

Sin, by any other name . . .

By Ed Fowler

Judging by the tide of reassurances that God is in control in recent days, there must be some reason to doubt that God is in control. For one thing, it seems the recent election has exposed a deep racial divide in the Church.

So the Associated Press reports. It quotes Derrick W. Hutchins, "a leader in the Church of God in Christ," one of the largest predominantly black denominations in the country. "Hutchins," the AP relates, "was angered by repeated accusations that he and other black theological conservatives had abandoned their religious beliefs simply to vote for a black candidate. The claims came not only from white Christians, but also from some blacks who backed McCain.

"What they did is insult our biblical understanding," said Hutchins, who voted for Obama and has backed Democrats in past presidential elections. "The white religious right-wing determined that if you didn't vote for McCain, you were not meeting a standard of the Bible."

The dispute turns on Barack Obama's support for abortion and for civil unions for homosexuals and John McCain's opposition to abortion as a means of birth control and his advocacy of an understanding of marriage confined to a man and a woman. While most of the nation focused on the economy during the presidential campaign, a remnant in the Church strove to keep God's commandments in the fore.

The General Council of the conservative Reformed Episcopal Church issued a statement shortly before the election directing "the clergy and laity of the Reformed Episcopal Church to make a political candidate's position on the Sanctity of Human Life the highest priority in discerning for whom to vote regardless of political party represented or office being sought."

One need not be a scholar in the biblical languages to interpret those words as a directive to vote for Senator McCain.

Because nine in 10 African-Americans voted for Senator Obama, it follows that most black church-goers voted for him. And because this group is traditionally conservative with regard to abortion and homosexuality, the charge arose that they were abandoning the biblical witness out of loyalty to a candidate of color. So it was that Mr. Hutchins and others took offense at an affront to their "biblical understanding."

Their offense is well-taken. Years before they had heard the name of Barack Obama, many white evangelicals were decrying the positions taken by white church-goers in the mainline Protestant denominations in favor of abortion on demand, homosexual unions and ordination of homosexuals in the Church. One must hope that these white liberals were offended by the criticism and that blacks who vote for a candidate of any color who enlists in the cause of the enemy are equally affronted.

And one must pray that a Bible-believing Christian of any color will advocate for God's cause and will cry out against all who set aside the Creator's inspired word out of prejudice in favor of a given race. Mr. Hutchins and those of like mind are not the only ones offended by recent events.

The Republican Party has manipulated and abused Christians for years. Knowing our passion for certain issues – and especially the right to life – it has feigned common cause and delivered very little. But even if Senator McCain had proved to be of the same stripe, he would have been an avowedly pro-life leader who might have followed President Bush in his philosophy of nominations of Supreme Court justices. As reserved as a Christian's support for him might be, given the only alternative it could not in good conscience be withheld. A vote for a champion of sin is sin.

Still, much of the Church cannot seem to sort out the issues and come down squarely on God's side. Blacks elevate racial solidarity over God's word. Whites squirm under a weight of guilt for abuses of the past, unable to grasp that slavery and its aftermath made African-Americans sympathetic, not righteous. Blacks, whites and those of other colors are equally stained by sin and equally called to join God in condemning it. Every Christian is a Christian first. Other loyalties may not supersede or compete with allegiance to God.

The predominantly white Evangelical Presbyterian Church distributed to its membership immediately after the election a letter by Rufus Smith of Houston, a black pastor. In the letter he declares, "As a Black American, I am as *proud as a prancing horse* (italics original)." He also issues a plea to others in the denomination.

Mr. Smith writes, "may I ask you to consider pausing this Sunday or next to openly recognize the historic American election this past Tuesday? The question is not whether you or I voted for President-Elect Obama or not, but the issue is the potential capacity of his election to expedite the erasing of the stain, stigma and stereotype in the collective soul and psyche of an indigenous (sic) ethnic group and a nation."

This is not exactly Jeremiah Wright, but one can hear an echo. The denomination, then, invites members to celebrate in a worship service what God condemns in the interest of wiping out a painful collective memory.

To adopt the metaphor prized by liberation theologians, God did in fact lead his people Israel out of bondage in Egypt and to the Promised Land. What must not be missed, however, is that they sinned repeatedly in their liberation and God chastised them severely for it.

God grants no exemption from the consequence for sin based either on race or a history of oppression. Neither must his people – of any color – acquiesce in sin. The real divide in the Church is theological, not racial. Race (in the sense we know it now) is one of those things of this world that is passing away. God calls his people to extol and exalt his word, which stands forever.