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WISE AS SERPENTS: CHRISTIANS, POLITICS, AND STRATEGIC VOTING

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Imagine it is Election Day 2004. You know for whom you will cast your vote for the office of President of the United States. You are not sure, however, about who will get your vote for other offices up for election, such as those in the U.S. Senate, House of Representatives, state senate, state assembly, and city council. You consider yourself to be a social conservative, and so you conclude that your best strategy is to vote for every socially conservative candidate regardless of his or her party affiliation. This is the strategy some well-meaning Christian personalities offer on their radio programs and in their literature. It would be a mistake, however, to follow this strategy.

Caesar's Coin. In order to explain what you probably think is a completely outrageous suggestion, we have to take an excursion into the Bible as well as the nature of the American government. The New Testament speaks very little about government and the Christian's responsibility as a citizen; nevertheless, there is one particular passage that is cited most often in this regard. Jesus, in a familiar scene, is confronted with an apparent dilemma by the disciples of the Pharisees:

"Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." At that he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." (Matt. 22:11-13 NAB)

The dominant understanding of this passage is that Jesus was instructing His audience that the church and government have jurisdiction over different spheres of authority. I believe this understanding is largely correct; however, those who present it often miss the subtle and political implications of what Jesus said. He asked whose image was on the coin. The answer was, of course, Caesar's. There is, however, an unsaid question that begs to be answered: What or who has the image of God on it?¹ If the coin was under the authority of Caesar because it bore his image, then we are under the authority of God because we bear His image. Good governments, nevertheless, ought to be concerned with the well-being of their citizens, and these citizens correctly believe that their well-being is best sustained by a just government. It follows that both government and the church, though having separate jurisdictions, share a common obligation to advance the well-being of those who bear God's image.

The Nature of American Government and Politics. The United States is a constitutional republic of separated powers. By "constitutional republic" I mean that the United States is a nation whose government is based on an authoritative document, the Constitution, in which the government's powers and the rights of its people are enumerated. By "separation of powers" I mean that each government of the United States, whether federal, state or local, and each branch of those governments, whether executive, legislative, or judicial, has its own scope of authority and powers unique to itself. This places limits on governments and reduces the likelihood of tyranny and despotism.

From the very beginning and through most of its history, two parties have dominated American electoral politics. Today, the two parties are Republican and Democrat, each holding to contrary points of view on a variety of issues that are important to Christians such as the moral status of the unborn, gay rights,

public education, constitutional interpretation, judicial appointments, and the relationship between religion and government. There are, of course, members in each party who do not act in agreement with their party's platform (i.e., stated views), largely because of the demographics and cultural history of the part of the country in which they were elected. One finds, for example, the phenomena of the "liberal Republican" in the Northeast (e.g., Rudolph Giuliani) and the "conservative Democrat" in the South (e.g., Zell Miller).

In legislative bodies (i.e., those that make laws) the majority party is essentially in control of legislation that is put to a final vote. This is because the majority party controls the leadership of the legislative body, which includes the chairmanships of committees that decide what sort of legislation will be debated and voted on by the entire body. If, for example, the majority party in the U.S. Senate has a platform that affirms abortion rights, then that party's policy preferences on abortion will be advanced even if a few U.S. Senators who are members of that party are not supporters of abortion rights.

Strategic Voting. The goal of both the church and the state is to advance the public good. That seems simple enough. Some Christians would conclude, therefore, that they should always vote for the candidate, regardless of that candidate's party affiliation, whose views most closely line up with what advances the public good. This voting strategy, however, ignores the realities of our constitutional republic and its two-party system. Consider the following illustration.

Suppose that Mr. Smith is running against Mr. Jones for the state assembly (a law-making body). Mr. Smith is strongly pro-abortion while Mr. Jones is strongly pro-life. The typical conservative Christian who considers only this factor would say that one ought to vote for Mr. Jones. Imagine, however, that Mr. Smith belongs to the pro-life party, which holds the majority (26) of the 51 seats in the assembly. Mr. Jones, on the other hand, belongs to the pro-abortion party, which holds the minority (25) of the seats in the assembly. If Mr. Smith wins, then the balance of power in the assembly stays with the pro-life party, and it can maintain leadership of the assembly, fill committee chairmanships with members of the pro-life party, and hold hearings and votes on legislation that is important to pro-lifers. On the other hand, suppose that Mr. Jones wins. Even though Mr. Jones is pro-life, the balance of power would shift to the pro-abortion party. The pro-abortion party would now control the assembly leadership and thus the assembly committees that decide what sort of legislation gets out of committee; therefore, if Mr. Jones is elected, it actually harms the pro-life cause. In fact, if you think that pro-life legislation advances the public good (as many Christians do) — that such legislation may help protect the smallest creatures who bear God's image — then, ironically, voting for Mr. Jones may be *inconsistent* with the implication of Jesus' admonition that the church and the state should be concerned with the good of those who bear God's image.

Consider another example. Suppose the U.S. Supreme Court is only one vote short of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. You, like many Christians, believe that abortion is an evil that not only wrongs unborn children but also tarnishes the souls of the women who elect to have these abortions. Although you realize that overturning *Roe* would not outlaw abortion — for it would merely return the matter to the states as it had been until 1973 — you rightly conclude that this change in the law would permit you and your fellow citizens to pass legislation that would at least protect the unborn and their mothers in your state.

Your political party, however, the pro-life party, is in the midst of a primary race for a U.S. Senate seat currently occupied by a pro-abortion senator who is the minority leader of the Senate judiciary committee. This is the committee that holds hearings on the President's judicial nominations to the federal courts, including the Supreme Court. The primary pits three candidates against each other: Ms. Johnson, a devout pro-life Christian who has made comments in the past that have been interpreted as racist; Mr. Adams, a pro-abortion atheist who is moderate on other issues such as sex education and gay rights; and Mr. Baker, a moderate on abortion (he thinks some legal restrictions are permissible) who is liberal on other issues such as gay rights and school vouchers.

Imagine that you live in a very liberal state, and thus it will be virtually impossible for Ms. Johnson to beat the incumbent senator in the general election. Mr. Adams and Mr. Baker therefore stand a better

chance; however, only Mr. Adams has promised to support the judicial nominees of the President, a strong pro-lifer who thinks that *Roe* was wrongly decided.

Assuming that pro-life laws advance the public good, voting *against* Ms. Johnson, a pro-lifer, and *for* Mr. Adams, a pro-abortion supporter, is strategically wise, for it increases the likelihood that the President's nominees to the federal courts will be approved, and these nominees, which will include future Supreme Court justices, will have an opportunity to rule in ways that advance the public good (or at least put up judicial barriers to harming the public good).

In order to be wise stewards of the gift of self-government in a constitutional republic, we not only have to understand what our theology teaches us about our obligations to the wider community of human persons, but we also have to understand both the nature of our government and its politics. We have to be, in the words of Jesus, "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16 NIV).

— Francis J. Beckwith

NOTES

1. This is an insight Luis Lugo offered in his essay "Caesar's Coin and the Politics of the Kingdom: A Pluralist Perspective," in *Caesar's Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14–15.