

Music professor ponders Christ's call to action

Life
lessons

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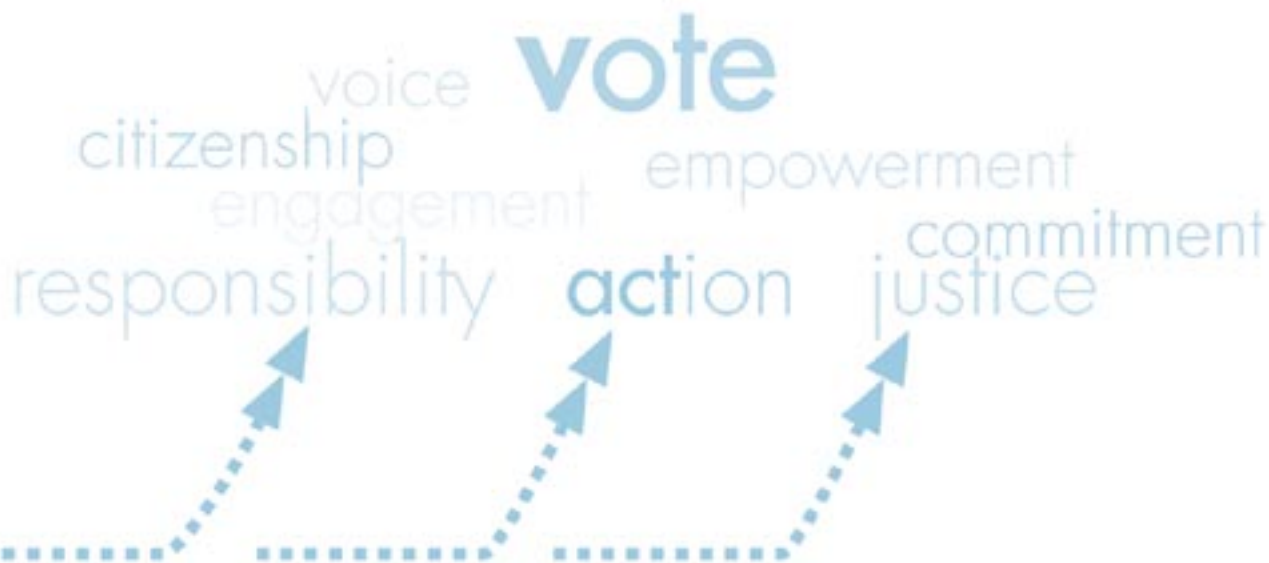
calling
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If I could point to a personal political “epiphany,” it would have to be a moment not long before the 1984 presidential election. I was a student at Wheaton College, in Illinois, and had already returned my absentee ballot. As I watched the debate between President Ronald Reagan and his Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale, I remember Reagan asking the rhetorical question, “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” It was a question Reagan had posed four years earlier, and because a majority of the electorate could not answer “yes,” it had helped him win the 1980 election. As I watched



that debate in late October 1984, it dawned on me that the President was counting on the fact that a majority of voters would feel that they were better off, and would then re-elect him. Perhaps it was something I had heard in chapel that day, or something I had read, but at that moment, I could not reconcile the question with what I believed to be Christ's call to me. Yes, the majority of Americans were probably better off. But a significant minority were not. I regretted having cast my first presidential vote without reflection, and I vowed that I would never again vote without thinking carefully about how my Christian worldview should guide my decisions.

Earlier this year, there was a great deal of discussion in the media about the religion factor in presidential politics. Howard Dean promised to talk about Jesus when he campaigned in the south, and for a couple of weeks the religious dimension was all over the news. I heard that churchgoers tend to be Republican, and non-churchgoers tend to be Democrat. I heard about which candidates were “genuine,” and which were not. As I listened to the media pundits – liberal, conservative and moderate – I was troubled that no one really seemed to “get it.” The key thing, and the thing that the media (and, unfortunately, most voters) don't understand, is that what matters is not what candidates say about their religious beliefs, or where and when they go to worship, or which keywords they



say to which audience. Most important are their fundamental beliefs about the way the world is and the way it works – their worldviews. And while I might disagree with a candidate’s worldview, understanding it will enable me to understand – and even predict, at times – the practical outcomes of his or her politics.

It is naïve to think that presidents – or anyone else, for that matter – can keep their faith (or worldview) separate from their actions. Candidates who state that their religious beliefs will have no bearing on their execution of the office significantly diminish their credibility in my eyes. I credit Candidate Bush in 2000 for his candor regarding his faith. Many of President Bush’s decisions grow out of a considered and defined worldview. The basis for his worldview and mine are similar in many ways, and yet the practical conclusions that he draws from it are worlds apart from mine. I don’t think, for example, that the best way to care for the poor is to create programs that seem to favor the rich in the hope that the money will trickle down to those who need it most. When President Bush justifies tax cuts by arguing “It’s your money!” I have great difficulty reconciling those words with what the Church teaches regarding stewardship. And I don’t think that the best way to secure our country against terrorist attacks is to invade a country whose threat to ours is dubious at best. These policies, apparently based in a Christian worldview, seem to me to have turned Jesus’ teaching on its head.

Why is it that I have yet to find a candidate, or at least, an electable candidate, who shares both my particular Christian worldview and its practical outcomes? Few candidates, for

example, oppose both abortion and capital punishment on the basis of the intrinsic value of human life; it is more expedient politically to support one and oppose the other without really having to explain away the inconsistency in the position. More often than not, every election cycle I find myself in a quandary: Do I support the candidate who professes a Christian worldview but whose policies are diametrically opposed to my own beliefs? Or do I support the candidate

whose worldview is more nebulous, or more secularized, but who will lead the country in the direction that is more consistent with the practical application of my Christian faith?

For a long time I thought that if I could find a candidate who shared my worldview, I would have my ideal candidate. Invariably, I was disappointed:

The positions of the Christian are unpopular, and that makes it awfully hard to get elected. So rather than worry about the candidate’s worldview, I worried about mine. What is the work that Christ calls me to do? Feed the hungry, heal the sick, love my neighbor as myself. There is no aspect of my life – including the civic part of it – that is outside of that call. Electing a government that will help to that end does not excuse me from personal responsibility toward my neighbor. To the contrary, it is part of my personal responsibility to my neighbor.

God calls us to be good stewards of whatever He has entrusted to us. Even though my vote counts as much as the vote of the most unreflective of my fellow citizens, that’s not what matters. Each of us is called to consider the claim that Christ makes on our whole lives, and to cast each vote as if it was the single most important one in the world.

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