
Political Identity and Christian Identity

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

On last Monday evening, the day when we commemorated the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I was reading Jim Wallis's new book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. But I took a break to prepare dinner and to listen to Bill O'Reilly on Fox News. I agreed with elements of what both men were saying.

O'Reilly offered a commentary about what Dr. King would be saying if he were alive today. He would be 76 years old, said O'Reilly, and he would be unabashedly Christian in his views. His social justice would be grounded in an unashamed Christian faith. I agreed with that.

I also agree with the assessment of Dr. King by Jim Wallis in his recent book: "No one in American history ever linked religion and politics better (or more prophetically, democratically, and inclusively) than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." (page 60). That book, *God's Politics*, goes deeper. Wallis claims that "What is needed is nothing less than a renovation of our souls and the soul of politics. We are all-Right and Left-pursuing our innocuous spiritualities ("following our bliss," as the saying goes) as if religion meant nothing to our life together. Whether attending our Zen/Christian retreats as "progressives" or our "seeker-sensitive" megachurches as "conservatives," we've abandoned the heart of "capital R" Religion. In essence this book is arguing a very evangelical point: our souls and our society are in great need of transformation" (page 36).

At our Cathedral Chapter retreat two weekends ago, we discussed the strengths of the Cathedral of St. Philip. (We were following the advice of still another important book, *What Happy People Know*, by Dan Baker and Cameron Smith; "I see people changing their lives every day-but it's not by correcting their weaknesses. It's by building their strengths" (page 71).) One strength we mentioned was the identity of the Cathedral as something different from Right/Left politics and Republican/Democrat identities.

I certainly hope that is a strength we can build on. All of us are political people, whether we are trying to manage the resources of our small household, or whether we are actively campaigning for our favorite candidate. That activity is not just good; it is necessary. However, persistently partisan politics can be damaging indeed to the Christian Church. The Christian Church must always be about something far deeper than the burning political issue, or political people, of the day.

The Cathedral of St. Philip, in case you haven't noticed, really does contain some of the most liberal democrats and some of the most conservative republicans. I like it that way. There is something good and accurate in both those political sides. But neither of those sides can contain the fullness of our own historic Christian tradition. For generation after generation, and for political term after political term, the Church has contributed to our national and local politics by placing its first allegiance to the gospel of God in Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is always bigger than me. The gospel of Jesus Christ is even bigger than the system I use to interpret it. At its best, the Gospel Church of Jesus Christ stands for that greater truth. I believe this is why all of us go to Church. It is why we support the Church. We know that God has been faithful here, no matter what our smaller disagreements have been about, no matter even what our sin has caused. God has been faithful here, giving us gifts from his enormous and generous grace.

I hope that we all want to participate in the political issues of the day. Part of the legacy of Dr. King is for Christian faith to make a difference in the world. But I want us all to participate in the Christian Church first. In fact, I want us all to participate in the Cathedral of St. Philip. People who give to the Cathedral, who support the Cathedral with prayer and with resources and with (yes!) money, generation after generation, term after term, are giving to something larger than themselves.

When we give to the Church of God, God gives us something in return. God gives us an identity that is bigger than what the world can give us. God gives us an identity that is bigger than our household, our neighborhood, our city, and even our country. In fact, God gives us a life, an eternal life that overflows from the belly with love and spirit.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Rev. Sam Candler

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