



"Whichever side denounces the other for politicizing the issue is losing the argument."

—Barney Frank

07-Sep-12

The False Morality of Compassion

Flipping channels on Wednesday night during a commercial break in the Giants-Cowboys football game, I landed on the local PBS station that was airing the speeches from the Democratic National Convention here in Charlotte. Former President Bill Clinton had just begun to give his long nomination speech:

We Democrats think the country works better with a strong middle class, real opportunities for poor people to work their way into it and a relentless focus on the future, with business and government working together to promote growth and broadly shared prosperity. We think "we're all in this together" is a better philosophy than "you're on your own."

Who's right? . . .

It turns out that advancing equal opportunity and economic empowerment is both morally right and good economics, because discrimination, poverty, and ignorance restrict growth, while investments in education, infrastructure, and scientific and

technological research increase it, creating more good jobs and new wealth for all of us.

On the surface, this sounds good, and the delegates on the floor of the convention hall loved it. His words skewered the Republicans and at the same time reconfirmed their own political beliefs. In effect, the former President was saying that members of his party hold the moral high ground because their policies help the poor and disadvantaged and lift everyone up equally. As the more compassionate of the two parties, he implied, the Democrats have the answers to humanity's problems that will last the test of time.

Perhaps that is overstating what he meant, but he and the Democrats certainly believe that they are more compassionate than and thus morally superior to cold-hearted Republicans. As some of the campaign ads imply, Mitt Romney and his supporters want nothing more than to do away with all welfare, push Grandma and her wheelchair over a cliff, pollute America's air and water, force everyone to own a gun, and unleash unfettered greed on the nation. While these are, of course, exaggerations, they illustrate the vast gulf that many Democrats see between themselves and their rivals across the party divide.

Seeing this "compassion deficit" in the image of the Republican Party, George W. Bush and his Republican cohorts in the 2000 Presidential election coined the term "compassionate conservatism" to spotlight the fact that people on the right care too. Unfortunately, this led President Bush to compromise on several social issues, particularly education and prescription drug legislation, to prove that he and his party had soft hearts. Democrats vilified them anyway, and many conservatives threw up their hands in dismay at the undermining of their principles. Vestiges of "compassionate conservatism" still linger in the thinking of the leadership of the Republican Party, which has contributed to the rise of the Tea Party.

It is apparent that this crude dichotomy remains in people's perceptions of the two parties. Because of their advocacy of minority rights, welfare, universal healthcare, amnesty, labor unions, choice, and the like, Democrats are considered to be more compassionate than Republicans are. However, as Christians, we need to realize that compassion is not an inviolable virtue—

and in fact, it is difficult to think of any virtue that cannot be abused by impure motives. Just as [love](#) can be feigned to get a spouse's money or loyalty can be faked to attain a promotion, so can compassion be put on to gain sympathy, votes, and power.

Unless a person has a heart of stone, he will feel compassion for those who are suffering, and that emotional reaction often fuels a helpful response in the form of aid, much like the Good Samaritan had compassion on the man who was wounded by thieves on the road to Jericho ([Luke 10:30-37](#)). He saw the man in his plight, sympathized with him, and selflessly cared for him at his own expense. [Jesus](#) shows that we should "go and do likewise" (verse 37), as such compassion is the mark of a true Christian. We see compassion similarly encouraged in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, where the righteous sheep help those in need, expecting no reward ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)).

It is instructive to see Jesus showing compassion in the few times it is mentioned in the gospels. The first appears in [Mark 1:41](#), where He, "moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched [a leper], and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.'" Another time, recorded in [Luke 7:13](#), He feels compassion for a widow who had just lost her only son, and He raises him from the dead. In [Matthew 20:34](#), He has compassion on two blind men and heals them. Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus had compassion on the multitude that had followed Him "because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" ([Matthew 9:36](#); see [Mark 6:34](#)). He also has compassion on multitudes because they had nothing left to eat ([Matthew 15:32](#); [Mark 8:2](#)) and because many of them needed healing ([Matthew 14:14](#)).

In each of these cases, Jesus shows compassion for people whose circumstances had reached a point of dire need, and they had no ability to help themselves. He then performs a miracle that alleviates the problem. Notice, however, that, like the Good Samaritan, He asks for nothing for Himself, except perhaps that they keep the miracle to themselves. He has little or nothing to gain by helping them—and in fact, His miracles could draw the unwanted attention of the authorities—but He helps them anyway out of outgoing concern. His compassion has no ulterior motive except to draw them closer to [God](#).

Jesus was not a politician; He never demanded a *quid pro quo*. True compassion, as He practiced it, is an outpouring of *agape* love, a selfless concern for the ultimate well-being of another expressed in sacrificial action in the other's behalf. His compassion for humanity went so far that He gave His life for us "while we were still sinners," unworthy of aid as His enemies ([Romans 5:8](#), 10). His compassion for our weakness and suffering will ultimately lead to our eternal life in His Kingdom, for when He expresses His love for us, it never ends ([I Corinthians 13:8](#)).

Examining Christ's true empathy beside the contrived compassion of America's political parties exposes the latter as mercenary, trite, and false. Neither party has any moral high ground to stand on because both use it to curry favor and attract votes, not to solve endemic problems. As the psalmist writes, "Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. . . . Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help" ([Psalm 146:3](#), 5).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Politics and Christ's Return](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

In the church, we are not politically liberal, conservative, or moderate—we are "God-ists." The world considers us liberals because we are not bound by its religious orthodoxy. Conversely, we are conservative when following God's constitutional code, His holy standards, living by the spirit of the law rather than just by the letter. Ultimately, religion and politics do not mix at all because in weak men, political expediency trumps righteousness every time. Because we are set apart by God, we are not to become involved in the world's political, judicial, or military systems. Our term in office has not yet begun.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[This Is Not God's World](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

In several places in Scripture, God urges His people to come out of this world. Because He is the earth's and humanity's Creator, we may struggle with this command. But the world of which He speaks consists of society's anti-God religious, psychological, and philosophical systems whose beginnings reside in the Adversary, Satan the Devil. John Ritenbaugh suggests we thoroughly evaluate how much of this world still influences us.

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