

The Political Jesus

by: *Ronald L. Dart*

From time to time the country's news magazines feel obliged to report on the health of the various Christian movements in the country. It's always a borderline question whether it's funny or aggravating when they decide to do it. At the time of the last election *Newsweek* featured, on the cover, a cross wrapped tightly with a flag and the theme was "The Politics of Jesus." The lead article was "An Evangelical Identity Crisis: Sex or Social Justice? The War Between the Religious Right and Believers Who Want to Go Broader." Now I thought that was priceless. The article was written by Lisa Miller, along with some other staff reporters, but is it a "war between the Religious Right and Believers Who Want to Go Broader"? What on earth does that mean? War is an astounding metaphor for differences in opinion between Christians who agree on far more than they disagree. But the chosen examples in the article are kind of instructive.

First is James Dobson, naturally. His radio program reaches 220 million people, they say, worldwide. And, speaking of Dobson's Halloween program this year, Lisa Miller wrote this: "In the spirit of a day devoted to ghosts and goblins, Dobson's radio show, which reaches 220 million people worldwide, evoked what he hoped would be dark and scary visions for his fellow evangelical Christians: a nation filled with married gay couples. With same-sex-marriage initiatives on ballots in eight states, Dobson told his flock in a taped broadcast, they could not afford to stay home on Election Day. If they did, we could begin to have same-sex marriages in places all over the country."

I read that and thought, "Well, I wonder where Lisa's coming from on this? She kind of thinks this is a little silly." I don't follow Dobson's program so I can't evaluate whether he was trying to scare people or not, but I do know that partial sentences taken out of context can be made to say just about anything a person—a reporter—wants them to say.

What I feel quite sure is true, though, is that Dobson is four-square opposed to gay marriage. The heart and soul of his ministry, after all, is the family, and most evangelicals see gay marriage as a threat to the family. So, who sits on the other side of the fence from Dobson on this issue who also claims to be an evangelical? He's a 42 year old evangelical pastor named Adam Hamilton.

He was, Miller said, preaching an entirely different message. He was helping his 14,000 members parse the parables in Matthew 13—the wheat and the weeds, the good fish and bad. He told the reporter—and this is what Lisa Miller says he said, “Our task is not to go around judging people. Jesus didn't do that.” Well now, that sounds very Christian for him to say that. And, again, I must allow that it was taken out of context and the pastor very likely qualified that remark. So consider that I am questioning what *Newsweek* thought they heard him say. It's all-powerfully hard, you know, to get around your prejudices and hear what people are really trying to tell you. And reporters, more often than not, don't seem to get it.

Now on one level, his statement is true. It is not our task to “go around judging people.” After all, Jesus said, “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). It's an entirely reasonable call to make, even upon non-Christians. People render judgment all the time when they lack the data to make the judgment. But when Hamilton said, “Jesus didn't do that,” now that statement needs some qualification.

Later in his ministry, after having had one confrontation with the Pharisees after another, and in the full knowledge that some of the Pharisees were plotting his eventual death, Jesus finally found it necessary to pass judgment on them. So to say Jesus didn't go around judging people is not accurate. You find a long section on it in Matthew, the 23rd chapter. Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples, and he said this: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: [What he meant by that is: they have some authority, some civil authority, in your society.] All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matthew 23:2-4).

Now this is precisely the kind of judgment we are called to make on Election Day. We have a Congress that will pass laws which adversely affect our lives, while they exempt themselves from having to obey those laws. It's not a very difficult judgment to make and because “they”—that is Congress—are an exclusive club (and I suppose the Pharisees were too), they do protect one another. The FBI can get a warrant and search your home, your office, your car, and any other thing they want including your underwear. But when they get a warrant and search the offices of a congressman, with probable cause, looking for evidence of a crime, most of Congress on both sides of the aisle are in high dudgeon and race to the defense of the beleaguered congressman.

Now, my question when this happened recently, was this: Are we supposed to imagine that a congressman can hide a murder weapon in his office and the authorities cannot—not even with a warrant, not even having convinced a judge they have probable cause—they cannot look for that murder weapon in the congressman's office? Good grief, a

man could commit crimes, have his office bulging with evidence of the crime, and they couldn't go look there. Now, do I have the right to make the judgment that this is wrong? Of course I do. I am a voter; these men work for me. They are public servants; they are not our kings and rulers.

But, Jesus didn't stop there when he talked about the Pharisees doing exactly this—making judgments that we have to observe, but they don't. He goes on to say, “But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, [he's talking about symbols of their rank] And love the uppermost rooms at feasts [again, symbols of rank], and the chief seats in the synagogues [symbols of rank], And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ” (Matthew 23:5-8).

