman A. Kellstedt, David C. Leege, Kenneth D. Wald, and Michael R. Welch, "Are the Sheep Herding the Shepherds? Cue Preceptors, Congregational Responses, and Political Communication Processes," in *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics* ed by Lyman A. Kellstedt and David Ck. Leege, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 250.

and if the local congregation supports more liberal and progressive moral values then the voter will choose a more liberal candidate.

Some people who believe the relationship between clergy and voters is totally controlled by clergy view this control as very negative. Those who view a relationship of complete control negatively often use it as an argument for why there needs to be complete separation between churches and the government. Supporters of this opinion argue that voters have become blind sheep who are willing to follow whatever they are told. They argue that people are totally influenced by the political values of the church.⁵⁷ They pick up on every political cue of the congregation, so that they represent every value that the church supports. They become a product of the church who votes exactly as their church would want them to. This complete influence is bad because it opens up the possibility for a specific religion to gain control of the political world. If one religious group gained control of politics it is possible that other religious groups might become marginalized, forcing followers of those religions to lose their right to freedom of religion.⁵⁸ If there was complete separation between religion and politics then this potential for excluding a group from their right to religious freedom could be completely erased.

There are other people who believe that a direct strong influence from clergy is not a negative thing but is instead very positive. An example of people who supports such an opinion is the evangelical Protestants. In the evangelical tradition hierarchy is very important. In their search for moral guidance they look straight to the Bible for, and they depend on the interpretation of the member of the community who is considered to

⁵⁷ Kellstedt, Leege, Wald, and Welch, 250.

⁵⁸ Dunn, xix.

be most spiritually blessed. In evangelical churches it is the clergy who are the primary interpreters of the Bible. Their interpretation is often given so much authority in their congregation that some consider them to be “local popes for their congregations.”⁵⁹ Evangelicals create a religious community in which they greatly depend on their local authority for guidance concerning political decisions.⁶⁰ Evangelical voters often willingly give up some of their decision making abilities and join the rigidly hierarchical structure of their church because they hold such a high regard for the opinions of their church leaders.⁶¹

A Lack of Any Influence

A second group of people argue that clergy have absolutely no influence over the political decisions of individual voters. This opinion is often held by voters who argue that they are not blind sheep. They argue that the local church and clergy have absolutely no influence over their political decisions. In recent years most, if not all church-going Americans polled claimed that messages from the pulpit have no influence over their voting decisions. These voters argue that any decision they make at the poll is a personal one which is affected by no outside influence. They claim that if their voting choices are similar to the moral values voiced by their churches it is simply because they choose to attend a church that represents the moral and religious values they held before hand.⁶² According to voters who claim to represent this opinion, any choice they make, such as the decision to vote for only pro-life candidates, is a choice made strictly through internal

⁵⁹ Kellstedt, Legee, Wald, and Welch, 248-249.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁶¹ Wald 314.

⁶² Ibid., 125.

reflection and independent decision. The choice has nothing to do with the fact that every week they attend Sunday church services and hear the minister preach on the immorality of abortion.

Many people see this claim as delusional. They cannot understand how people can claim to be unaffected by such an authoritative outside influence. Kenneth Wald believes that in reality, Americans probably are influenced by local clergy, but do not want to admit that they have succumbed to that influence. The polls probably do not represent any actual lack of influence by local clergy, but instead show that Americans desire to portray themselves as completely independent thinkers even when they are not.⁶³ Some people are confused why people would lie about being influenced by an outside force, however, this desire can be better understood by looking at the value placed on independence in the US. The United States has placed a very large importance on the independent spirit, and the country glorifies the individual who does things on his own. Americans live in an age of modern liberalism in which the individual is expected uphold a “commitment to skeptical reason, affirmation of pragmatic action”, as well as an affirmation of the individual and individual freedom.”⁶⁴ “The evidence is indisputable that individualism and freedom are the values that Americans treasure,” and all Americans have the desire to become independent and “become their own person.”⁶⁵

Political scientists encourage this independent spirit in their evaluation of the political influences in the US. They assume that decisions are based on personal traits such as age, education, race, and personal ideology. They send the message to voters that

⁶³ Wald, 125.

