

# BAPTIST FEATURES

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## Is The Church A Donkey Or Elephant?

(Editor's Note: In this second of four articles on forces seeking to use the churches, the author discusses the place of partisan politics in the pulpit and pew.)

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To what extent should Baptist churches get involved in partisan politics? With the next national election not far off, what lessons can be learned from viewing in retrospect the 1960 election?

We are still close enough to the 1960 election to view the circumstances at close hand. Though the religious issue was repudiated by the major candidates, the undeniable facts are that both parties used it as a vote-getting device.

The Democrats were delighted by the mass Catholic support of their Catholic candidate. In addition, they angled for sympathetic votes by emphasizing that their candidate was the target of bigotry.

On the other hand, the Republicans were delighted to pick up a strong anti-Catholic vote. They capitalized on this factor in many areas, particularly in the South.

Unfortunately, some Baptist churches thus became involved, however unwittingly, in partisan politics. What some Baptists fail to realize is that the more reactionary Roman Catholic elements would like nothing better than to see a political party or movement identified as "Baptist," "Protestant," or "anti-Catholic" rise to prominence in this country.

The eventual and inevitable political effect could be nothing but a gain in Catholic influence and the achievement of many of the political aims of the Catholic hierarchy.

Perhaps the atmosphere in the churches during the 1960 presidential campaign made it easier for other political, social and economic groups--each with its own axe to grind--to move in.

In the 1930's, extreme leftist groups sought to identify their political philosophy with that of Christianity; they called on the churches to advance the cause of "Christian socialism." Today, the pendulum has swung and, in a similar way, extreme right-wing radicals are seeking to organize churches in support of their programs.

Recently, for instance, some Southern Baptist churches have given their Sunday school and Training Union periods, and sometimes the worship service itself, to these radical groups, spouting extremist propaganda.

Baptist preachers and laymen who, with good intentions, allow churches and congregations to be exploited by partisan political groups would do well to consider European political history.

The church-connected political party has been part of the European scene for centuries. Today, at least seven unofficial Roman Catholic parties participate powerfully in the governments of Italy, France, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal.

In each case such church-identified political activity produces much that Baptists, with their strong emphasis upon separation of church and state, bitterly oppose.

The United States has largely been spared such mixtures of church and politics, except in isolated local instances.

In recent times the nearest that American national politics has come to such patterns occurred in the presidential elections of 1928 and 1960. In both cases, the problem centered in the nomination of a Roman Catholic presidential candidate by a major party.

American citizens are entitled to believe politically as they choose. But Christians are not entitled to identify the gospel of Jesus Christ with any partisan political program.

There is no "Christian Party" and no official Baptist candidate for any office. The Democratic Party is not dedicated to the establishment of the Kingdom of God, and the Republican Party is not conducted in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount.

Americans for Democratic Action is not a Christian organization, and the John Birch Society is not entitled to claim God's approval or the church's sanction on its activities.

Every Christian has a moral and spiritual obligation to be a good citizen. This involves intelligent consideration of such civic activities as voting, party membership, and candidate support.

But the lesson of history is that, in honest obedience to conscience, sincere believers end up in widely diverse political groupings. Such political differences are not tests of Christian fellowship and must not be allowed to divide Christian brethren.

Democrats, Republicans, left-wingers, right-wingers--these are passing political phenomena. As they come and go, the churches are called to be God's instruments in the midst of them, proclaiming the redemptive gospel of Jesus Christ and His judgment on a sinful world.

With such a mission, no church can afford to damage its witness by submitting to the exploitation of power-hungry politicians, whatever brand they wear.

Next article: "What Kind Of Economy Can Be Called Christian?"