Now I have to digress to clarify a small point. It is okay, according to Jesus, to call your dad “father.” The problem here is that the Jewish scribes had begun to place the rabbi and teacher on a par with Moses. What these men taught was considered to be, or even to transcend, Scripture. So they were creating law as they went along, in the role of rabbi, teacher and spiritual father. And it is in that cultural context that these statements are made.

But Jesus didn't stop there either. He went on to say, really, right to these people who were there, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . .” Now, how in the world can a knowledgeable pastor, a man who probably has a degree in theology, make such a statement— that Jesus didn't go around judging people? I would call this a judgment.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Matthew 23:14 ff). What's Jesus talking about? These men would actually take advantage of a poor widow in a business deal—a property sale or something they were doing—they would just eat up her inheritance. And at the same time they would go into the synagogue, sometimes in the public street, and make long sweeping prayers. Do you think Jesus was judging anybody yet? Is it judging to tell the truth? Is it judging to acknowledge illegal and immoral conduct and call it what it is? He wasn't through yet. He said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” What? Isn't this judging that he's doing here? “Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?”

I mean, Jesus, if you were there to hear him, I think must have sounded pretty exasperated by this time. When you use the words “fools” and “blind,” you've got to be

speaking pretty strongly to these people. Later he would say, “Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.” You know what extortion is? That’s when you know something about someone and you threaten to expose him unless he pays you money. These men were extortioners. Is it too much of a stretch for us to judge extortioners and condemn their behavior? We can’t do that? Of course we can. Are we supposed to suspend judgment when the truth is staring us right in the face? Well, hardly. Jesus was still not finished talking to these men.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Well, maybe now Jesus was finished? Oh no, not quite, he went on to say, “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” Now I don’t know how strong you think a person would have to get before you would conclude: “I think he’s really sitting in judgment of these people.” Jesus called them snakes, vipers, and said they were not going to escape the damnation of hell.

Now, where does that leave us with the pastor’s remark: “Our task is not to go around judging people. Jesus didn’t do that”? Well, Pastor Hamilton went on to address the question of the hour. “He encourages his congregation to vote, [he says], but when they do they’re neither predictably Republican nor Democratic. [I agree with him on that.] On the issues, many are increasingly frustrated with the war in Iraq; they’re conservative on abortion, but they express compassion for homosexuals. The religious right has [quoting Hamilton] ‘gone too far.’ They’ve lost their focus on the spirit of Jesus and have separated the world into black and white, when the world is much more gray.” And he concluded by saying, “I can’t see Jesus standing with signs at an anti-gay rally. It’s hard to picture that.” Well, yes. It is hard to picture that, but it’s a strawman argument and it’s disappointing to hear the pastor of a congregation of 14,000 people say that. I would be profoundly shocked to see James Dobson standing with signs at an anti-gay rally.

Let’s get real here. Homosexual behavior is described as sinful in the Old Testament and it’s described as sinful in the New Testament. So, while Jesus, as far as we know, never encountered a homosexual, we’ve got to look at a different example to see how Jesus would have responded to a sinner.

It was on a day early in the morning—you’ll find the story in John, the 8th chapter—Jesus came into the temple to teach as was his habit. He sat down and began to teach the people who gathered around him. Then the scribes and the Pharisees, who were becoming increasingly troubled by this man and the influence he was having on people, brought to him a woman who had been caught in adultery. They set her in the middle of the people and said,

“Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?” (John 8:4).

Now they were not entirely correct in this. Moses allowed for the stoning of one who committed adultery, but not without due process. I don't know how people overlook this. It's in our own Constitution. We understand “No man shall be deprived of life or liberty without due process.” Well, it was the same then. In the Old Testament, due process was required. Someone had to make the accusation, evidence had to be heard, the accuser and the witnesses had to cast the first stone. No one else was authorized to act. And if no one wanted to do it, it was not done.

There's a classic example in the New Testament with Mary, who was with child of the Holy Spirit. Joseph discovered this and his immediate thought was she had committed fornication, she'd gotten pregnant, and he had an option. He could have had her stoned. He didn't. The Scriptures tell us that Joseph was a just man and he decided that he would be fair about this, he would put her away—divorce her—privately. But, then of course, he learned what the story was and didn't do so.

Getting back to the story of the woman who was brought to Jesus in the temple, the truth about Jesus in this case is, he was not a priest nor did he hold the civil office of judge. He really had no authority to order or disorder this woman's execution. Now they said this, we're told, to test him so they could have something to accuse Jesus of. They thought they had him on the horns of a dilemma. Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with his finger as though he did not hear because, in fact, the case was not his to hear. When they pressed him on the issue, he raised himself up and said, *“Well, he who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.”*

He makes it clear this is not his call. His statement is consonant with the law, and having made his statement, he stooped down and wrote on the ground some more. “And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.” What a picture this makes. “When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:9-11).

Now, it's really important to notice that Jesus did not declare her innocent. He did not condone her sin, because he admonished her to go and sin no more.