⁶⁴ Fowler, 39

⁶⁵ Ibid. 40.

the church is not considered to be a political influence, and so voters try to ignore religion's influence. Americans are encouraged to make their own decisions and are often frowned on when they become dependent on others.⁶⁶ This assumption by political scientists is prevalent enough that it has entered into our school text books. School children learn in their American government text books that "religion is not and never has been a significant factor in either the development of our political institutions or their operations", and they are taught that all religious institutions must be kept far away from the workings of politics.⁶⁷ Americans are constantly shown the dangers of becoming dependent on the church to guide their personal political decisions by political leaders. In 1984, a senator was quoted as saying that "When you introduce religion into politics you are playing with fire."⁶⁸

Americans are taught that the United States is a country that has gone through modernization, meaning that it has moved away from religion and towards secularization. They are taught to believe that religion has no significant influence on the moral credibility of American democracy. Some political experts argue that religion is about as morally significant as sports.⁶⁹ Supporters of this opinion tell Americans that in a modernized nation, such as the United States, it is only the older generations and people from unsophisticated communities that still allow religion to be an influential factor in their lives. Americans are informed that if they are to embrace modernization and

⁶⁶ Lyman A. Kellstedt, David C. Leege, and Kenneth D. Wald, "Church Involvement and Political Behavior," in *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics*, eds Lyman A. Kellstedt and David C. Leege, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 122.

⁶⁷ Wald, 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁹ Reichley, 351.

sophistication, they must refuse to allow their political decisions to be significantly influenced by religion.⁷⁰ Therefore, when asked, Americans will claim that their political decisions are completely independent rather than admit that they were influenced by the church. This does not mean that Americans do not privately turn to their religious beliefs to aid in their political decisions. It only means that when asked about what influenced their political decisions they provide a response that they believe the political elite would find to be acceptable in the modern world.

The Reality of Clergy Influence in America

In reality, the connection between religion and politics is not an all or nothing choice. Voters are neither completely under the influence of the church without their own opinion, nor are their political decisions completely independent of the influences of the church. Voters who attend church are members of a group, their congregation, and like most members of a large group, they can be influenced by the group sentiment and the sentiment of the leader.⁷¹ The church has become such an influential group organization because it is often the largest organized institution in which Americans are involved. It is an institution where voters have conversations with each other concerning political issues and where they receive bulletins and literature from the church which contains guidance on moral issues that can be found in the political world.⁷² The church has become a place of influence in the lives of Americans because it provides them with the sense of community that often is missing in a nation where individualism is so highly

⁷⁰ Wald, 5-6.

⁷¹ Kellstedt, Leege, and Wald, 122-123.

⁷² Kellstedt, Leege, Wald, and Welch, 235.

valued.⁷³ This religious community helps a person to converse about issues such as spirituality that he or she cannot find through individualism.⁷⁴

Church clergy have influence as a moral guide over their congregation. This can be seen by the fact that thousands of Christians attend church willingly every week, searching for moral guidance. They look to the minister, through his or her preaching, for that moral guidance. When it comes to political issues of morality, some voters frequently turn to their clergy because these voters believe that their clergy has the highest level of moral credibility. These people accept the moral guidance of their clergy over the statements made in a political ad campaign or in a commentary made on a news show or in a newspaper. It is because clergy have this level of moral credibility that they are able to help direct the attitudes of their voting congregation.⁷⁵

The moral credibility and value that Christians place on the opinions of clergy can be seen by something called the Position Clarity Hypothesis. This hypothesis was formed by research done by two political scientists, David C. Leege, and Michael R. Welsh, in 1991. The hypothesis argues that if the local clergy of a church has a very clear, strong, and visible opinion on an issue the majority of the congregation will pick up any cues and adapt the beliefs of the clergy.⁷⁶ The congregation trusts that the clergy has a greater understanding and knowledge of the issues surrounding the Bible than they do, and so members are willing to adopt those beliefs because they perceive that they are the morally correct ones.

⁷³ Fowler, 39

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁵ Corwin Smidt, "Clergy in American Politics: An Introduction," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 no. 4 (2003) 495-499.

⁷⁶ Kellstedt, Leege, Wald, and Welch 243.

There are many different examples and degrees of influence that clergy can have over the voting decisions of their congregation. This is evident when considering the influence of conservative Protestant, Catholic, and mainline Protestant clergy over congregations. However, that influence does exist to some degree in every congregation, today. Alexis De Tocqueville saw American churches as the original American political institutions and believed that American clergy played an important role in shaping the ideology of voters and organizing voters into action.⁷⁷

As was discussed earlier, conservative Protestant churches often create a community in which the clergy and church leaders have significant control. It is very easy to track the involvement of evangelical churches in politics because they are so open and strong about their connection to the Republican Party. In evangelical churches the clergy depend greatly on their preaching for their organization. They use the pulpit on Sundays to provide moral guidance and to make pronouncements on what is required of their congregation.⁷⁸

