



What Makes John Kasich So Sanctimonious?

He'll need better talking points when he reaches the Pearly Gates.

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The governors were supposed to be the Republican candidates to beat this presidential cycle. It hasn't turned out that way. Bobby Jindal, Scott Walker, and Rick Perry have all departed the field. Michael Huckabee is running a faint shadow of his 2008 race. Chris Christie is desperately putting all of his effort into New Hampshire.

And John Kasich seems most interested in winning the contest for Most Sanctimonious. He isn't even likely to win the Ohio primary, let alone capture the GOP presidential nomination.

There was a time when Kasich looked like a serious contender. Two-term governor of a large swing state. Former congressman and budget committee chairman. In the investment world in between. An "everyman" persona. What could possibly go wrong?

The governor has gone out of his way to offend everyone, especially those who believe in shrinking government. He's this year's Jon Huntsman, without the charm. Kasich garnered the most negative reaction from focus groups after the last debate. He has taken an "interesting" approach to campaigning.

Perhaps Kasich's strangest electoral ploy has been to present himself as God's candidate. Criticize him for his spending and he'll tell you that God wants it. Unfortunately for him, too many Republican voters actually read their Bibles to believe him.

Two years ago he decided to expand Medicaid eligibility in his state. How to best provide health care for those with lesser incomes is a tough issue. But Medicaid is a mess, costing a lot while discouraging physician participation with low reimbursements and offering beneficiaries a poor standard of care. There obviously are good reasons not to expand the program to ever more people.

But Kasich didn't stop at trying to make a practical case for his proposal. Instead, he trashed opponents as "hard-hearted or cold-hearted." After pushing the line that Medicaid expansion was

the only alternative to leaving the poor “out in the street,” he declared that God, or at least heaven’s gatekeeper, St. Peter, was for it. He told a state legislator: “Now, when you die and get to the, get to the, uh, to the meeting with St. Peter, he’s probably not gonna ask you much about what you did about keeping government small, but he’s going to ask you what you did for the poor. Better have a good answer.”

Kasich doubled down a year later when challenged personally over his plan for Medicaid expansion: “I don’t know about you, lady, but when I get to the pearly gates, I’m going to have an answer for what I’ve done for the poor.” This year he went on Meet the Press where he declared: “As a big fan of that handbook that the Lord’s handed us, the Old and New Testament, there’s a lot in there ... about our need to take care of the widowed, the poor, the disadvantaged.” He said his measures would give these people “a lift and an opportunity.”

When questioned in the first presidential debate over his contention that God told him to do it—what reason is there to believe “you won’t use your Saint Peter rationale to expand every government program?”—he provided no response. He simply defended his actions as governor. But he doubled down while campaigning. He offered to buy Bibles for his critics: “There’s a book. It’s got a new part and an old part. They put it together. It’s a remarkable book. If you don’t have one, I’ll buy you one. And it talks about how we treat the poor.”

Kasich calls himself a “compassionate conservative,” but his understanding of compassion is that of a very modern liberal. Years ago Marvin Olasky wrote how compassion traditionally meant to “suffer with.” Over the years it turned into writing a check. Now it means making other people write checks. The more you squeeze the taxpayers, the more compassionate politicians like Kasich apparently feel.

Worse is his understanding of Scripture. Instead of giving away Bibles he might spend more time reading his own. Paul wrote the Corinthian church: “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love.” (2 Corinthians 8:9) Indeed, when the Macedonian churches gave, it reflected the grace of God, not government: “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” (2 Corinthians 8:2)

What government does is policy, not compassion. It should be justified as such, not covered with religious rhetoric when politicians make others give.

Worse, though, is the fact that Kasich apparently has not lived up to his own rhetoric by helping personally. In the moving vision of the separation of the sheep and the goats Christ’s (not St. Peter’s!) statement is, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Jesus did not say whatever you voted to take from your neighbors for the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and imprisoned you did for me. He did not say whatever bureaucracy you voted to create to help those in need you did for me. Indeed, what made the famed Samaritan good was personally helping the person in front of him, not voting in the next election for a politician promising to create a government agency.

Someone else who confused compassion with coercion was Walter Mondale's 1984 running-mate, Geraldine Ferraro, who accused Ronald Reagan of not being a "good Christian" because he sought to shut down the Department of Education. What that bureaucracy had to do with the poor was left to people's imaginations. Moreover, while none of the candidates had given that much to charity, Ferraro's contributions were negligible over a period of years. She had done virtually nothing personally "for the least of these brothers of mine."

Kasich has not released his recent tax returns. However, we have them for 2008, which he provided during the 2010 gubernatorial campaign. On an income of nearly \$1.4 million, which made him one of those dreaded one percenters, he donated \$27,326, not even two percent. While Christ freed us from a legalistic obligation to make the Biblical tithe, Paul explained that "just as you excel in everything ... see that you also excel in this grace of giving." (2 Corinthians 8:7) Kasich may be a good Catholic, but he appears to have missed his priest's homilies on charity. (So, too, did fellow Catholic Vice President Joseph Biden, who came in under two percent for charity in 2014. President Obama did much better, hitting almost 15 percent.)

Providing medical care for the poor isn't an easy task and Kasich's Medicaid reforms have been lauded by some. But that is the ground on which it should be defended: good policy. If he can't do that, he shouldn't try to wrap himself in Biblical rhetoric. Whatever Medicaid expansion is, it is not a measure of Christian compassion and charity.

Kasich isn't likely to be the GOP presidential nominee. But he still might attract some interest as a vice presidential nominee. His prickly determination to be the most obnoxious candidate on stage should give pause. Along with his claim to be doing God's work. Whether cynical or delusional, it's a claim that can't be taken seriously. In fact, it should disqualify him from sitting in the Oval Office.

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