



"Terrible things that are done with the excuse that progress requires them are not really progress at all, but just terrible things."

—Russell Baker

14-Nov-08

The 'Success' of Pragmatism

After twenty months of primaries and caucuses, conventions, campaign speeches, countless roadside signs, and front-lawn endorsements, the extended election season has finally ended. America has voted to elect Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th president. His election is historic and significant, both because Obama will be our first African-American President and because of the model for success he has given to America, not to mention his strong liberality. While we may be concerned with Obama's far-left economic and social agenda, we should perhaps be more wary of the model of ruthless pragmatism that his campaign employed to achieve electoral victory.

It is not new to anyone that most politicians are less-than-honest in their races for office. Duplicitous tactics, used by both the right and the left, are even expected, whether in the form of excessive spending hidden in bills making their way through Congress, accepting generous donations from special-interest groups with questionable intentions, or as we have become all too familiar with in the past weeks, malicious attack-ads that smear the name and reputation of political opponents. It is Obama's history of participation in this final item that reveals his model for success and the true nature of man's political systems: pragmatism.

To give a thumbnail sketch, pragmatism is a philosophy made popular during the last half of the nineteenth century by Northeastern American academics. Its main tenets assert that:

- any system of belief is true only in as much as it produces a satisfactory outcome;
- meaning in a statement is not established by its truth, but by the practical nature of a statement;
- whatever is not practical is not true.

This absurd philosophy found widespread acceptance among America's intellectuals, and profoundly affected law, politics, and education. Obviously, pragmatism is in direct opposition to God's Word, as it is merely a systematic justification of "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" ([Judges 21:25](#)). It ignores or forgets that the "way that seems right to a man . . . is the way to death" ([Proverbs 14:12](#)).

Pragmatism dominates the political arena, but it becomes evident through the use of attack-ads and smear campaigns. Despite John McCain's and Obama's promises to run smear-free campaigns, it was largely through aggressive, negative slander that Obama won his future seat in the Oval Office. Some pundits speculate that if McCain had been more aggressive in his attacks against Obama, that prized seat might have been his instead. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such tactics is a sad commentary on the criteria by which citizens make their electoral choices—and the use of such tactics is an even sadder commentary on the morals of our elected officials, a morality defined by pragmatism.

This election season exposed two elements of Satan's way that permeate the entire culture of his world, not just politics: the use of pragmatism to achieve success and pragmatism's destructive nature in competition. Political campaigns—two or more people running against each other to garner enough support to achieve their goals—are merely public performances of the competition that occurs elsewhere in everyday life: striving for a promotion, aiming to win the gold in a sporting event, or even vying for another's time or attention. All of these contain the tension of competition—that one's success means another's failure—but that tension is not in-and-of itself corrupt or evil. Paul's epistles are replete with athletic and military metaphors that are undergirded by this tension. It is in the reaction to competition that Satan's world and pragmatism wreak their perversions.

The incessant smears of Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin serve as a real and obvious example of this process at work. As soon as she joined McCain's campaign, the media and her political opponents launched an endless volley of attacks to destroy any perception of credibility, personal or professional, in the minds of voters. "She wants to ban books," "She supported a Nazi sympathizer," and "Palin's child, Trig, is actually her daughter's child," are examples of the pernicious rumors spread by major news sources and bloggers—all of which were proved false. The Obama camp never denounced or reproached these mean-spirited attacks, but used them to its own advantage. In the spirit of pragmatism, this ruthless political process demonstrates that power and success are won through the use of lies. The next step in such thinking is that lies, then, are morally acceptable because they are practical and necessary to winning.

As members of God's church, we are all being prepared for offices in the [Kingdom of God](#), positions of rulership and authority ([John 14:2](#)). Our lives could be understood as kinds of campaigns for our election by [God](#) to serve in those offices. However, the opponent we must defeat is not anyone else—we are not running against any of our brethren—but against ourselves, our carnal nature. We should run our "campaign" for heavenly office in an essentially *opposite* way to that seen in this election season. Political candidates run campaigns that attempt to expose the real or fabricated faults of their opponents, while hiding their own faults and deficiencies. In this way, politicians are like the Pharisees, who attempted to expose the sins of others, while never noticing their own.

As Christians, we must show God that we possess the qualities to be effective servants under Him. Paul defines these qualities in [Ephesians 4:1-3](#), and each one is a polar opposite to those demonstrated by the world's politicians. These virtues call for another characteristic that is contrary to the world's basic character: realizing that success can be found only through God ([John 15:4](#)), which requires humility, subjection to God, and the denial of the world's pragmatism.

In [Proverbs 2:12-15](#), Solomon concisely summarizes these opposing systems in his description of godly wisdom: It "[delivers] you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways." Conversely, he advises in [Proverbs 3:5-7](#): "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own

understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil."

- Staff

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[What Does God Really Want? \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh focuses upon the atmosphere of disorder which has emerged in the greater church of God, caused by individuals (ministry and lay members alike), obsessed with the urge to change doctrine, convinced that God was too weak to control Herbert W. Armstrong. The unspoken accusation is that God raised up a messenger, sent him with His gospel, and then allowed us to use a faulty calendar. Because no proponents of the calendar change are in agreement, any calendar change will produce more confusion. The priorities in Matthew 6:33 (The Kingdom and His righteousness) indicates that the primary emphasis should be on repentance and overcoming rather than mastering some inconsequential technicality.

From the Archives: Featured Article

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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