Evangelical Protestants depend greatly on this information provided from the pulpit. They look to their clergy for moral guidance, and receive strong messages from a clergy that is very involved in politics. An example of this is a minister in Arlington, Virginia who used the pulpit to convince his congregation that George W. Bush was the moral choice for President. He announced in his sermon that he could not directly endorse a specific candidate, however, he was about to tell a story that would make it clear which presidential candidate was the Godly choice. The minister then proceeded to

⁷⁷ Rhys H. Williams, "Political Theology on the Right and Left," *Christian Century*, 115 no 21 (1998), 722.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 724.

read Bush's personal statement of faith to the congregation and preached on how one needed to consider the faith of a candidate when considering that candidate for the position of international leader.⁷⁹

Some evangelical leaders are very involved in the political world. They have created well known national political machines. They have run for office, and they have a high membership in their different institutions of voters who are willing to follow the direction of those leaders. The Christian coalition has established many religious education institutions and groups through out the country and these institutions are very much controlled by the authority of the church leaders. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are examples of how church leaders try to control the political actions of believers. A Bible college established by Pat Robertson encourages its students to be involved in political activities that involve moral issues; however the college does not allow unrestricted activity. Every demonstration that occurs must first be approved by the institutions leaders. This school is also well known in the academic world for refusing to grant its faculty and students any academic freedom.⁸⁰

Both the Catholic and mainline Protestant Churches are not as heavily connected to a single political party; however the clergy still provide guidance and have influence over the decisions of voters in both traditions. The Catholic Church has had a very vocal and constant position of church officials in the political world. This position does not fit any party lines, and because of this the decisions of catholic voters do not constantly follow a single party line. The Catholic Church works to provide official guidance from the leadership which then can be used by voters as a moral compass. They wish to

⁷⁹ Wald, 124.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 314.

provide voters with a moral framework that they can rely on when having to make their own personal decisions on what side to take on a political issue. An example of this is a letter sent out in 1983 by Catholic Bishops concerning the morality of nuclear weapons. The letter never told Catholics that they had to support a certain side of the issue, but many feel that it provided Catholics with the unspoken message that to truly be catholic they had to support that side of the issue.⁸¹

The clergy of mainline Protestant churches have the longest history of political involvement in the United States. Before the 1970, mainline Protestant clergy were often very involved in encouraging their congregations to implement social change through political action. They saw no problem in using their influence to advocate for social change, and felt that it was their duty to lead their congregations towards helping others in need. They worked to bring criticism to the social norms of the time, such as segregation, because of the belief that God is here in this world rather than waiting for us to arrive at the next. Since God is present around us now, the main task of a Christian is to help his or her neighbor now rather than to work on personal holiness.⁸² During the 1960s many mainline Protestant clergy were heavily involved in social reform. They were very involved in labor strikes, picketing for social issues, and organizing political activities. In 1968 for example, Harold Quinley, a political scientist of the time, took a poll of clergy in California. The results showed that clergy were very active in campaigning to receive fair housing for poor, working to unionize migrant workers, and protesting against the Vietnam War.⁸³

⁸¹ Wald, 254-255.

⁸² Ibid., 269.

⁸³ Ibid., 270

Since the 1970s however, mainline Protestant clergy have drawn away from this political involvement and commentary on social issues because of its effect on the congregation. The clergy often had much more liberal views than its congregation as a whole, and the result of clergy activism was that it caused an uncomfortable challenge to the status quo. Congregation members responded to this challenge by voicing concerns that their own spiritual needs were being ignored, and so often left the congregation to fulfill those spiritual needs.⁸⁴ Congregation members also often responded negatively to their clergy's challenge of the status quo because there was a huge gap between their own political views and the political views of their clergy. The Pastors of mainline Protestantism had very liberal views, while their congregations often had much more conservative views.

Clergy responded to this reaction by submitting to the desires of congregation members. In order to maintain church vitality they consciously turned away from any discussion of the political issues and social issues of the time at the pulpit. This is because they realized that their congregations were opposed to any clergy commentary on these issues. Even today Protestant clergy tend to avoid preaching on political issues; however they still continue to encourage congregation members to work towards the betterment of their fellow mankind.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Wald, 273-274

⁸⁵ Ibid., 276.

Chapter 3

Ensuring a Positive Relationship of Influence

Before looking at the benefits and drawbacks of clergy influence it is important to realize that this influence is not absolute. Voters may be influenced morally by the messages provided by their clergy; however, they also do make their own decisions and resist that influence at times. People submit to different degrees of influence, as shown by looking at the evangelical, Catholic, and mainline Protestant traditions. Some Christian voters do hold their clergy in high esteem and submit completely to a system of moral hierarchy, which exists in the evangelical tradition. Others, such as the Catholics, are able to resist the message of their church leaders by voting in ways other than they are encouraged. Still others, like mainline Protestants, show a frequent dislike to politicized clergy, causing a lessening of political influence by their clergy.

