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The View from New York: A Protestant challenge to the religious right

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NEW YORK -- With full choir singing "O God of Love, O God of Peace," and Bill Clinton quoting Scripture, the nation's long-ignored mainline Protestants served notice yesterday that they will challenge the religious right's claim to represent America's values.

"What some among us have forgotten is what a profound force that faith has been for progress and social justice: Just look at the struggle for civil rights," said the Rev. James Forbes Jr., senior minister at The Riverside Church.

The great Gothic church, built by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1927, was packed with 1,500 worshippers as America's 42nd president took out after the Christian conservative movement that has become a dominating and platform-dictating force in the Republican Party.

"We have a current situation in America today where the religious right has tried to turn all those who oppose them into two-dimensional cartoons," Clinton declared.

Clinton took up a pair of issues, the labeling of pro-choice advocates as "pro-abortion," and the demonizing of gay and lesbian relationships using Old Testament scriptural references.

"I have yet to meet anyone who is *for* abortion," said the former president. He argued that being for choice means safeguarding a deeply personal decision that should be made in the privacy of the family.

"I'm not ashamed to say gay people shouldn't be discriminated against, and I don't think Jesus had much to say on the subject," Clinton added.

Guidelines for believers

The 2,400-member Riverside Church is the epicenter of a nationwide campaign called Mobilization 2004. Forbes has traveled the country arguing for 10 "prophetic justice principles" which should guide believers casting votes in the presidential race.

Mobilization 2004 aims not only to put the faithful on the streets but to reach voters' minds. If successful, it will provide an alternative to the heavily ideological "Voters Guides" distributed by such religious right groups as the Christian Coalition.

The principles include -- but go beyond -- the Protestant churches' historic social justice theme of responsibility for children, the disadvantaged and the elderly. As an example, Principle No. 6 says: "Disdain the Arrogance of Power."

It reads: "Does the policy show humility before the governed, and respect the need for checks and balances on power? Does it fall victim to the hubris of ideological certainty, or a sense of entitlement to govern?"

Principle No. 7 takes up a similar theme: "Guard Freedom of Thought and Discussion: Does the policy provide for free press, free discussion, the expression of dissent, along with fair and just methods of participation in the democratic process."

Such are not principles generally associated with such administration figures as Vice President Dick Cheney and Attorney General John Ashcroft.

As recently as 1996, a major effort to soften the Republican convention's anti-abortion plank was barely beaten back in the platform committee.

Not even a minimal effort was seen this year. "It has been a total victory," said Phyllis Schlafly, head of the National Republican Coalition for Life.

The platform draft also endorses amending the Constitution to outlaw same-sex marriages.

A great deal of calculation underlies such bows to the religious right. Karl Rove, the Bush administration's political guru, has set a 2004 election goal of registering and getting to the polls four million new Christian conservative voters.

Clinton joked yesterday: "I am a white Southern Baptist. I have benefited from the Bush tax cuts. Why am I not a Republican?"

Clinton has even sinned and repented in the manner of some conservative TV evangelists.

The former president said he believes President Bush is "a committed Christian" whose religious faith "saved him, gave him a new purpose in life." However, argued Clinton, that doesn't mean Bush administration policies should not be subject to debate -- in their consequences and in their language.

'It offends my values ...'

"It bothers me that we have an environmental policy called 'healthy forests' when we are cutting trees that shouldn't be cut down," said Clinton.

Similarly, he argued, the "No Child Left Behind Act," which set performance standards for public schools, has failed to provide urgent help for inner-city students.

"We left over two million kids behind but we gave me my tax cut," Clinton said, alluding to his newly acquired wealth. "It offends my values that I learned in my church."

The former president also believes the Christian right and Bush political operatives have failed to heed one of the Ten Commandments: Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Thy Neighbor.

"In 2000, John McCain was smeared in the New York primary for being against breast cancer research, because he had voted against the defense bill," said Clinton. McCain was protesting colleagues attaching pork barrel appropriations to the measure.

He cited TV spots, using pictures of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, directed in 2002 against Democratic Sen. Max Cleland of Georgia -- a Vietnam triple amputee. The latest example, he said, is the orchestrated Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attack on the war record of Sen. John Kerry.

