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On Moral Ambiguity

And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. --Luke 4:6

Surprised it to say there was considerable skepticism in advance of last week's presidential forum at Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Concerns had been expressed that Warren's recent courting of AIDS, poverty and global warming groups might induce him to pander to Barack Obama and John McCain rather than probe their inmost beings. Happily, most evangelical leaders were pleasantly surprised, praising the forum as pertinent, informative and skillfully handled.

Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is one who at first blush was dubious. "With the press pushing the event as a 'new face' for American evangelicals, I was not overly hopeful," says Mohler. "I still have deep reservations about identifying the event so closely with a church, but the conversations really did get to urgently important and controversial issues, and Pastor Rick Warren handled the conversations with aplomb, demonstrating both civility and candor."

Among the lesser number whose concerns were not assuaged is Ms. Star Parker, an accomplished author and speaker on behalf of family issues who is highly regarded in conservative Christian circles. Her response to the Saddleback forum has pricked our thinking. Here are her thoughts:

A number of years ago, John McCain participated in a hilarious segment on Saturday Night Live in which he did a spoof commercial for an album called "McCain Sings Streisand." The "commercial" featured a crooning McCain torturing a number of Streisand hits – "People," "Memories," "The Way We Were."

The senator then pitched, "I've been in politics for 20 years, and for 20 years I've had Barbra Streisand trying to do my job. So I decided to try my hand at her job."

Pastor Rick Warren's presidential candidate "Civic Forum" at his Saddleback Church brought this SNL highlight to mind. I'm picturing a segment with Lou Dobbs or Brit Hume preaching a Sunday sermon in a crowded church and then looking into the camera and saying, "Rick Warren is taking a fling at my job, so I thought I'd try my hand at his."

My apologies to Pastor Warren. Who am I to question a pastor who has sold 35 million copies of a book that flicks on the light for folks to see that life is more than just about themselves? God Bless Pastor Warren for this. But I think his foray into presidential politics carries a lot of baggage and creates problems.

If anything characterizes the problems we're having today it is relativism and ambiguity, a blurring of lines between everything. John McCain's...sketch jokes about one part of this: our elevation of entertainment and celebrity to the point where movie stars start thinking they should be setting public policy, and the public taking them seriously.

In our materialism, we're losing the distinction between money, power and celebrity, and knowledge and wisdom. Now we're seeing a world in which clarity between good and evil, right and wrong, knowledge and ignorance, men and women is disappearing into a borderless and indistinguishable gray.

For whatever good intentions Pastor Warren may have, by posturing as a neutral broker between different points of view, many of which have profound moral and religious implications, he contributes to the moral ambiguity we'd expect a pastor to be combating.

We have institutions for civic and political forums. The press, universities, town halls, etc. If they're not delivering well, let the marketplace work to improve what we're getting. But this is not the job of pastors or churches. If it is, where do we go to learn about good and evil?

What exactly is going on in America when our obsession is to cleanse every inch of public space from religion...Our kids can't pray in public school, or read the Bible or learn to apply traditional values in managing their lives. The Ten Commandments cannot appear in our courthouses. A crèche cannot be displayed in a public space during Christmas. Yet somehow we think a church is an appropriate forum for hosting candidates for president?

Our world is turning upside down. Rather than raising our public and private lives to a higher moral standard, we're politicizing religion. It's actually worse, I think. The pretense of neutrality is really a left-wing illusion. It's a sleight of hand to buy into relativism, and somehow Pastor Warren seems to have fallen into the trap.

When a pastor hosts a political candidate that has a 100 percent rating by NARAL Pro-Choice America and a 0 percent rating by the National Right to Life Committee, he gives legitimacy to that candidate. When legitimacy is given to a line of reasoning that says that poverty and AIDS are symptoms of anything other than moral breakdown, the relativist views of the left are justified.

To a disproportionate measure, when we are talking about poverty and AIDS in America, we are talking about black communities. [*Our note: Parker is Black*]. These communities are in disarray because of moral ambiguity. They not only need moral clarity and leadership, they crave it.

Partisanship is not our problem today. Healthy partisanship is vital to freedom. Our problem is moral ambiguity. Anyone that thinks this ambiguity is helpful in addressing poverty, crime, and disease is misinformed.

We need political leaders that are more moral. Not church leaders that are more political.¹

Ms. Parker has heard from a lot of her fans on this one. A slight majority disagree with her premise about political forums in churches, mindful that in earlier times, a church often served as the local school house, city hall, emergency hospital, funeral parlor, and venue for other public occasions. In the truest sense, any building or place where believers meet is CHURCH. A facility is nice to have, but the mission field is elsewhere.

Yet in the broader sense, Ms. Parker's angst begs the question "Can we be so accommodating that TRUTH becomes an impediment to the work of the ministry—even inside the church building?"

Michael Odell, a former state legislator and weekly web blogger for the *Christian Coalition of Washington*, warns that all of us in the public policy arena should be aware that... "National media and political parties will seek to take any Christian leader they can to the mountain top and show them all that could be theirs."

Unfortunately, that is something we "political crusaders" at the Christian Coalition know all too well.

Rick Forcier

¹ Star Parker, Pastor Warren's Politicized Pulpit A Mistake, Townhall.com, 8/17/2008