Benefits of Clergy Influence

The moral influence and guidance that clergy have in the decisions of voters can be positive and it should not be abolished. Clergy, through their influence can provide a moral framework for the decisions of voters. They can show voters that morals are important in the political world. If clergy stopped their attempts to guide and influence voters in their individual decisions of moral issues in politics it would be dangerous. Clergy would essentially be telling the voters in their congregations that the moral lessons they tried to instill did not apply to every aspect of the voter's life, including the world of politics. Because clergy have influence over their congregations, what they fail to talk about sends just as strong of a message as what they choose to talk about. If

voters belong to a congregation in which the clergy refuses to discuss the issues of the time and only focuses on the words of the Bible, the voters will begin to gain the impression that their religious morals and ethics have no connection to the political issues of the country.⁸⁶ The issues in the newspaper need to be discussed in churches as well as the issues in the Bible to avoid the impression that morals are only relevant in private life, and avoid opening up the door for the creation of public policy that lacks any concern for morals.⁸⁷

Today's religion helps to uphold the values that are necessary for a healthy democracy, and by having an influence over voter decisions, clergy aid in upholding those basic concepts. The concept that all humans have rights is an important foundation of the American democracy. These basic human rights have often been defined and explained using tools gained from religion.⁸⁸ Religion often provides the standards that give meaning to many democratic concepts. The concept of freedom comes from the religious concept that all humans are individual children of God. The need to participate in the community comes from the belief that all humans are required by God to help their fellow humans.⁸⁹

The influence of Christian values on political decisions is also positive because it often establishes a sense of uncertainty that is beneficial to the political culture. Christianity often teaches people that they cannot be certain that they know the answers to everything. Because humans are sinful, they can not be certain that their behavior and actions are righteous. This knowledge of sin causes Christians to have a beneficially

⁸⁶ Stortz, "Ethics in the Pulpit?"

⁸⁷ Wald, 310.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 308.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 309.

critical outlook on the earthly situations of the world. They can possibly question why the government insists on following a certain policy because they realize the potential to sin. The Christian concept of sin is an example of how uncertainty can be beneficial. Christians realize that just because political views are unchallenged by the majority does not mean that they are free of sin.⁹⁰ As an up-and-coming politician, Senator Barack Obama stated, “Faith doesn’t mean that you don’t have doubts.”⁹¹ Because Christians are sinful, we will not always have the ability to discover the ways of God on our own. That is why we go to church so that we can constantly work towards discovering Gods will.⁹²

Dangers of Clergy Influence

However, the influence that clergy have over their voting members can also be used incorrectly and in America’s history clergy have used their influence to gain support for negative things. For example, Southern evangelicals in the period right before the Civil war became upset over the attack on the institution of slavery, and became very defensive. One way in which they defended their practice of slavery was to turn to their church leadership for justification. They frequently turned to the Bible to justify their use of slavery and to argue that the institution of slavery was divinely ordained.⁹³

Guidelines for some separation of churches and politics are beneficial because of the danger that politics can bring to churches. Politics has the potential to use churches

⁹⁰ Wald, 311.

⁹¹ Barack Obama, “Called to Renewal”, June 8, 2006<
http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060628-call_to_renewal_keynote_address/index.html>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Fowler and Hertzke, 19.

and their moral teachings for political gain. Politicians realize the impact that morally charged language has, and they have no problem using and twisting religious terms that voters hear in church for their own political gain. For example, President Bush used religious language to gain support from religious voters for his War on Terrorism by calling anyone who supported the terrorists' part of the "Axis of Evil". By using this language he is trying to establish the same moral credibility that church leaders possess, and is trying to give Christian voters the sense that he has a God-granted ability to judge the morality of other's actions.⁹⁴

Politicians realize that church leaders and clergy do have a moral influence over their congregation members. They try to manipulate church leaders into supporting them so as to gain votes. Politicians try to gain support through promising to uphold certain values once in office, promising to establish moral reforms, and by acting like they completely agree with the values that the church teaches. In reality, the politicians do not always support all the values or establish all of the moral reforms that they say they will. Often this is because it is not possible to do so in American political culture of compromise. Politicians may have every intention of supporting certain values or reforms, but the workings of politics require that they abandon some of those practices. However, there are critics who believe that there are plenty of politicians who make promises in bad faith, and have no intentions of supporting specific values and reforms once they are in power. They pretend to support the values of churches, and in reality have no respect for the moral values or the clergy of the churches.

