

NEW BAPTIST COVENANT

INTEREST WORKSHOPS

Faith and Public Policy

Thursday, Jan. 31/08

2:00-3:15pm and 3:45-5:00pm

Presentation Room: B406

Conversation Room: B408

Presenter: Lois Mitchell

Good afternoon. It's a privilege to be here to talk about Faith and Public Policy. This is an issue that's becoming increasingly critical as we consider the effects of globalization on all nations and people groups of the world. I'm very conscious of being a "Canadian" on the panel. Let me start by saying that there is no consensus in Canada amongst evangelicals – or even Baptists – on this issue. I'm not an authority on this topic and I don't claim to represent a "Canadian perspective". But here I am!

A few years ago I was trying to define and articulate a vision for Christian witness within our denomination. We were dealing with a number of sensitive and divisive public policy issues – including especially the legal recognition of same-sex unions in Canada. The federal government held hearings across the country and various Christian agencies made presentations to the committee. I prepared and presented a brief on behalf of Canadian Baptist Ministries and I heard or read many presentations made on behalf of other Christian denominations and agencies. Many of them were blatantly angry, aggressive and defensive. Some were conciliatory.

As I reflected on this, I identified four distinct Christian responses to the challenges of pluralism. Each one has a different impact when it comes to public policy. Jesus is described as being full of grace and truth so I used **GRACE** and **TRUTH** as axes, forming four quadrants. The four responses are:

1. **ACCOMMODATION** which produces syncretism (a blending of two or more cultural perspectives);
2. **WITHDRAWAL** which leads to isolation;
3. **CONFRONTATION** which typically results in alienation; and
4. **ENGAGEMENT** which I believe leads to influence.

But we don't share a common perspective on **TRUTH**. Some see truth as an objective reality that's fixed and static – something we can possess – something we can hold in our hand. From this perspective, the issues ARE black and white. Those who see truth this way have a tendency to stake a claim or plant a flag when they discover truth or some portion of it. And then they shift their attention away from *seeking* truth and focus on *defending* it. It's all very well intentioned but that doesn't make it an appropriate expression of discipleship.

The reality, I think, is that truth is beyond us and that our perspective is always shaped and limited by our culture. Jesus said that **He is truth**, but that doesn't resolve the issue because our knowledge and understanding of Jesus is culturally conditioned and culture is inherently biased in its own favor – a concept sociologists call ethnocentrism.

Our heritage as North American evangelicals has promoted a *culture of certainty*. We've tended to equate certainty with faith and conviction. We've encouraged people to “know **what** they believe” and to “know **why** they believe”. This sounds sensible enough but it produced many Christians who are SO sure of what they believe that they are neither seeking Christ – they've already found him so no need to keep seeking! – nor able to

engage in meaningful dialogue with people of other faiths or no faith. This makes it very difficult for them to collaborate on the formulation of public policy within pluralistic societies.

We also live in a “make it happen” world where success is measured in terms of outcomes and leadership is evaluated in terms of tangible measures of effectiveness. There’s a great temptation for us to take matters into our own hands – to assume that we know God’s purpose and plan and then to assume that God is counting on us to ensure that His agenda is accomplished. These are dangerous assumptions.

Even the original disciples, who had the unique privilege of literally walking with Jesus, were constantly surprised by the way Jesus did things. From start to finish Jesus confounded their expectations. But we tend to forget that in our enthusiasm for carrying out God’s will here and now – we pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and then we think it’s up to us to see that that happens. Humility and uncertainty look and feel like weaknesses.

In the interest of time, I’m going to make a few remarks - each one of which could be the subject of lengthy discussion. These points are not distinct and independent statements, but rather pieces of a puzzle.

- ❖ Jesus came preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God – He said that the Kingdom of God is near, or at hand (Mark 1:15, for example); but he also said that His Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Note that it is not **of** this world but Jesus does not imply that it is not **in** this world.
- ❖ Jesus came to free His people from spiritual oppression, not to establish an earthly Kingdom (empire) or overthrow the Roman oppressors (see Acts 1:6-8);

- ❖ We are called to be witnesses (both locally and globally) – an ongoing incarnational presence of Christ IN the world – part of Christ’s body of believers, citizens of God’s eternal and global kingdom;
- ❖ By the power of Christ in us, we are to live according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God (spelled out most succinctly in the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7), even as we live in human societies that are in rebellion against God;
- ❖ We are not called to **reform** secular culture; rather through obedience to Christ’s teaching and example, we have the assurance of **transformation** of our own hearts and even of our communities. Transformation is not **our** agenda but a consequence of our **obedience** – not something WE do, but something that God does, through us and in ways which are often beyond our understanding;
- ❖ Our ultimate purpose is life everlasting in the Kingdom of God – a present reality and future hope. We need to be sure that we don’t abandon this vision and simply settle for making the world a better place! This is not to say that we have no concern for this world but that our concern for this world is best served by passionate obedience to Christ;
- ❖ We need to remember that the battle is not against flesh and blood – that is, it’s NOT against people who have a different view or opinion than we do – but “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). We need to know the enemy!
- ❖ Therefore, we are to live our faith publicly with joy and humility, realizing what Jesus meant when He said that we must take up our cross daily and follow Him (Luke 9:23) – following Jesus is not easy – our vision of the Kingdom is limited and for now, we see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12);
- ❖ In North America we need to let go of the assumption that our “prosperity” is an indication of a position of favor with God. Is it accurate to say that we have been “blessed by God”? Is it possible that we have taken matters into our own hands and have secured our place in the world, not by obedience to Christ but by a distortion of

