

The Charlotte District E-Pistle

November 1, 2004

Political discourse is appropriate within the life of the church. Such conversation within any faithful congregation must always be civil, respectful of another's opinion, but conducted in the context of a more urgent agenda. The politics of the church always transcends the agenda of the polis. The politics of the church is related to our ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom that was articulated and embodied by our living Lord. Political parties within the polis and candidates who represent specific political philosophies of government, therefore, may receive the provisional support of an authentic disciple of Christ. But we should refrain from a blanket endorsement of candidates or political parties because these are always flawed, temporary, and partial representatives of our more fundamental political perspective.

From the perspective of Kingdom politics, we are compelled to speak with prophetic intensity about relevant issues that affect the quality of life for all citizens—the economy, the plight of the poor, health and welfare our citizens, the preservation of peace, national and global security, etc. But our perspective is uniquely formed by the spirit that emanates from Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know from our immersion into the biblical text and our participation in the community of faith (the Church).

John Howard Yoder, in his classical volume, *The Politics of Jesus*, wrote words that define our posture as we relate to the agenda of tomorrow and the following days of political controversy:

“Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications; he was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry unfortunately was seen in a political light; he was not just a sacrificial lamb preparing for his immolation, or a God-Man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. Jesus was, in his divinely mandated (i.e. promised, anointed, messianic) prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, **the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships. His baptism is the inauguration and his cross is the culmination of that new regime in which his disciples are called to share.**”

Since I know Jesus to be *the bearer of new possibilities* for this nation and state in which I reside, I take very seriously the political process. When I voted last week, I pushed the final red button with a sort of sacred respect for the privilege of my participating in such a non-violent revolutionary activity. But my life will not be destroyed if, on the dark day following the election, my candidates are not elected. To the contrary, I am usually surprised when those who are not radical disciples of Jesus Christ vote for candidates that receive my provisional endorsement.

When I served Shady Grove UMC, the oldest man in the congregation whose name was Joe Smith abruptly asked me, “Preacher, what is the saddest verse in the entire Bible?” I pleaded ignorance; so he provided his carefully researched answer, from I Samuel 13: 19 KJV: “Now there was no **smith** found throughout all the land of Israel....” Common names are both a blessing and a curse. Last week's *Charlotte Observer* contained an editorial with the caption, **Bush supporter or Christian? Choose.**

Underneath was this vociferously stated opinion: "Anyone who votes for Bush cannot be a real Christian." The contributor identified himself as *George Thompson!* On the evening of the editorial, I conducted a Charge Conference, and the first question I was asked by a member of Purcell UMC was related to this one line in the morning editorial page. I have no intention of calling attention to this freely expressed opinion by scribbling out my retort for the *Observer*. Maybe this published statement will cause people in the district who do not personally know me to engage in lively dialogue with me about some political issues that we think are worthy of our reflection as Christians.

The truth of the matter is that we United Methodists are all over the board politically. David Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School has observed that, of the current presidential and vice-presidential candidates, three of the four running for the top offices and endorsed by the two major political parties are United Methodists. Moreover, "Methodists constitute 3% of the American population, 12% of the U. S. Congress, and 75% of the 2004 presidential ticket."

Sunday I attended a class between the two services at Dilworth UMC and before their Charge Conference. The entire class was studying the writings of Stanley Hauerwas in preparation for his lecturing there on Sunday, November 14, 3-5 p.m. We are all invited. Bring a seat belt and tighten it during the presentation; for all attending will be in for a wild ride. But that is the nature of the church: we engage one another in much controversial conversation because we know which issues deserve our attention. We share a vision of the coming Kingdom even though we disagree about the route for reaching the destination.

If you have not voted yet, do so tomorrow. Voting is a privilege and many have given their lives in order that we can exercise that privilege. But do not consider your political philosophy so important that it cannot be abandoned or denied in the pursuit of a much higher allegiance.

My name is George E. Thompson; and I approve this message.

Grace and peace,

George