⁹⁴ Martha E. Stortz, "An Apology for Theology and a Challenge to Theologians," *Dialog* 43 no. 4, (2004), 257.

David Kuo, a former Whitehouse official who was the second in command for Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, provides an example of how politicians can use religious organizations for their own political gain. In his book *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, Kuo shows that President Bush's aids used the religious conservatives as political pawns through their Faith-Based Initiative Program. Bush's aids pretended to respect conservative religious leaders and to the faces of these leaders were all "hugs and smiles," however; they called these same leaders "nuts" behind their back.⁹⁵ The aides only pretended to respect these religious leaders because they were using the leaders to gain votes for the Republican Party. They used the faith based program to provide more money to local organizations if they were known to be "friendly" to the Administration. They also held conferences on "non-partisan" in hotly contested areas where they hoped to convince church leaders to turn their congregations towards the Republican Party.⁹⁶

Guidelines also need to be established to create an appropriate connection between the moral reasoning and the political motives for voting a certain way. Problems can also arise when voters are taught that political decisions involve no critical thinking on their part. Some voters are told, and accept the message that there is a single right answer to all political issues. These people have a tendency to also accept that their clergy know what God's will is and will accept their clergy telling them how to vote without making any independent decisions. Such Christians can become prey to the fault of believing that all other answers are wrong and against Gods will, losing the sense of

⁹⁵ Robert Marus, "Book Says Bush Aides Duped Religious Allies," *Christian Century*, 123 no. 22 (2006), 17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

uncertainty that is so beneficial to the Christian ethic. When Christians lose this sense of doubt or uncertainty they reach a dangerous level because they assume incorrectly that their actions are infallible, and so refuse to reflect on the impact of their actions.

Some people believe that President Bush is a very prominent example of someone who has lost their sense of uncertainty, and assumes that their beliefs are infallible. They assume that President Bush is confident that because he is a Christian he becomes an instrument of God's will and inherently understands what God would want him to do. Simply put, because he is a Christian and reads the Bible, God works through his actions.⁹⁷ When people argue that they have the only correct Christian view on an issue other Christians are apt to realize that those "correct views are not their own. The question then arises over who is right. Christians must realize that Biblical passages, the words through which we comprehend God's will do require thought and interpretation."⁹⁸

Problems can arise when Christians forget the uncertainty of the righteousness of their actions and assume that they have the only moral answers to the world. They refuse to engage in conversation about political issues and refuse to respect the opinions of others. They begin to talk past each other and hold that their answer is the only answer because it is God's will.⁹⁹

The goal is not to establish a "correct" position for Christians on political issues. There is no effort to discover which political position is "godly" and which one contributes to the efforts of the devil. Discovering ethics and morality in politics can never be about God versus sin because this polarizes the issue and assumes that there is

⁹⁷ Amy Sullivan, "Slate," *In Good Faith: The Real Meaning of Barack Obama's Speech on Religion and Politics*, July 3, 2006, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2144983/>>.

⁹⁸ Obama.

⁹⁹ Wald, 296.

one correct answer. We as humans should not try to play God by labeling people as good or evil. We can question and speak about their actions that we believe are negative, but the judgment as to whether they are good or evil is left wholly to God.¹⁰⁰ “Ethics is not about distinguishing between right and wrong...Ethics is rather more like literary criticism. It helps us to grasp and thus live the deeper meaning of our embodied lives.”¹⁰¹ Clergy and voters should not use theology as a rhetoric that outlines how people should act. Instead they need to consider it as more of an “Angelic Science” much as the great medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas did. They need to see Theology as a lively critical conversation, where questions are raised to be debated rather than dismissed, and where every article of faith can be argued fiercely and with passion because it is articulated clearly and backed with thoughtful consideration.¹⁰²

Guidelines for Clergy

As Martha E. Stortz points out, the pulpit is not the place to discuss partisan issues.¹⁰³ This is because of the level of influence and authority clergy maintain when they are in the pulpit. To discuss or try and persuade church about politics from the pulpit would be an irresponsible use of that authority. This means that clergy should not discuss who they support in an upcoming election, or whether they are republican or democratic from the pulpit. Clergy need to avoid discussing their own personal feelings in the pulpit. This does not just exclude the outright endorsement of candidates. It also

¹⁰⁰ Stortz, “An Apology,” 257.

¹⁰¹ L. Roger Owens, “Why Herbert McCabe Still Matters: Don’t Talk Nonsense,” *Christian Century*, 122 no 2 (2005), 20.

¹⁰² Stortz, “An Apology,” 257-258.