His word? Or, if it IS true that God has blessed us, are we using those blessings responsibly or are we hoarding them for ourselves?

- ❖ If Christ showed any favoritism it was to the poor and marginalized. As His followers, we need to emulate that bias, both locally and globally. Our frame of reference is not our own community, province, state or country. Our frame of reference must be global rather than local or national.

So then, what ought to be the relationship between Christian faith and public policy?

There are those who believe that Christians ought to use their faith and whatever means they find effective to shape public policy so that our social life in civil society is ordered according to biblical principles. From this perspective it's all about secular power and influence, about making sure the right candidates get elected and pressuring politicians to vote in a particular way on issues that we feel strongly about. It's about mobilizing believers to "take a stand" and to "speak out", to stem the tide of evil in our communities and nations.

Craig Carter, in his book Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective, (2006:21), says:

Too many Christians regret the demise of Christendom; they need not. We need to face reality: Christendom did not work. There is no way it ever could have worked... When the Roman emperors offered the church the job of being the religion of the empire, the bishops of the church should have done what Jesus did in the wilderness when the devil made him the same offer.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who see politics as an inherently corrupt and irredeemable system. They believe that Christians who have too much interest in, or involvement with, politics and/or public policy are playing too close to the flame.

I think both of these positions - the Christendom approach and the head-in-the-sand-wait-for-Jesus-to-return approach - miss the point. Yet between them they account for much of the contemporary evangelical Christian response to public policy. There is another option.

Bob Briner, author of a book called Final Roar says this:

Christians are to offer the peculiar and particular insights of Christianity and the Bible. We are not to sell them, force them, develop power blows to install them, sue to have them enacted, or legislate them into being. We are to *offer* them. Of course, in order to be able to make an offer, one must be positioned to do so, to show up at the place in the public square where offers can be made and accepted or rejected.

Briner says that “when we try to change the world using the ways of the world, we will always fail”. Wise words indeed! Didn’t Jesus say that God’s ways are not our ways?

I believe it’s an expression of our discipleship to come to the table – to be involved with decisions that affect our common life. As followers of Christ I believe that we must come to the table, speak the language of the table [to be clear on this point – we should leave the “thus saith the Lord” language in our sanctuaries and translate the truths of God’s commands into the shared language of secular society], listen with real respect, acknowledge the complexities of the political process, and actively pursue peace and justice as best we understand these principles, with humility. We don’t need to grasp at power or look out for ourselves. We don’t need to strategize to get our “agenda” through. We don’t need to shout or threaten.

If we are to be advocates for the poor and marginalized, we must speak **with** them - and occasionally **for** them while we are working to empower them so that their voices can be

heard. To do this well we must **know** them and understand the issues and systems which make them vulnerable.

Christians are often involved in compassionate or charitable ministries to alleviate the suffering of the poor in our communities. We establish soup kitchens and food and clothing banks. We offer programs for single parents or widows and support groups for those who are grieving or who have suffered abuse and for those who are striving to overcome addictions. These are important and appropriate responses to the immediate needs of the marginalized and vulnerable in our communities.

We also respond to global needs – sending money and volunteers to disaster stricken areas of the world. Mission agencies often combine proclamation of the gospel with community development work and the provision of micro-credit loans to address the material needs of people who have very limited resources. Christians regularly demonstrate the love of Christ at home and abroad. But is this enough?

Having compassion is the first step in effective intervention. In their book What Can One Person Do? Faith to Heal a Broken World, Sabina Alkire and Edmund Newell identify five spiritual phases of engagement:

1. a strong sense of **compassion** for those in need;
2. a strong sense of **responsibility** for the plight of the poor;
3. a strong sense of **respect** for the poor as our equals before God;
4. a strong sense of **humility** as we recognize the limits and importance of our work;
and
5. a strong sense of **dependence** on God to bring all efforts to fruition.

Notice that compassion is the **first** level and yet too many Christians assume that this is all there is. Our understanding of the gospel has allowed us – even encouraged us – to see compassion and charity as the full expression of our faith in the face of injustice.

