



# Background Paper

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

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## Can We Take Action Without Taking Sides?

by Henry Brinton

*Editor's Note: Henry G. Brinton is senior pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, VA, and a frequent contributor to the Outlook section of The Washington Post where this article first appeared. His book *Balancing Acts: Obligation, Liberation, and Contemporary Christian Conflicts* will be published in early 2006 by CSS Publishing Company.*

Religion and politics are a volatile mix, and were even before Jesus was put to death for blasphemy and sedition almost 2,000 years ago. I kept this in mind in leading my congregation through the observance of Holy Week, and reminding people that Jesus was killed after being accused of both religious and political offenses.

Remembering his actions, I understand why members of the religious right took stands against abortion and gay marriage during last year's election campaign, while moderate and liberal Christians gathered in Washington earlier this year to protest the federal budget and address peacemaking, poverty and environmental issues. All of these people are motivated by deeply held religious values, and they share a desire to put their beliefs into action.

But I worry that Christian social action rarely survives its journey into the world of politics. If the messenger isn't crucified, the community is divided into warring political factions. I know that many pro-life Christians were upset by the removal of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube and that some felt a need to speak out in protest. But I haven't met anyone in church who's feeling particularly good about the full-scale partisan warfare that has erupted around this case – raising the question of whether moral clarity can ever be preserved once lawmakers get involved in an issue.

I'd like to find a way to keep people focused on social action instead of on political posturing, but it's hard to draw a bright line between where social action ends and political activity begins. Over the past winter, Fairfax County faced an urgent need to house the homeless on freezing nights, including families with children who have been sleeping in wooded areas around Fairfax City. Area churches have banded together to offer housing in church buildings, and a number of members of my church, Fairfax Presbyterian, want to join this effort, with a focus on recruiting volunteers to help the homeless now and again next winter.

As a pastor, I love to see my church members united by such a mission, but I wonder if performing these acts of charity is really enough. Part of me wants to go further, to put effort into pressuring the local governments to build more



**The Scriptures contain much that is inherently political. But how can churches stay focused on social action without sliding into divisive partisan politics?**

BFW Photo / Jim Stipe

shelters and affordable housing. Problem is, I've seen the difficulties that arise in my congregation when I ask whether Fairfax City, where my church is located, is doing enough for the homeless. Church members sense that I am wading into political waters, and their own political biases immediately surface. Liberals are anxious to go beyond charitable responses and work to change the system, but conservatives are suspicious of efforts that expand the role of government. While my congregation is united in its charitable desire to help the homeless, there is no consensus about what the church should do beyond providing a place of shelter. Since I've already experienced division over denominational pronouncements on the war in Iraq, I'm reluctant to move in a direction that might fuel further conflict.

Most church members simply don't like to see their pastor involved in politics. Last year, a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll revealed that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that religious leaders should not try to influence politicians' positions on issues. But Jesus himself had an impact on his society from the start of his ministry to its end. Any attempt to behave like him today is going to shake up the status quo, even if partisan politics are carefully avoided.

Fortunately, I do think politics can take a back seat to other concerns when churches make an effort to concentrate on promoting core Christian values, such as hospitality. Diana Butler Bass, author of *Broken We Kneel: Reflections*

on *Faith and Citizenship*, has seen this at the Church of the Epiphany in downtown Washington, where she worships. Not long ago, her church started an effort to help the homeless by offering a simple Sunday breakfast, but then it expanded the activity into a full morning of worship, prayer, fellowship and food that includes the whole congregation.

What originated as a feeding program has become an opportunity for homeless guests and church members to sit together, eat together and share stories of their lives and their faith. This develops new awareness, and political positions can change. Bass, a Democrat, says that the experience at Epiphany has given her “both a greater appreciation for the traditions of Democratic social concern and sharpened their shortcomings – leading me to understand that a more creative, and more potentially challenging, set of political solutions is necessary to care for the least among us.” She now recognizes that “no political party has the corner on addressing homelessness and urban poverty.”

Experienced community organizers tell me that effective social action has to begin with strong relationships across congregational and denominational lines. John Lentz, a pastor in Cleveland Heights, OH, reports that his suburban Presbyterian church is beginning a relationship with an urban Baptist church so that parishioners can share their experiences of pain and hopefully discover mutual self-interest in a variety of difficult social issues. “We know in Cleveland Heights that unless we engage ourselves in justice for East Cleveland, the drugs and the poverty are just down the hill and creeping up,” he tells me. “It’s in our long-term self-interest to do this.”

Over the past year, I have been working with an interfaith group to organize a religious network in Northern Virginia. This multi-faith, multiracial group – made up of blacks, whites, Christians and Jews, and probably Republicans as well as Democrats, conservatives and moderates as well as liberals – is determined to be a civic voice that can balance the political and business voices in the region. But the organizers have stressed the importance of developing personal relationships across racial and denominational barriers, and to build a foundation of understanding and trust before we begin to identify the issues we need to address. We know that there may not be much in common, politically, between black urban pastors and white suburban pastors, a disconnect that could pose problems when particular issues arise in one region or another. But if we form deeply personal relationships, then we pastors will trust and support one another and we’ll be able to avoid political divisions.

Gerry Creedon, the pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington, VA, believes that this approach is essential, that we need to find a way through conservative and liberal ideological frameworks “to an underlying experi-

ence of faith.” Then later, when our network begins to work on particular issues – affordable housing, perhaps, or immigration – I hope it will be able to avoid political tensions because we’ll all be looking at these concerns through a broader lens as questions of human dignity and social justice, rather than worrying about how we label our approach to solving them.

Unless they identify and embrace shared principles, faith communities will shatter along political lines. These unifying principles can be as simple as seeking justice and ending hunger – core stances that have shaped the work of Bread for the World, a nationwide Christian citizens’ movement, for the past 30 years. I’ve been involved with Bread for the World since I was in college and seminary, and I have always found it to be a faithful, nonpartisan voice on legislation that deals with hunger issues both here and abroad. My colleague Roy Howard, pastor of St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Rockville, MD, points out that Bread for the World has both Republicans and Democrats – from former GOP presidential candidate Bob Dole to former Clinton administration budget director Leon Panetta – on its board of directors, and its leaders “are very careful to stay focused on their mission to make social policy that helps the hungry” and to speak with a unified Christian voice.

Of course, strong relationships and shared principles are no guarantee of perfect unity. At Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, VA, where I served as pastor for 11 years, I worked hard to develop bonds between African immigrants and Americans, and attempted to create a climate of hospitality within the congregation, but the church still experienced divisions. And I don’t doubt that as I move ahead with the homeless coalition and the interfaith network, I’ll face some criticism at Fairfax Presbyterian – there will always be some who see Christian social action as being partisan, or political, or outside the core mission of the church, which they see as concentrating on nourishing the soul. But I can live with this kind of resistance. As one of my mentors, Ed White, a consultant at the Alban Institute, an interfaith organization in Herndon, VA, that provides resources for congregations, says, “If we cannot do anything unless we all agree, the church is immobilized.”

David Ensign, the pastor of Clarendon Presbyterian Church in Arlington, finds it helpful to remind his church members that much of scripture is inherently political. For example, the Moses story is not only about God, but also about the politics of liberation, “about speaking truth to power.” He knows that there will always be people who disagree on policy and on partisan politics, but such disagreement should never be an excuse for inaction, because inaction amounts to a blessing of the status quo – and that, of course, is a political act in itself. To me, it’s important to avoid being part of a paralyzed church, because I know that so much bad can happen when good people choose to do nothing.

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