¹⁰³ Stortz, “Ethics in the Pulpit?” 355.

means that clergy cannot provide hints from the pulpit on the political issues they support, and it means that they cannot use their position of authority to try and convince members to vote a certain way. For example, the minister in Arlington, Virginia, who simply avoided stating Bush's name, but informed everyone that they could easily figure out which candidate he believed was the moral and better choice, crossed the line. He crossed a line because he tried to use his moral influence from the pulpit to promote a candidate and a political campaign.

Political issues in general can enter into the pulpit but they should not take over the pulpit.¹⁰⁴ Clergy do need to address the political issues of the time, but the reason they are doing so from the pulpit is to help people work towards hearing God's Word concerning the issues of today. Christians cannot simply hear the Word of God, by being told on Sunday morning that the Bible says God requires certain actions in our modern times. Christians often get a sense of "biblical narcissism" and assume that the Bible specifically relates to my time and specifically addresses the issues facing me.¹⁰⁵ The thing that Christians must remember is that it is not our manmade rules that are present in the bible, but instead it is God's rules, intended to be used for all times, that are present in the Bible. The Word of God is living and has to be discussed and considered before it can be applied to current issues. The role of the clergy in this is to present the word to the congregation with food for thought so that they can listen to the word, and go out and discuss it with other congregation members as well as others outside of the church.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Stortz, "Ethics in the Pulpit?" 354.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 352.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 354.

There are some legal restrictions today that should help to influence a responsible relationship between clergy and voters. Clergy and religious organizations cannot financially contribute to political campaigns or openly promote any political campaign in any way. Religious organizations enjoy tax exempt status, and so their political activities are monitored by the Internal Revenue Service. If clergy or local churches become openly involved in politics they risk an investigation by the IRS which might end in the loss of their tax exempt status. For example, a church in New York lost its tax exempt status in 1992 when it placed advertisements in both the *Washington Times* and *USA Today* stating that Bill Clinton's policies went against God's Law and that a vote for Clinton was a vote for sin.¹⁰⁷

However, legalities are often ignored by churches and voters. As has been established, they act in the manner that they believe they ought to, not in the manner that has been legally outlined for them. Churches and clergy also find loopholes so that they can support specific parties or candidates. The Reverend in Arlington Virginia was able to find a loop hole telling a story about how moral President Bush was, and in doing so avoid making the outright statement "I support President Bush" when he was in the pulpit.¹⁰⁸

A Catholic group called "Catholic Answers" issued leaflets to many different Catholic Churches during the 2004 Presidential elections. The group declared that there were five different political issues which contained a correct nonnegotiable choice for all Catholics. These issues were abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, gay marriage, and cloning. These leaflets were "political pamphlets disguised as religious tracts, and they

¹⁰⁷ Wald, 124.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 124.

almost explicitly stated that voting for Bush was a must for Catholics.¹⁰⁹ However, they did avoid making such a statement openly which is why they continue to maintain their tax-exempt status. Catholic Cardinal O'Connor, head of the New York archdiocese, avoided directly questioning the morality of a political candidate in 1984 by making a general and vague statement. He stated that he did not know how any true catholic could vote for a pro-choice candidate, a statement that was a thinly veiled attack on vice-President candidate Geraldine Ferraro.¹¹⁰

The IRS has also contributed to churches ignoring the law by being generally pretty lax in supporting it unless the violation is incredibly blatant. Churches are usually allowed to become involved in activities such as hosting political speakers, registering voters, lobbying for or against specific referendums, and issuing voter guides that do not explicitly support a specific candidate as long as they do not cross the line by becoming supporters of a specific campaign. Usually if churches stray a little too close to the line they are warned, however, there are sometimes when they cross the line and do lose their tax-exempt status.¹¹¹ Because churches and clergy are not simply restricted by the law separating religion and politics, and the enforcers of law are often lax, there is a need for moral guidelines above legal guidelines.

The local clergy have a responsibility to portray a certain moral objectiveness to congregation members. The clergy need to work to provide their voters with a moral framework. Churches and clergy have the task of helping congregation members by guiding them to the correct moral values. The congregation members are then expected

¹⁰⁹ E. J. Dionne Jr, "A Thorne in Both Their Sides," *Sojourners Magazine* 35 no. 6 (2006), 21.

¹¹⁰ Fowler and Hertzke, 69.

