

'Their god is their belly . . .'

By Ed Fowler

The presidential race brings to mind a passage from the third chapter of the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Philippians. He writes of the enemies of the cross of Christ: "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (v. 19). These he contrasts with those whose citizenship is in heaven. To them he says, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4:8).

These are the Lord's interests and so must they be the Christian's interests. The question that presents itself regarding the race for president is: Who speaks for the Christians?

As the economic crisis in America has worsened, the rhetoric of both campaigns has revolved almost exclusively around economic themes, or what Scripture calls the things of this world. These are the things the Lord instructs his people to trust God for in the Sermon on the Mount. We are to live in this world by faith that God will provide for all our needs while keeping our attention on the concerns of his eternal kingdom. Because God's got our backs, we can live today as we will in his holy presence.

Neither candidate is addressing those who have aligned their interests with God's interests. Neither is speaking to voters whose main concerns are the protection of the right to life and the sanctity of marriage. Both are telling us they know how to put more jam on our bread.

Timothy Egan of The New York Times traveled to the evangelical bastion of Colorado Springs, Colo., and reported, a bit smugly, that Christian conservatives are finally beginning to see the light of the secularists. In other words, for them as for the culture at large economic issues trump all else.

Egan notes that James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, has reversed his earlier pledge not to endorse John McCain and thrown his qualified support to the Arizona senator. At the church once pastored by the disgraced Ted Haggard, Egan found Haggard's replacement, Pastor Brady Boyd. Egan writes:

"Dobson is yesterday. Boyd is tomorrow, saying that the environment, the poor, and helping those in his church who've lost a job or a house are things that matter to his congregation.

"Abortion? Homosexuals? Bill Ayers?

"To be focused on those things at a time when people are hurting would really be to the detriment of families," said Boyd."

James Carville's classic summation, "the economy, stupid" now applies equally in the Church and in the secular culture, it seems. If McCain is not sufficiently committed to the evangelical cause to win Dobson's enthusiastic endorsement, he retains enough vestigial interest in it to merit Egan's scorn. Noting that Barack Obama has gained enough ground in the conservative stronghold to carry Colorado

and thus the nation, Egan concludes, “That leaves the circus of Sarah Palin and the sad specter of a snarling John McCain fading as they embrace the slippery bonds of the last century.”

I suspect he is right. The new wave of church-goers – and their pastors -- does indeed appear more committed to the economic and environmental issues of the moment than to the eternal moral precepts of God’s word. Their god is their belly. Pastors like Boyd justify their priorities by embracing the cult of family. Long useful for those who deified family to explain away the Lord’s call to a radical Christian life (Luke 14:26; Mark 3:33-35), this cult is now serving those who would elevate the paycheck above the right to life.

Ron Sider of Palmer Seminary produces his “biblically balanced agenda” as a substitute for the Ten Commandments. (He does not, of course, couch the matter in those terms.) Sider lays out (*Prism*, September/October 2008) an array of criteria by which to measure the presidential candidates including the environment, economic justice, racial justice and the sanctity of human life. The Christian is then expected to weigh the merits of the men who would be president according to Sider’s “biblically balanced agenda” rather than God’s biblical agenda.

The candidates need make no distinction between such theologians, pastors and church-goers on the one hand and the secularists on the other. An increasing number of self-professed evangelicals say they will vote for a candidate who advocates abortion and homosexual union. When the Church aligns her views and teaching with the culture’s, political campaigns, freed from the need to address Christians separately, become more streamlined.

But then the matter is reduced to the more pertinent question: Who speaks for God?