

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Christians Should Vote for Competence, Not Faithfulness

Doug Bandow

February 1, 2016

Politicians pander. It's what they do. But Christians seem especially susceptible to those claiming to be their spiritual brethren. It would be better if people of faith focused on candidates' practical ability to perform the duties of what remains a secular office.

With the Iowa caucuses upon us, it seems like every Republican tramping through the snow claims to be a Bible-believing, God-fearing, Jesus-loving Christian. Some trot out their parents; others offer personal conversion stories. Some defend persecuted Christians; others explain their policies in Biblical terms. A gaggle of church leaders promote their favorite presidential wannabe.

It's a fruitless exercise. The Israelites were told to select men who "fear God," (Exodus 18:21), but theirs was an explicit community of faith. Governance of a secular republic with an increasingly diverse and unchurched population is very different.

It's rarely easy to judge whether a particular candidate's faith claims are true. Sometimes his or her behavior suggests otherwise. But we all are flawed, sinful human beings who fall short of God's glory. That's why God told the prophet Samuel: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16: 7)

Both Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum previously ran on their faith in Iowa, though neither has achieved much traction this time. Bobby Jindal made equally explicit claims, but it did him little good and he quit the race. Marco Rubio, another faith claimant, is polling better.

However, Ted Cruz appears to have done the best this year in presenting himself as a committed Christian. His religious tale, including the conversion story of his pastor father, is contained in an

18-minute documentary and is being promoted by David Barton of WallBuilders. By all accounts Cruz is doing well among the most theologically conservative Republicans in Iowa.

Yet McKay Coppins of BuzzFeed reported on doubts about Cruz's faithfulness: "some who worked closely with Cruz earlier in his career have been puzzled by his recent transformation into a culture warrior. 'He was never particularly religious as far as I knew,' said one aide who worked for him in the Texas solicitor general's office. 'I'm not even sure he went to church'."

Moreover, in late 2014 Cruz used a conference on persecuted Christians from the Middle East, among the most vulnerable people on the planet, as a campaign prop. Ignoring their plight, he instead appealed to Christian Zionist voters -- usually Republicans who care more about the modern, secular state of Israel than Arab Christians who suffer therein.

Cruz also gave less than one percent of his income to charity between 2006 and 2010. Although Jesus freed believers from legalistic application of the Old Testament tithe, the Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthian church about the "rich generosity" of Macedonian believers and how "God's will" was that Christians "excel in this grace of giving." (2 Corinthians 8: 2, 5, 7) Especially for someone who emphasizes private over public solutions, his personal failure to do more for the needy raises questions for voters of faith. Mike Huckabee, who apparently has faithfully tithed, observed: "It's hard to say God is first in your life if he's last in your budget."

Ohio Gov. John Kasich has not been talking about his spiritual beliefs, but he defended his expansion of Medicaid as what God demanded. It's a strained reading of Scripture, alas. After all, the Apostle Paul explicitly refused to command Christian churches to support one another, though he did say he wanted "to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others." (2 Corinthians 8: 7). He did not include in that ranking Rome's role in raising taxes for a public welfare program. Medicaid is policy, not charity, despite the governor's confusion.

Donald Trump has been doing his best to pander without a carefully crafted story. One suspects that the Donald's heart just isn't into religious things. Christians struggle with the injunction against divorce; Trump doesn't appear to have hesitated. Running casinos with strip clubs is unusual "fruit" from a Christian walk and represents a Christian witness best described as unique. Wealth is not evil, but it is a snare, and Trump certainly seems to enjoy its pursuit. His style of campaigning would appear to be an odd way to be "salt and light" to advance the Christian faith. True, he promised Liberty University students "to protect Christianity," but his concern for religious liberty appears to be newly discovered.

When speaking at Liberty Trump referred to "Two" rather than "Second" Corinthians, which suggests he hasn't spent much time in church or listened to anyone quote the Bible. Indeed, it gives substance to comedian Andy McDonald's imagined version of the Bible according to Trump. For instance, the death of John the Baptist: "Herod's daughter asks daddy for the head of John the Baptist. But really it was her mother, the gold digger. Definitely get a pre-nup on that one. So they bring John's head on a platter, my people tell me a very ornate and luxurious silver platter, no expense spared. Poor bastard though."

How about the rest of the GOP candidates? (Democrats are largely irrelevant to this exercise.) Ben Carson is a Seventh Day Adventist, which worries some evangelicals since his theology appears to be less than orthodox. (In the same way, many were unsettled by Mitt Romney's Mormonism.) What do Jeb Bush, Rand Paul, Chris Christie, Carly Fiorina, and Jim Gilmore (who even knows who he is!) really believe about God? Do they have a personal relationship with Jesus?

The better response than "who knows?" is "who cares?" One's theological views just don't tell much about a person's competence to perform a civil office. Voters should care most about how a candidate would deal with Social Security's insolvency, end America's constant warring in the Middle East, craft U.S. policy toward a rising China, address dependency as well as poverty among the poor, encourage children's access to safe schools which educate, and deal with other serious policy issues. Where the candidates stand on a literal resurrection, baptism by sprinkling, and the nature of the host doesn't matter much for being president.

Indeed, by the most public measures of behavior President Barack Obama appears to be a more faithful Christian than Donald Trump. Yet many political activists who loudly assert their Christian faith are trending toward the Donald. Indeed, Liberty University President Jerry Falwell, Jr., gave a fulsome introduction to Trump, who previously had received an honorary degree from Liberty. Falwell cited Trump's "life of loving and helping others, as Jesus taught in the great commandment" and even compared Trump to Jesus in expressing unpopular opinions.

Falwell later endorsed and campaigned with Trump, without praising the latter's faith. But Falwell offered, well, a singular view of The Donald which generated substantial criticism from other Christian leaders. One was Michael Farris, chancellor of Patrick Henry College and executive director of Jerry Falwell, Sr.'s Moral Majority. John Stemberger, head of Florida Family Action, complained that Trump was "the most immoral and ungodly man to ever run for President of the United States."

An exaggeration, perhaps, but it actually would have been more reassuring had Liberty University invited Trump to speak and The Donald done so, with neither pandering to the other. Trump ain't my cup of tea, but the argument for his candidacy is entirely secular. Nevertheless, Christians should vote for him if they believe him to be the best candidate--and not because they believe him to be a faithful Christian like themselves. The idea of The Donald as America's Moral Role Model and Christian-in-Chief is best left for a vaudeville show.

After years of being manipulated by ambitious politicians, faithful believers should check their credulity at the polling place door. Christians should be interested in political issues for the same reason as their neighbors: a desire to make the world a better place for themselves, their families, and those around them.

There are some issues of special importance to believers--most obviously protecting religious liberty at home and abroad. But Christians shouldn't cast their ballots based on their perceptions of the contenders' religious faith. Martin Luther was right when he declared that he preferred to be governed by a smart Turk than a stupid Christian.

Goodness and faithfulness are important, but no substitute for competence. Believers and nonbelievers alike should choose the best candidate, not the best Christian, for president.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.