¹¹¹ Wald, 124.

to defend the moral values they have learned in political decisions.¹¹² This means that they provide the tools for voters to discover the answers themselves. The tools for finding the answers are the Ethics of God, which can be found in the Bible. The clergy must bring the Word of God to the congregation through preaching, leaving the Word to be discussed and the meaning of the Word to be worked out through conversation. Clergy can engage in this conversation but clergy cannot outright tell congregation members which way they must vote to be in tune with the Word of God.¹¹³

Clergy need to realize that their goal is to help voters to think more critically about incorporating their religious values into political decisions, and so they need to provide criticism as well as praise for all sides of political issues. In order foster critical thinking clergy cannot tell their congregation that they are obligated to believe or follow certain political issues as Christians. This would totally kill any critical analysis by the individual because he or she would be fed the ‘correct’ information. To foster critical thought the clergy need to provide criticism as well as praise of political ideas and positions.

More importantly clergy need to be critical of both sides of all issues. “Ideally the church’s role in politics is to cause discomfort, to encourage questions, to challenge narrowly ideological views.”¹¹⁴ The ultimate goal of clergy is to leave their congregations with questions rather than provide them with answers. They need to cause voters discomfort, so that voters must engage in personal reflection and dialog with

¹¹² Wald, 310

¹¹³ Stortz, “Ethics in the Pulpit?” 353.

¹¹⁴ Dionne, 21.

others to resolve that discomfort on their own.¹¹⁵ For example, it is not the responsibility of clergy to pronounce that abortion is wrong, and order or even suggest that voters support only pro-life candidates. Instead the clergy need to raise questions both about the morality of abortion, as well as the morality of those who are rigidly pro-life.

There may be some occasions when it is acceptable for clergy to take sides on an issue. These occasions occur when an institution goes against the universal moral values of Christianity and of secular morals. Christianity promotes the wellbeing and humanity of all, so if there are institutions that cause harm or violence to a group, clergy can speak out against this harm. For example, most people in America view domestic violence as harmful because of the abuse placed on the victim. However, there is often a hesitancy to help those victims and provide resources for them to escape the abuse. Clergy can speak out about the need to protect victims and install resources for those victims.

Clergy also have to ensure they do not become the pawns of political organizations. The church is not supposed to become a liberal or conservative “machine” because this connection to politics is illegal. Clergy should also avoid becoming pawns of political parties, because if they fall under the control they will not be as effective at instigating moral reform in our country. Clergy can establish a greater moral reform in the political world when they refuse to promote one side of an issue and are instead critical of both sides of that issue. They are better able to establish reform when they challenge the established political beliefs of their congregation.¹¹⁶

Clergy should also strive to keep a distance between themselves and politics because of the dangers that a close relationship might bring to the freedoms of the church.

¹¹⁵ Dionne, 23.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

Some of the founders established a distance between religion and politics because they did not want the government to have the power to dictate how different people practiced their faith and worshiped. If clergy become too close to politics today they might discover that the government can begin to influence how they practice what they believe. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the clergy to keep a distance from politics so that they can maintain their freedom to direct their church as they choose.

Clergy also must realize that they cannot establish heaven on earth. They can realize that government has a positive role in establishing good here on earth. It also plays an important role in restraining sinful behaviors and preventing harm from being done to others. However, the government cannot be seen as an agent of divine will. It is not a way that one can establish God's Kingdom on Earth. Government is simply present to assist men in establishing a secular society that has religious influences. It is not there to aid God in the establishment of his desires or laws on earth.¹¹⁷

Guidelines for Voters

The individual voter also has a responsibility to keep this relationship healthy. They should allow what they have learned about religion to spill into their political decisions. This means that they do not accept decisions simply because it is what God and their church tell them is right. Instead use what they have learned about religion and morality in church to help them in their personal considerations of political issues.¹¹⁸

Voters have a responsibility in the relationship of influence because they are active members of a democratic society. First, voters need to realize that while they are

¹¹⁷ Baldwin, 79.

¹¹⁸ Wald, 182.

influenced by the teachings of their clergy, this influence is not a mandate and they do have the ability to make their decisions. This means that they should monitor the influence and should not allow themselves to be blindly led to the correct choices. The clergy has only provided them with a moral framework, and they must form an individual choice based on that moral framework. The moral teachings that they receive at church from their clergy provide them with their own personal morality. While this morality got its framework from the clergy it is not identical to the personal morality of every other member of the church. It is a personal morality that the individual developed through attending church, entering into conversation, and personal reflection. According to political figures on both the right and left, it is acceptable and necessary for individual voters to “inject their personal morality into public policy.”¹¹⁹

What voters cannot do is refuse to reflect on issues and refuse to establish their own personal morality. They cannot simply take the easy way out and vote on an issue a certain way because their minister or God told them it was the correct way to vote. It is the responsibility of voters to critically listen to the messages being given to them and to question for themselves what the best response is, because “no true follower of Christ can follow the path of passive acquiescence.”¹²⁰ This means that no Christian should ever accept that there is a single political choice for him or her. He should not acquiesce to the demands of a corrupt church leadership which orders him or her to choose a specific candidate simply because it is the Godly choice.

