

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

REFLECTIONS ON THE 2008 ELECTION

History was made on 4 November 2008! America elected the first African-American president in history. From that perspective, as Americans, we can all feel very proud. It is truly extraordinary! As an American, my heart was stirred and moved as I witnessed Barack Obama and his family on election night. That he was elected is an indication of how far Americans have come in terms of race. It made me personally very proud to be an American. Many evangelicals were very disappointed in the results, but, as Christians, we must trust the providence and sovereignty of God. There are several critical passages of Scripture that come to mind: Daniel 4:17 and 25, where Daniel establishes that God places in power rulers He wishes to accomplish His purposes. I can find no reason why we should see this election any differently. Further, Romans 13:1-7 is a central New Testament passage that affirms obedience and submission to the state as our duty. Finally, it is imperative now that we pray for president-elect Barack Obama. 1 Timothy 2:1-3 is quite central. Here Paul admonishes us to pray for all those “in authority over us, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” I believe we must put our disappointment behind us and fervently pray for Obama. He is going to face enormous challenges and he will need our prayers. I am convinced that we will not agree with some of his policy decisions, but he is our president and, as Titus 3:1-2 commands, we must respect him as the president, even if we disagree with him. Hence, in this *Perspective*, I offer several reflections on what this election means.

- First, this election must remind us of the New Testament’s clear teaching that the Christian does have an obligation toward the state. This is the central point of Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12:13-17, where, when questioned about paying taxes to Rome, He answers that we “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” There are, then, two spheres in the believer’s life. We owe obligation obviously to God and His Kingdom but also to the state, because He created it and it serves His purpose. This passage makes clear that this obligation to the state stems from being a beneficiary of the state. Those who take advantage of the benefits of the state, owe the state a suitable allegiance. In Romans 13:1-7, the Apostle Paul elaborates on Jesus’ argument when he argues that the Christian is to submit to government because God established it. No ruler, president, prime minister or tyrant has power that did not first come from God (see also Daniel 4:17-25). In verses 3 and 4, Paul also argues that the state is to administer justice and thwart evil. This is the principal reason that God created government in the first place (see Genesis 9:5-7). Paul seems to imply that this function of the state is actually conducive to the spread of the gospel. This is manifestly clear in 1 Timothy 2:1-7, the final reason for the Christian’s obligation toward government.

Here the believer is instructed to pray for those in authority in the state, in order that “we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”

That Christians have a responsibility toward the state is now clear, but what exactly is the content of that obligation?

1. The believer owes the state respect. Romans 13:7 and 1 Peter 2:17 both admonish the Christian to honor and respect government as “ministers” of God who have been ordained by Him and are accountable to Him for their solemn trust of promoting justice and thwarting evil. Respect involves treating with full seriousness even individuals who have no respect for the office or their high calling to that office. That dimension, therefore, necessitates administering rebuke and calling to account those rulers who abuse their high office or treat with contempt the office itself.
 2. The believer owes the state, its agents and its duly enacted laws obedience (see Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7). Jesus paid the temple tax and Paul apologized for speaking disrespectfully to a ruler. Further, Jesus’ birth occurred in Bethlehem because Joseph was obedient to an oppressive government demanding a tax-assessing edict. Yet the New Testament mandate is neither slavish nor absolute; we see Peter and John defying the Sanhedrin’s order to stop preaching. The issue apparently to them was clear: We obey the state until it is a sin to obey the state. Here civil disobedience was not merely permitted by God’s Spirit; it was demanded (see Acts 4:19ff; 5:29). If the government therefore commands something that God forbids or forbids something that God commands, we must disobey. That disobedience cannot involve violence nor vandalism, actions that contradict prudence and civil order. Thus, disobedience should never be taken lightly or with undue haste. Christians do have a higher law than that of human government. But God gives human government His seal of approval and disobedience should only be considered with great caution.
 3. The believer must pay taxes (see Mark 12:13-17, Matthew 22:15-22, Luke 20:20-26, Romans 13:6-7). The Christian, in effect, owes some payment in return for the protection and conveniences the state provides. Jesus makes the payment of taxes the fundamental mark of obligation to the state, regardless of its morality or ethical bankruptcy. This is clear because Jesus and Paul were both writing of tax payment to the Roman empire, a corrupt, evil and ethically repulsive state.
 4. The believer must pray for those in authority (see 1 Timothy 2:1ff). Such praying for civil authorities is an essential part of the debt owed, whether the official is pagan or Christian, religiously indifferent or anti-religious, just or unjust. I am often frustrated by Christians who relentlessly criticize governmental officials but rarely, if ever, pray for those officials. God can use praying to effect righteousness in the state’s laws or in bringing an unbelieving governmental official to Jesus Christ. Constructive criticism and calling the state to accountability need to be balanced with fervent, persevering prayer.
- Second, this election should serve as a wake-up-call for evangelicals about the matter of priorities. In a recent essay, Cal Thomas argued that “Too many conservative evangelicals