More will be heard from Mobilization 2004 during Republican National Convention week.

An interfaith service, "Let Justice Roll: A Call to Address Issues of Hunger and Poverty in this Election Year," will be held tomorrow night at Riverside Church. Its sponsors include major Protestant churches in New York City.

At its conclusion, faithful bearing flashlights will join in an effort to circle Manhattan at dusk. Said Forbes: "It is a way of letting people know there is a light of peace and freedom and equality shining in the land."

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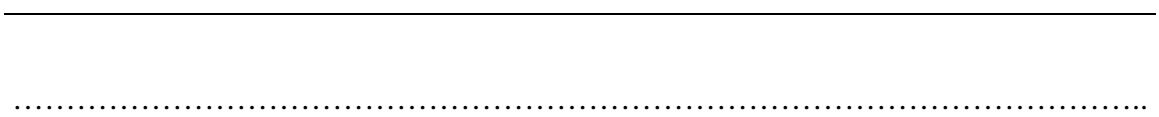
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THE PROPHETIC JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

We face a time of choices, and a recognition that our nation has strayed from some of its founding spiritual, moral and democratic principles. People of faith who care deeply about the soul of our country may feel inspired to hold up, as the Prophet Amos did, a series of principles against which to test their leaders' policies for moral depth.

1. **Seek the Common Good:** Does the policy represent the common good of society rather than the interest of an elite few?

2. **Be truthful in facts and motives:** Is the policy based on a true analysis and does it disclose its true intention? How likely is the outcome to achieve its proposed purpose?
3. **Promote unity and inclusion:** Does the policy hold the prospect of reducing the polarization and fragmentation of the society due to race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin?
4. **Care for the poor:** Does the policy provide good news for the poor? Does it reverse the trend toward an ever-widening gap between rich and poor?
5. **Protect the Vulnerable:** Is the policy good for children, the elderly, and the disadvantaged? Does it show sensitivity to the spirit of the golden rule?
6. **Guard the Freedom of Thought and Discussion:** Does the policy provide for free press, free discussion, and the expression of dissent, along with fair and just methods of participation in the democratic process?
7. **Respect Other Nations and Peoples:** Does the policy encourage respect for peoples and nations other than our own? Does it respect the fundamental dignity and rights of every human being? Does it use diplomacy as a valued instrument of statecraft in resolving international conflicts and refrain from unilateral military actions for empire-building and domination strategies?
8. **Ensure Stewardship of Creation:** Is the policy supportive of strong measures to insure ecological responsibility and sustainability?
9. **Cherish the Human Family:** Does the policy practice good global citizenship involving respect for all cultures and nations, and collective responsibility for the common good of the global community? Does it refrain from nationalism, militarism or imperialism based on a sense of national superiority?
10. **Provide Moral Leadership:** Does the policy lead by example, doing the right thing and holding the right lessons for our children and our citizens? Does it promote a more ethical society, and uphold trust in public offices?



The world doesn't really like George W. Bush. This isn't just Bush-bashing; it is a defining geo-political fact - a fact beyond the realm of partisan preferences. Bush has polarized America, but what may be less evident to election-overdosed Americans is that Bush is polarizing the world. Increasingly, it is Bush and company against the rest.



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In this climate of escalating global divisiveness, U.S. churches are in a better position than anyone to show the world a friendly, humble face of America - and of Christianity, since to many Bush is also the face of Christianity.

If many global citizens feel the U.S. thumbed its nose at them by re-electing Bush, they are increasingly thumbing their noses right back. Consider vehement anti-Bush protests in Europe, increasing victories for Latin American leaders running against U.S.-backed candidates, trade delegations from southern countries walking out on the U.S. and company at trade talks in Cancun, and Canadian politicians bad-mouthing Bush to popular acclaim.

With the prospect of four more years of escalating volatility and division, the church has an opportunity to bring people together. After all, reconciliation is our domain. Beyond the realm of government-to-government officialdom, the world needs to see an overwhelmingly humble and compassionate side of America. Who better to lead the way than the church?