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Qualities in political candidates

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I observed late last month that the candidacy of Donald Trump should push pastors — and others looked to for pastoral counsel — to take up the work of political theology and help their parishioners answer questions about Christian participation in politics. At the time of the Iowa caucuses, at least one such question has come sharply into focus:

What qualities should Christian voters seek in political candidates?

Consider how two Christian university presidents have spoken into the presidential campaign in recent weeks. Both are self-described evangelicals; both are political conservatives. (Both have been criticized on this blog.) But when it comes to Donald Trump, Everett Piper and Jerry Falwell, Jr. couldn't disagree more sharply.

First, Falwell — who not only invited Trump to speak in the convocation service at Liberty University (that invitation has been extended to all presidential candidates, with Ben Carson, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders all speaking at Liberty in 2015), but offered a long, gushing introduction:

Matthew 7:16 tells us, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Donald Trump’s life has borne fruit, fruit that has provided jobs to multitudes of people in addition to the many he has helped with his generosity. I have met three of his children in the last week and I can tell you they are personable, kind and humble — successful in their family lives and in their vocations — a real credit to their father and to the Trump family. I have seen first-hand that his staff loves him and is loyal to him because of his servant leadership. In my opinion, Donald Trump lives a life of loving and helping others as Jesus taught in the Great Commandment.

Eight days later, Falwell formally endorsed the businessman. He has since campaigned with Trump in Iowa.

Enter Everett Piper, who told the people of Oklahoma Wesleyan that Trump would never be invited to their campus to speak. Anticipating the counter-argument that any criticism of a leading Republican candidate would only help the Democratic field, Piper stood on principle:

Anyone who is pro-abortion is not on my side. Anyone who calls women “pigs,” “ugly,” “fat” and “pieces of a—” is not on my side. Anyone who mocks the handicapped is not on my side. Anyone who has argued the merits of a government takeover of banks, student loans, the auto industry and healthcare is not on my side. Anyone who has been on the cover of Playboy and

proud of it, who brags of his sexual history with multiple women and who owns strip clubs in his casinos is not on my side. Anyone who believes the government can wrest control of the definition of marriage from the church is not on my side. Anyone who ignores the separation of powers and boasts of making the executive branch even more imperial is not on my side.

I'm a conservative. I believe in conserving the dignity of life. I believe in conserving respect for women. I believe in conserving the Constitution. I believe in conserving private property, religious liberty and human freedom. I believe in morality more than I do in money. I hold to principles more than I yearn for power. I trust my Creator more than I do human character. I'd like to think that all this, and more, makes me an informed and thoughtful citizen and voter. I've read, I've listened and I've studied and there is NOTHING, absolutely nothing, in this man's track record that makes Donald Trump "on my side."

I refuse to let my desire to win "trump" my moral compass. I will not sell my soul or my university's to a political process that values victory more than virtue.

Even bracketing off the question of whether Christians ought to prefer a candidate with a consistent record of supporting conservative policies, isn't Piper right to contend that morality is a crucial consideration in choosing a candidate to support? Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore responded to Falwell's endorsement of Trump by tweeting a link to his denomination's 1998 "Resolution on Moral Character of Public Officials," which affirmed "that moral character matters to God and should matter to all citizens, especially God's people, when choosing public leaders... we urge all Americans to embrace and act on the conviction that character does count in public office, and to elect those officials and candidates who, although imperfect, demonstrate consistent honesty, moral purity and the highest character."

But Falwell has defended his endorsement on other grounds, arguing in the Washington Post that "this nation needs a citizen legislator who is a tough negotiator, one who has gone head to head with the best business minds in the world and won, a businessman who has built companies from the ground up, and who will use those experiences to be tough with China, ISIS and nations that are taking advantage of the United States by stealing our jobs." Tellingly, he emphasized Trump's credentials as a businessman, not his personal faith or moral character:

I do believe Trump is a good father, is generous to those in need, and is an ethical and honest businessman. I have gotten to know him well over the last few years and have come to admire him for those traits.

I do not believe, however, that when Jesus said "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" that he meant we should elect only someone who would make a good Sunday School teacher or pastor. When we step into our role as citizens, we need to elect the most experienced and capable leaders.

As I said, Jimmy Carter is a great Sunday School teacher but the divorced and remarried Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan saved this nation when it was in nearly the same condition as it is today.

Jesus said “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” Let’s stop trying to choose the political leaders who we believe are the most godly because, in reality, only God knows people’s hearts. You and I don’t, and we are all sinners.

Likewise, Cato Institute senior fellow Doug Bandow rolled his eyes, both at Trump’s attempt to pander to evangelicals and at their rationale of those who reject him:

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 confront Washington’s virtual fiscal insolvency, end America’s constant warring in the Middle East, address dependency as well as poverty among the poor, and deal with other serious policy issues.

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, even comparing Trump to Jesus in expressing unpopular opinions.

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.

Please note that I’m making no claims here about the merits of the “entirely secular” argument for Donald Trump to become our 45th president. Nor do I mean to imply that his competitors are obviously more moral. Here I just want to ask the underlying question: on what basis do you cast your vote? If you judge one candidate the most likely to govern effectively but harbor significant reservations about his or her character, how should you mark your ballot?

And while I’ve used the Republican field to set up the question, one could certainly ask it of the Democratic contenders as well. Interestingly, both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders spoke recently about religion and its implications for their candidacies.

Or if it’s hard to detach this debate from the peculiar characteristics of this campaign, go back to the 2008 campaign and decide whether my colleagues Dan Taylor and Mark McCloskey were on to something:

Competence without virtue is poisonous. It simply makes one more effective at doing wrong. Furthermore, being virtuous is, in itself, an expression of competence. Since virtue is a requirement for leadership, a lack of virtue in a leader is a sign of incompetence and grounds enough for rejecting that leadership. Virtue is a personal matter, but it is never wholly a private one, certainly not in a president...

When we are choosing someone to lead us, we do best to look for a “good human being.” Such a person is not likely to be moralistic or pious or politically correct. But he or she needs to be virtuous. Because, over time, nations flourish only to the degree that their collective virtue sustains.