Charity is responding to immediate needs. Justice is correcting the systems which are responsible for creating and perpetuating those needs. It's easy for us to see opportunities to act charitably. Even though we have elaborate social safety nets in Canada and the US, there are still many many needs right in our own neighborhoods as well as in developing countries. Advocating for justice is much more difficult than engaging in acts of charity but it is an integral part of the mandate of discipleship.

Nelson Mandela made this comment at a Make Poverty History event in 2005:

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.

We can and we must influence public policy. It's time to step up and get engaged – to broaden and deepen the dialogue so that fundamental issues of justice become part of the process. Public policy reflects and reinforces the ideological biases and presuppositions of a society. It is through public policy that we organize ourselves to facilitate social order. Public policy establishes parameters within which to promote the “common good”. But who decides? Too often it's about power and the ability to influence and harness public perception and public agendas to support the status quo - which inevitably favors the rich.

I understand that we can never completely divorce ourselves from our national identity. We are, in fact, tribal creatures and fallen humanity persists in finding ways to divide people into ingroups and outgroups – us and them. But God cannot be owned or

controlled by any political party or country. Didn't Jesus spend much of his time on this earth erasing lines and breaking down barriers?

The gap between the rich and the poor is growing in both Canada and the United States. And the gap between the global rich and the global poor is also widening. As Christians this ought to offend us deeply. As Christians, we need to recognize the trap that has been set in our public life that shifts attention away from justice for all humanity and focuses rather on the protection of our own individual rights and freedoms.

We know that Christ intended for His people to be a counter cultural force in society. Christians have been diligent to stake out our territory on issues like abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, addictions, etc. But what have we had to say about issues of profound economic and environmental injustice? We may feel smug in discussions of narrow moral issues but where have we been when the fates of whole people groups are being decided, or when policies are quietly agreed to by global power brokers that exploit both resources and people who have no voice?

As we come to the table, we must be informed about the issues being discussed. For many Christians, this may be intimidating. How are we to understand the issues which produced the Rwandan genocide, or more currently, the situation in Darfur? How are we to know whether or not the privatization of water is a means by which water can be provided more efficiently or yet another way to exploit the poor? How can we be expected to understand the science behind the current climate change concerns? How can we evaluate the effectiveness of agencies like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank? How can we know how to address the situation of homelessness or drug abuse in our own neighborhoods?

We live in a world where we have instant access to information on virtually every subject we can imagine, literally at our fingertips. As we begin to see our participation in civil

society as a core mandate of our discipleship, we will discover that all of these issues are actually related. We need passionate disciples of Christ who are economists, biologists, ethicists, political scientists, lawyers, teachers, etc. etc. – all living out their faith within their professions. But it's not just a call to professionals.

At Canadian Baptist Ministries we're developing a ***Just Living*** challenge that will help individuals and churches begin to be more intentional about how we live. The purpose of this initiative is to help people evaluate their attitudes and actions in light of the biblical command to be good stewards of the environment and of our financial resources – and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It will – we hope - stimulate conversations about faith and justice and thus provide the push many of us need to get more involved in public policy discussions on all kinds of issues. We'll use this campaign to encourage the virtues of redemptive generosity, hospitality and simplicity.

The bottom line is this: the earth cannot sustain the way of life that we have come to feel is our due. It cannot sustain it for us and it certainly cannot sustain it for the entire population of the planet. The counter cultural movement that ought to be inspired by our faith in Christ and our longing to serve Him as disciples in this world, is long overdue.

I'm always a bit cautious when we North Americans – even we Christians - speak as though we have the answers and that impoverished people and nations should trust us to do what's right. The day is quickly coming when the backlash against the rich of the world will make it very hard for us to have any credibility – but even then – when persecution comes – we will need to remember that God IS in control.

Global statistics are alarming but we are not without hope. There is no need for us to feel overwhelmed. In *What Can One Person Do?*, Sabina Alkire and Edmund Newell quote a prayer entitled “A World Without Walls”. Here's a portion of that prayer:

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work... We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in knowing that. This enables us to do something and do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way and an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, that that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.

This is a **GREAT** time to be the church, but it's not an easy time. Our biggest challenge may be to shake off old ideas and habits – some of them which we have absorbed from our culture and some of them from our church traditions. Christians who are full of grace and humbly seeking truth will have much to contribute as humanity seeks solutions to both localized and global issues.

Christians should be involved in the formulation of public policy at all levels of government, but only insofar as we are willing to speak principles of justice and mercy into the dialogue, with humility. The world needs the prophetic voice of Christians from all corners of the earth – from the rich and the poor, from the marginalized and the powerful. May God give us wisdom and grace!

Christian Responses to Pluralism

(Lois Mitchell: Faith and Public Policy Interest Session, Jan. 31/08)



etibleteacher.com

Joshua Miller

With thanks to Malcolm Beckett