

Revelation Road: A Professor Hits the Campaign Trail

By Susan Pace Hamill

The intense hatred and fear fueled by the manipulation machines permeating the 2012 presidential election cycle raise disturbing questions. Can the common democratic values we supposedly share survive the turbulent tensions driving us apart?

Hostility toward government and taxes, the wedge over gay marriage, and legalized abortion and the treatment of illegal immigrants – these are just a few of them. We are faced with a perplexing paradox. In a nation where more than 70 percent of us claim to practice Christianity in some form, we endure an increasing lack of civility punctuating the discussion and the demotion of the most important concerns Jesus expressed – “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45). This paradox indicates that

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authentic faith is in deep trouble. If they truly want to straighten out our path, ministers, well-meaning reformers, and academics must grasp this paradox – why many devoutly religious people cling to ideas, policies, and candidates that hurt “the least of these” as well as themselves personally – and respond to it by crafting a reform message in a way that speaks to *their* universe, *not ours*.

As a tenured professor of law, I decided a decade ago to complete a master’s degree in theological studies at Beeson Divinity School, a conservative evangelical interdenominational seminary, part of a private Baptist-affiliated university in Birmingham, AL. Beeson’s mission – to prepare God-called men and women to do the work of Jesus Christ on earth using their “head, hands, and heart” – fit my needs perfectly. I quickly found my calling – using my

expertise in tax law in a manner that reflects the teachings in the Bible. My master’s thesis, which declared that the horrible injustice inflicted by Alabama’s regressive state and local taxes is unbiblical according to conservative evangelical exegetical and hermeneutical analysis, caused a firestorm in Alabama and quickly spread to other states.

Energized, I conducted follow-up research. One article establishes that biblical principles support moderate progressivity and reasonable opportunity as general moral guidelines for tax policy discussions. I also argue that the tax cuts during President George W. Bush’s first term were driven by objectivist ethics, a form of atheism where each individual functions as his or her own god. Another exhaustively researched article examines the state and local tax structures of all fifty states, concluding that none of them meet these general moral guidelines and thirty-one of them display the extreme level of injustice found in Alabama.

Simplify, Simplify

Bursting with pride over the positive responses that generated hundreds of speaking engagements in thirty different states and extensive press coverage, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *London Times*, I believed I had found the answer: All I had to do was simplify the message and secure help from trustworthy community leaders to help me deliver it. If I did that, like the sun shining rays of hope far and wide, my work would reach the masses and grow grass by convincing them to support leaders who foster tax policy that helps “the least of these” and would also for many of them reduce their own personal taxes. I was undeterred even by the 2003 defeat of a tax reform proposal in Alabama.

Then something happened that taught me how wrong I was. During the 2010 election season I ran for the Alabama legislature as a Democrat. The experience took me decidedly out of my comfort zone. I emptied myself of being an autonomous professor and became a servant who begged people for support. I submitted to the authority of a street-wise political manager who, despite staunchly believing in my work, informed me darkly: “Darling, your books and poetry are of little use to you now.” Under the tutelage of a new hairdresser, handpicked by the self-appointed chair of a committee of ladies that swooped in and assumed responsibility for my makeover, my hair went from a short and professional cut to a lengthier, blonder style.

Meeting People Where They Are

The campaign came to a head when, over my manager’s objection, I insisted on conducting an organized field campaign: Over a three-month period I spoke to 2,431 regular voters at home. Resigned that he could not stop me, my manager prepared me in a two-hour training session to meet the people at the door. “Never use the word *professor* at the door and only admit you teach at the university if the voter asks where you teach,” he ordered fiercely.

He proceeded to interrogate me throughout the session to keep me focused on the goal of this arduous field campaign: “Dear, why are you at the door?” Each time I said, “To get the voter to like me,” and he’d smiled and at the end of the session concluded: “That’s right darling, you want them to say after you’ve just left, She’s a nice lady – I like her.”

Only in the campaign did I fully discover the third of Beeson’s three educational prongs – “head, hands, and *heart*.” As one of my Beeson professors informed me years after I graduated, “Most of our students come to us with their hearts on fire and their heads not functioning and we have to straighten that out; you had the opposite problem.”

Although in the end I got killed because hordes of irregular voters came out in droves and voted straight Republican to make a statement against President Obama, I was still wildly successful at the door because my style of communication morphed. I learned to meet people in *their* way on *their* terms at an emotional level where they felt that *I cared about them as people*. As I discovered, nuanced policy arguments were of little interest to voters at the door. One local sage whispered brutal advice in my ear: “Use emotionally charged words, provide easy entertainment in sound bites of fun, fear, and us-against-them.” On my fiftieth birthday, the first day of the field campaign, I came up with my own

snappy quote to mark the occasion: “Stop relying on well-reasoned ideas and trust your hairdresser.”

Too many devoutly religious people are hurting both “the least of these” and themselves because they personally *feel* more comfortable with those ideas, policies, and candidates even when they are contrary to biblical teachings and their own self-interest. But here’s the rub: As long as ministers, well-meaning reformers, and academics put well-reasoned ideas at center stage without engaging the hearts and emotions of voters, our current political path will go unchallenged, even though the Bible promises such a path will eventually destroy us.

I learned this painful lesson during my campaign, one that is difficult for any academic that has dedicated years to laborious research to accept. My work is not like the sun after all but rather like a visible but distant planet – Saturn, say, rings and all. A planet has weight and atmosphere and density and importance, but it moves to the gravitational forces of others. It is absolutely helpless in getting us there on its own.

“I’m the Ball, Boss”

Another metaphor illustrating this invokes an Alabama favorite – a football team. My manager posed this hypothetical in our training session, asking me what position I played as the candidate. He was astounded when I answered correctly – “I’m the ball, boss” – and I understood that he is the quarterback, his staff plays other offensive positions, and my hairdresser plays center. Ministers, well-meaning reformers, and academics bring them water.

The greatest impediment to encouraging voters to help “the least of these” and themselves – an impediment even greater than the fear-mongering political manipulators – is us. When we ministers, well-meaning reformers, and academics refuse to accept the demotion of our importance in this pecking order, we allow the manipulators to prevail. In order to respond effectively to the paradox of immoral tax policy in a religious nation, we must resist the sin of pride and take our position as water bearers for the metaphorical quarterbacks who definitely sympathize with us about what the Bible requires but who have the decisive ability to communicate with voters in *their* universe using *their* language.

Jesus understood how difficult this is for us to swallow, and he offers those struggling some comforting words – “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

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