So it makes good Christian sense to express compassion toward homosexuals, but there is no reason why that should lead a Christian to condone gay marriage any more than, in not stoning the woman, Jesus condoned adultery. Sin is sin. Jesus called it what it was and there's not a thing in the world wrong with a Christian calling it what it is still, here, now, today. And because you say a person is a sinner does not mean you're uncompassionate. Basically, it could be a call to repentance and the saving of his life.

When Pastor Hamilton says that the religious right has "gone too far," I think he has gone too far and is, himself, making a judgment. A judgment of those in his general movement that don't agree with him. He said, "They've lost their focus on the spirit of Jesus and have separated the world into black and white, even when the world is much more gray. I can't see Jesus standing with signs at an anti-gay rally. It's hard to picture that." I think the very idea of an anti-gay rally is offensive, but that's not what Christians do when they oppose gay marriage. They are opposed, not to gays, but to the political agenda of the gays. And if gays enter the political arena, they are no more immune to criticism than evangelicals when they enter the political arena.

Lisa Miller says that millions of American evangelicals are eager to shed the Darth Vader image they've inherited from the religious right. What does she mean "Darth Vader image"? That's an evil image. The fact that some evangelicals are stern, that they try to be righteous, try to preach righteousness, try to preach moral conduct in our society—does that mean they're like Darth Vader? She quoted Cal Thomas hitting a common refrain, "What are Christians known for? We're against abortion, we're against same-sex marriage, but what are we for?" Now, I respect Cal Thomas, but give me a break. Christians are well known for our beliefs. People know what Christians are for. One thing we are for, is a moral society.

Social justice—well, now, that's a good thing. People talk a lot about social justice, but social justice will not hold without social morality. There has been an assault on moral society in recent years not seen since the Roman Empire. Christians are said to be against immoral conduct. So be it. When the assault on morality is an assault on the family, the church, and everything Christian—what are you going to do? Stand there and let them beat up on you, and not say anything? It's not a fair game when one can be beaten to a pulp and not be allowed to hit back.

What may be overlooked by Christians in the modern world is the office of the prophet. Now, by that I don't mean seers, crystal ball gazers, or prognosticators of the future. I don't mean some guy that shows up in your church saying he's got a word of prophecy that's just been handed down from the Lord. That was not, for the most part, what prophets were in the Bible. The office of a prophet was to call people back to God's law, to call them away from sin, and to call upon them to repent. The future element of prophecy has to do

with two things: 1) the road you are traveling is going to lead you to calamity and destruction; 2) after the calamity and after the destruction, God will come and save us from ourselves. In the meantime, it is the job of the prophet to point out sin, call it what it is, and call on people to repent. That doesn't make you "Darth Vader."

That message, though, does not make a lot of friends in the establishment. It got Jesus crucified. It got early Christians killed right and left. Why do you think they were persecuted? Why do you think they were condemned and killed? Because they weren't saying anything? Or was it because they were posing a threat to the existing establishment? What are we Christians supposed to do? Cower in the corner and maintain our image of Christianity? An image that has been imposed upon us by people who don't even know what Christianity is? Are we supposed to go to the wall, if necessary, like the Christians of old did?

It's really fascinating to watch the news media wrestle with Christianity. They expect us to fit the image they have of what Jesus was like, and they are shocked—shocked—when we stand up and start talking like prophets. Which, whether you like him or not, is precisely what James Dobson is doing, and what Pastor Hamilton is not doing. But there's a fundamental difference between these two men. Hamilton is the pastor of a mega-church. Dobson is a radio minister, which means he has a great deal more freedom to call things as he sees them. I don't think many people really realize this, but a pastor of a church is just not free to do whatever he wants. There are boards in those churches. There are deacons in those churches. There is the influence that flows down through the people in those churches. Dobson, on the other hand, really doesn't answer to anybody. He has an oversight board, I am sure, that sees to business and how the money is spent, but he doesn't have anyone telling him what he can't say.

He claims the same right the Apostle Paul did when he said, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" (Corinthians 9:19). No pastor of a church can make that claim in quite the same way Paul did, much less the pastor of a mega-church of 14,000 people. Neither the pastor nor the parishioners of a great church such as that are completely free. I would not care to be a member of a mega-church. I attend, what I would call, a mini-church. I know everybody there; everybody knows me. The mini-church retains so much more freedom than a mega-church and freedom is important for me. This ministry and the *Born To Win* radio program are nondenominational. Thus we maintain the freedom to speak to all men without organizational constraints, without having to worry about giving offense to the nabobs of a given denomination. I think Dobson understands this all too well. And while speaking the truth may seem, at times, to be less than compassionate, it is still the responsibility of some Christians in all generations. If it involves judging people, so be it. We may not have all that

much time to get our job done, so we had best be about it.

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