

Who's your daddy?

by Ed Fowler

Now comes word from New York that Gov. Eliot Spitzer is considering responding to the economic downturn by "securitizing" the state lottery, which means selling off future proceeds now. In other words, the state would be gambling on its gambling operation. Well, I suppose we must fund our entitlement programs somehow.

America seems to be rethinking government. We appear to have reached a consensus that the role of government is to provide a pain-free existence for all citizens. This attitude comes into increasingly sharper focus at the federal level as the presidential primary season continues. It raises a question worth considering for the Christian.

"Republican" and "conservative" were once virtual synonyms. No more. For their part, liberals are behaving predictably. From Teddy Kennedy to John Edwards, the upper-class ones believe in living sumptuously while taxing the middle class increasingly to provide entitlements for the lower class. The remarkable thing is that Republicans are responding with variations on Spitzer's shell-game idea.

We heard not a peep from his aspiring successors in his own party when President Bush proposed to address the sub-prime mortgage mess with a (partial) federal bailout. Most of the people who have been hurt are suffering as a result of their own covetousness, which is idolatry (Col 3:5). They borrowed on adjustable-rate mortgages more than they could afford to repay when interest rates rose.

Our national ethos once incorporated the idea that pain was a necessary corrective for those who erred. If you overreach, you get knocked down, you learn from your mistake and you do things differently next time. It has been replaced with the notion that the government should rescue us from the consequences of our own excesses. The victimization of the middle class has been achieved, and it has attained the status of Republican doctrine.

Not every wound is self-inflicted, of course. Some lose jobs through no fault of their own. We once accepted that capitalism entails downturns. The business cycle would not be a cycle without them. Dips are normal and inevitable. The economy overall continues to provide greater prosperity for more citizens over time.

Faced now, however, with what is not yet an official recession, Republicans are leading the bipartisan "solution" of an across-the-board tax rebate. We need not be economists to understand that, even in the doubtful event that this maneuver succeeds in stimulating the economy, the bill will come due later. Even the suggestion of a recession has driven us to voodoo. We'll do anything to avoid an owie.

Now compare this trend to that in the "conservative" church. We have drained all sacrifice from a religion grounded in the greatest sacrifice in the history of mankind. Our

sentimentalized Christianity has turned God into a Mr. Fixit whose primary interest is our present happiness. He's here with helpful hints on solving our marriage problems and financial problems and child-rearing problems. Anything to cheer us up. In the church as in politics, conservatives are camped out on the ground liberals recently held or are elbowing into bivouacs they still occupy.

Forget the TV carnival barkers – every movement has its extremists – and even the mainline Protestant denominations that ran round the bend into apostasy some time ago. The evangelical church is racing toward that bend at breakneck speed. Sin? Let's try to stay positive now. The pastor of a Vineyard Church characterized the overriding message of his sermons as "love, love, love, love, love, truth." A sociologist who studied megachurches found they provide "high-intensity experiences of communality with relatively weak systems for insuring individual religious accountability – the assurance of right without the punishment of wrong."

Our God is a God of love. It would be absurd to suggest the contrary. But just as foolish is the idea that he is not equally a God of justice. He hates sin and rebukes sinners. When we err he administers discipline, sometimes very painfully. That's God for you. He hasn't changed much.

In fact, he hasn't changed at all. Our attempts to soften him and improve his electability haven't made a dent. In our country, a Democratic president once could say, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." And be taken seriously. Now our preachers proclaim, "Ask not what you can do for your God. Ask what your God can do for you."

We are in desperate pursuit of an earthly Nirvana – no pain or struggle, privation or sacrifice. Republicans and Democrats, Christians and unbelievers alike want to see government as Daddy. If God were Daddy, we'd need to wait on him. Government can deliver what we want right now. And it won't bother us about sin.

The implications are not elusive. One need not even be a Christian to see them. In *The Transformation of American Religion*, Alan Wolfe, a self-professed unbeliever, considered the church's flight from discussion of sin and decided he should be encouraged. He wrote, "But somehow I am not pleased with this retreat from sin, for the ease with which American religious believers adopt nonjudgmental language and a psychological understanding of wrongdoing is detrimental to anyone, religious or not, who believes that individuals should judge their actions against the highest possible ideals of human conduct, however those ideals are established. One need not be a Calvinist preoccupied with the dark side of human nature to recognize that covenants exist and that we break them only at great cost to ourselves and to others with whom we share our society."