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COMMENTARY

Evangelicals must confront the ethical dilemma of partisanship

By **Jacob Lupfer** | May 2, 2016



Democratic U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton speaks to the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO Convention in Philadelphia on April 6, 2016. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Charles Mostoller

*Editors: This photo may only be republished with RNS-FITZSIMMONS-COLUMN, originally transmitted on April 8, 2016.

(RNS) In recent years, white evangelical leaders have professed a desire to be less reflexively partisan and less enthusiastic cheerleaders for the Republican Party.

The Rev. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's public policy arm, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, typifies this new Christian political engagement.

Unlike his predecessor, Richard Land, and many religious right leaders, Moore comes across as fairly apathetic about the GOP's electoral fortunes.

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Two months ago, Moore wrote (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/march-web-only/should-christians-vote-for-lesser-of-two-evils.html>) about how Christians should vote if faced with two evil choices. He made a striking claim that went largely unnoticed but merits comment, especially now that Donald Trump is the presumptive GOP nominee.

While Trump is morally disqualified from the presidency because of his misogyny and blatantly racist appeals, Moore suggested that Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders are morally disqualified because of their support for abortion rights.

It was a curious statement for a faith leader who, at least in his official capacity, portrays himself as nonpartisan. But Moore's view seems to be that nearly every Democratic politician is morally disqualified.

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While there continue to be millions of Democratic voters who oppose abortion and support a range of restrictions on the procedure, advocacy groups have succeeded in making Democratic politicians beholden to the abortion-rights agenda.

Interest groups have likewise forced Republican politicians to cut taxes on the rich, slash social welfare spending for the neediest, duck any meaningful response to environmental degradation and unconditionally support Israel, in defiance of Palestinian Christians' pleas.

Moore intends to highlight the singular importance of criminalizing abortion over all other political issues.

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This much is true: The Bible insists that the key ethical test for any society is how the strong treat the weak.

But in telling millions of evangelicals that politicians who support abortion rights are morally disqualified from office, Moore may be doing more to help the very wealthy than defenseless embryos and fetuses.

Many people of faith, particularly from the lower income strata, prefer the Democratic Party because they perceive a greater commitment to civil rights, economic justice and the dignity of people who are already born.

Democratic voters may be motivated by economic self-interest, but they are also motivated by values arising from their religious faith (<http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/typology-comparison/types/faith-and-family-left/>).

In any case, a vote for the Republican Party may be a vote for judges and policies that restrict access to legal abortion. But it is not without ethical dilemmas, either.

Republican policies do not bring us closer to the kingdom God sent Jesus to proclaim.

A better tack for Moore would be to call on Democratic evangelicals to fight for more space in their party for abortion opponents. The party has become so extreme that it cannot abide any talk of reasonable restrictions, or any consideration of the moral status of the unborn child at all.

But Democratic policies can lead to lower demand for abortion, and the abortion rate continues its slow decline even under Democratic presidents.

After a 2013 meeting with President Obama to discuss immigration reform, Moore said: (<http://www.bpnews.net/41477>) “We disagree, sharply, on some very important issues, but the Bible calls on us to pray for our leaders and to show honor where honor is due.” Presumably this is why Moore declined to call Obama a moral degenerate to his face.

But the implication that being wrong on abortion rights or marriage renders a politician morally disqualified is troubling, especially for a leader trying to make Christian political engagement more than an exercise in GOP electioneering.

Sure, Trump’s stunning disregard for the norms of political discourse, the rule of law and even the appearance of honesty and integrity make him categorically unacceptable. To his great credit, Moore has vociferously (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/have-evangelicals-who-support-trump-lost-their-values.html>) opposed Trump.

But Hillary Clinton, an imperfect but capable leader who has modeled fidelity and forgiveness in her marriage, is not a “clearly immoral option,” as Moore supposes. And she will only reassess an extreme view of abortion rights if there are people in her party fighting for a different vision.

Political parties are enigmatic; the 2016 election makes that clear. But they facilitate mass participation in politics so that citizens can effect desired policies, hopefully in accordance with the common good.

Political parties need vigorous moral and philosophical debate about the great issues of our time, and that will not happen if evangelicals oppose all Democrats as a matter of course but enthusiastically vote for virtually any Republican (with the exception of race baiters like Trump).

When the ethics chief of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination reminds evangelicals that Clinton and Sanders are morally disqualified, he is giving the Republicans in Washington a gift they can never repay.

And, as Moore knows better than most, they do not intend to. The GOP sends its thanks, but not much else.

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