

Capital COMMENTARY™

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December 7, 2007

The Religious Right is Breaking Up

Something new and important is emerging on the American political scene. The old religious right is breaking up. It is no longer a unified movement marked by an invariably conservative stance on a limited number of social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. New leaders are arising. They are emphasizing new issues and not always taking politically conservative positions.

A recent spate of articles and books takes note of this developing trend. David Kirkpatrick's article, "The Evangelical Crack-up," appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*. The books include *Faith in the Halls of Power*, by Michael Lindsay, and *Heroic Conservatism*, by Michael Gerson, President Bush's former speechwriter.

I welcome this trend, but I believe there is danger as well as hope in it. First the hope.

New leaders are adding new issues to the public policy agenda of concerned Christians—issues such as poverty, disease, protection of God's creation, and peace. These are issues about which the Bible is also concerned—and we should be too. The breakup of the religious right is also leading to a reexamination of the predictably conservative stances that the religious right adopted on issues such as support for lower taxes and the death penalty, the denial of global climate change, and opposition to additional regulations on the private ownership of guns. This trend, too, is to be welcomed.

But I believe there are also dangers present in the breakup of the old religious right. One is that many politically active Christians may simply lurch from the right to the left, leaving behind a solidly conservative agenda only to wed themselves to a solidly liberal agenda.

A second danger may appear at first glance not to be a danger at all. It is that politically involved Christians will become comfortable moving between conservative and liberal policy positions, adopting conservative positions on some issues and supporting liberal positions on others. They might, on the one

hand, support conservative positions on abortion and defense of the traditional family and, on the other hand, choose to back liberal positions on protection of the environment and in support of welfare programs for the poor.

This admittedly is far better than tying oneself completely to either the conservative or the liberal policy agenda. But if Christians merely switch back and forth between what conservatives and liberals are offering and not develop distinctive policy positions shaped by a biblically based worldview, we will miss an opportunity to be the salt and light that the world desperately needs and that our Lord has called us to be.

The great need is to apply a Christian worldview to today's contentious public policy issues and thereby come up with something new and distinctive to contribute to current public policy debates. As we do this, we will find ourselves not walking in lock-step with the public policy positions of either liberals or conservatives.

Key to a Christian worldview is commitment to biblically rooted principles such as justice, solidarity with all those in need, and the integrity of independent civil-society institutions such as families, churches, and nonprofit social-service organizations. We need Christian scholars, political activists, and organizations—as well as thoughtful individual Christian citizens—who will think through basic principles such as these and apply them carefully to today's contentious policy issues. We will then be in a position to make a contribution to our nation's public policy debates by offering policy options that are more principled and thoughtful than those now being served up by both the political left and the political right.

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