This is not to say that a political action at the polls cannot be religiously motivated. It is acceptable for voters to “inject their personal morality” into their

¹¹⁹ “God’s Will in the Public Square,” *Christianity Today*, September 2006.

¹²⁰ Baldwin 109.

decisions at the polls, and it would be impossible for them to separate those morals from their decisions.¹²¹ It is also perfectly acceptable for voters to desire and vote for candidates that support similar moral values. However, it is not acceptable for religious morality to be the only reason that motivated their decision. They “cannot simply point to the teachings of [their] church or [invoke] Gods will”.¹²² Voters must depend “on a variety of reasons - some religious, some pragmatic – to motivate” their political decisions.¹²³ Their reasons must be such that a secular voter could “buy into the cause.”¹²⁴

It is important for voters to realize what it means to cast a vote. It is a responsibility to cast a vote. The decisions voters make help to decide who fills America’s legislature.¹²⁵ They have the power to decide who leads the country and controls politics and the moral issues they contain at all levels of the United States Government. This is an important responsibility because a Christian has a responsibility to ensure that those leading the country are moral so as to ensure a moral government that supports democratic values.¹²⁶

By casting a vote, people do not have the power to ultimately decide the outcome of moral issues in American politics. Voters cannot directly decide whether the government will support the moral decision on all political issues. Their votes only have

¹²¹ “God’s Will in the Public Square.”

¹²² Barack Obama, quoted in “God’s Will in the Public Square,” *Christianity Today*, September, 2006.

¹²³ “God’s Will in the Public Square.”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Baldwin, 134.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 133.

an indirect influence on policy decisions.¹²⁷ A candidate can be moral, and can personally believe that an issue such as abortion should be banned because it is immoral. It is positive to have that person in a position of leadership because of his or her morality; however, the voter needs to realize that placing that candidate in power does not ensure a ban on abortion. There are many outside factors in the political process of compromise and give and take that can prevent that leader from either gaining support for a ban on abortion or even perusing a ban.¹²⁸

Christian voters have a responsibility to engage in conversation in a respectful manner with those in their faith community as well as people outside their community. While some influence is positive, complete control by clergy of voter decisions is something that should be avoided because it takes away from the individual decision of the voter. No voter who attends church is completely separated from the ideas and influences of that congregation, however, no voter should be under the complete control of his or her church leaders. Church-goers are members of a democratic society as well as members of their church, and they need to be involved in the process of basic democratic decision making.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Baldwin, 150

¹²⁸ Ibid., 81.

¹²⁹ Wald 314.

Conclusion

The establishment and free exercise clauses do not currently, and have never prevented clergy from influencing the decisions of voters in their congregations. This clergy influence is good, and necessary for a thriving democracy. Clergy should avoid telling people what they must do and believe, and instead become actively involved in discussing what the living word of God means today so that voters can make their own decisions as to what God requires of a Christian when voting in a modern political world. There are times when influence of clergy can become a negative thing, but when they follow certain guidelines their relationship can remain positive and one based on discussion and reflection.

One problem that needs to be avoided is churches becoming overly involved in politics by supporting one side of a partisan issue, or becoming openly supportive of one political party or candidate. Clergy can help prevent this by not preaching on partisan issues and by not endorsing candidates from the pulpit. If they refuse to make an official connection to any party then political parties will not see any gain in trying to draw them into politics. Clergy can also help prevent over-involvement by critiquing the ideas of all sides of a political issue. Once again, if they refuse to endorse one side openly, and if they provide their congregation with issues to consider concerning all sides, then they will provide their congregation with issues to discuss and consider on their own.

Another problem that can arise is that there is only one moral answer to political issues, or one side of the issue or political candidate that God would choose. Clergy can avoid this concept by providing guidance that is gained from the Word of God, and by refusing to mandate specific actions or beliefs. Voting members of the church need to

enter into discussion and conversation with others inside and outside of the church to avoid this problem. Through discussion they will at least become more open to the idea that they might not have the only answer to political issues even if they do not change their views.

Through following these general ideas, clergy and voters in the congregation can enjoy a healthy and productive relationship of influence. In this relationship the Clergy introduce the ideas of God's will from scripture and provide voters with questions to ponder without becoming involved in secular issues. The congregation in turn takes these Words of God and criticisms provided from the pulpit with them when they leave. They refuse to accept the message that God supports only one answer and they converse with other church members as well as those outside of the church so as to form their own political opinions based on the framework provided for them by their clergy.

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