have put too much faith in the power of government to transform culture.” He goes on: “Thirty years of efforts to use government to stop abortion, preserve opposite-sex marriage, improve television and movie content and transform culture into the conservative evangelical Protestant image have failed. . . Partisan politics clearly have not achieved their objectives. Do [evangelicals] think they can succeed by committing themselves to 30 more years of the same?” As an alternative should evangelicals then drop out of culture and separate from it? That is not the only alternative. Somehow Christians are to be “in the world, but not of the world” (John 17: 13-18). Christians have been removed from the world’s power at conversion (Galatians 6:14) and, because the cross established a judicial separation between believers and the world, Christians are citizens of a new kingdom (Philippians 3:20). The Bible both discourages absolute physical separation from the people of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9,10), yet instructs believers to witness to this world (John 17:15), all the while keeping from the influence of the world (James 1:27; 1 Corinthians 7:31; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15). How does one resolve this tension? Our model is Jesus. He separated from the evils of His culture, identified with its institutions and people, yet sought to transform it from the inside out. By adding to His deity humanity, Jesus identified with the world, its social order, its people and its customs. Similarly, the church is to do the same. At bottom, this is the heart of Christ’s admonition that we are “to be in the world but not of the world.” Christ separated Himself from the evil distortions of the created order. He had nothing to do with the distorted use of wealth, social position or political power. Yet, through His death, burial and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and Satan and guarantees the world’s transformation when He returns in glory and power. Similarly, the church is to move culture’s institutions toward genuine, biblical righteousness, all the while anticipating His final transforming work when He returns. Revival and renewal will never come from Washington; it will only come as people are transformed by Jesus Christ. The way to change culture is to change people. For that reason, the 2008 election could serve as a reminder of what is really important to our Savior—transforming people. We do not do that through political power. The last 30 years have taught us that. We do it through the gospel. For that reason, perhaps it is time to re-order our priorities. We do not separate from the culture; we identify with it and its institutions, including the political order. But we do so with the clear understanding of what government can do. It does not transform people, only Jesus does that. We separate from the evils of culture, yet identify with its institutions and its people, all the while seeking to be the agents of God’s transforming grace. That is our agenda!

- Third, how did Obama win? In terms of the religious vote, Obama made huge strides. (1) He won 54% of the Catholic vote, compared with Bush four years ago who won 52% of that vote. (2) He won 25% of the evangelical vote, compared with Kerry in 2004 who got only 21%. (3) Among those who go to worship services only a few times a year, Obama won that group by 61%. (4) Among African- and Hispanic-Americans, Obama crushed McCain. And both of these ethnic groups are overwhelmingly religious and faithful in terms of going to worship services. In short, it could be argued, that Obama has put together a new “faith coalition” that could be rather formidable for the future. Evangelicals still voted overwhelmingly Republican but less so than in 2004. In all other religious categories, Obama made enormous strides.

- Finally, a few thoughts about the Republican Party. It is clear that the Party is no longer the party of George W. Bush. But it also never seemed to be the party of John McCain. It is probably an understatement to say that the party is in a state of confusion and is in an identity crisis. Consider these items:
 1. The Party was one of the most united and disciplined of modern parties. But no longer. It is divided and has no significant leader. The rifts are real and will no doubt grow in the weeks and months to come.
 2. Is Sarah Palin the wave of the future? She undoubtedly represents the values of small-town evangelicals and she is intuitively anti-establishment. But is that where the Party needs to go?
 3. Is the red state versus blue state model for elections still viable? Certainly, the results of the election would raise some serious questions about that model. Obama broke it!
 4. The changing demographics of America will force the Party to change. It must pay attention to the growing population centers of Hispanics and African-Americans.
 5. What is the ideological character of the Party? Is it still conservative? Further, in today's economic and financial crisis, what exactly does conservative mean? Michael Gerson writes: "The issues of the moment—income stagnation, climate disruption, massive demographic shifts and health care access—seem strange, unexplored land for many in the movement." What are the first principles of the 21st century conservative movement?

The Republican Party is in search of a strong, energetic leader and an identity. Since the election only just occurred, no one can determine who the next leader will be nor what its identity will be. But there is no question that the Republican Party needs to answer both questions—and soon.

See Cal Thomas's editorial in the *Omaha World Herald* (9 November 2008); Sam Tanenhaus in the *New York Times* (6 November 2008); Steven Waldman, *Christianity Today* Politics Blog (5 November 2008); and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 53-56 and 19-25.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

THE NATIONAL DEBT AND OBAMA'S POLICY OPTIONS

Because Obama won both the popular and the electoral vote by significant margins, he can probably claim a mandate. However, the economic realities of the American economy will make it very difficult for him to fulfill many of his promises. There is no greater evidence of such a constraint than the national debt. For example, the Treasury Department will tap financial markets for \$550 billion in the final three months of 2008 and another \$368 billion in the first three months of 2009. Economists predict that the total borrowing by the federal government during the current fiscal year, which ends 30 September 2009, could surpass \$1.5 trillion!! In other words, the US national debt will have increased by 25% in one year. Given this reality, it could be very difficult for Obama to pursue additional spending or tax cuts, both of which he promised to do.

Why is the debt growing so astronomically? Obviously, the recession has slowed individual income and corporate income tax receipts. Outlays are rising for unemployment insurance, food

stamps, and other such programs. Further, the US government is embarking on a \$700 billion program to purchase distressed assets from Wall Street and invest in financial firms—all requiring the use of borrowed money. In addition, Congress will no doubt pass a new stimulus package that could exceed \$150 billion. That money will come from borrowed funds.

That this is troublesome is a given. What is even more of a concern for the near future is that Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security will all face significant shortfalls. As the population continues to age, all three programs will face huge deficits. Where will the government get that money? In short, it is difficult to be optimistic about the near- or long-term future of the American economy. Even more important for now is what Barack Obama wants to do in terms of health care, an alternative energy policy and his ambitious tax cut agenda. No one can realistically see how he can pay for all these with the deficit accelerating so quickly. This is part of the immense challenge Obama will face as he assumes office in January 2009. Perhaps he should look all of us in the eye and say, “I am going to need your help. We are entering a period of time when we will all need to sacrifice. Things cannot remain the same. We cannot continue to do things the way we have always done them. That is part of the ‘change’ I have been talking about. I am calling on all of us to sacrifice for the common good.” In my opinion, he needs to talk straight to the American people. We will see if he has the courage to do just that.

See Jon Hilsenrath’s very helpful article in the *Wall Street Journal* (6 November 2008).