

What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. — Micah 6:8

Bad Bedfellows: Politics and Preaching

I know little about Governor Sarah Palin. The Republican Party's vice-presidential candidate burst on the national scene recently when Senator McCain selected her as his running mate. In the days since that announcement people have been scrambling to learn about her background and governing philosophy. I am sure over the next two months we will all learn a great deal about this new face in the political arena.

One thing that has come to light about Governor Palin disturbs me. In a speech she gave at her former church in Alaska she told a group of ministry students that American soldiers going to war in Iraq are on a "task that is from God." She also stated that it was God's will for a natural gas pipeline to be built on the North Slope of Alaska. (Gene Johnson, "Palin: Iraq War a 'Task That Is From God,'" *Washington Post*, September 3, 2008.)

When politicians co-opt God in this fashion two things become tainted: the church and the state. The church suffers greatly when political leaders distort our tradition and teachings in order to gain support for policy positions. I see nothing in the life of Jesus to suggest war is part of God's will. But sadly, because politicians have a big platform from which to broadcast their theological distortions, such views take hold in the electorate.

But it isn't just the church that suffers from shallow theological assertions made by government officials. The state also loses something important in these moments. When politicians invoke God's will or name in order to muster support for policies a mockery is made of our nation's heritage. We are not a theocracy but a democracy. Political leaders should be ashamed for prostituting their faith in order to win policy arguments. They leave both the church and the state in a worsened condition by doing so.

All of which might make us wonder if there are models in our history of political leaders who did a better job of blending their faith and their public service. Fortunately for Baptists, one of the finest examples in this regard is one of our own: Roger Williams.

Clay Stalnaker was kind to direct me to an article in the September 10 issue of *The New Republic* that describes Williams's political philosophy. The author, Martha Nussbaum, provides one of the best overviews of Williams I have seen. The article is available online for no charge.

What makes Roger Williams such a wisdom figure when it comes to understanding the proper balance between church and state? He was uniquely positioned to contemplate the relationship. As an ordained minister he founded the first Baptist church on American soil. As a government official he founded the first government in recorded history to guarantee religious liberty to all citizens (Rhode Island). From this perch he could

see that religion did best when the government respected the inviolability of each person's conscience. He also argued that the state could only serve all citizens when it refused to use religious doctrine to undergird its positions. By assuring religious liberty on the one hand, and keeping the state free of theological justifications on the other, Williams showed the way to a healthy system where both church and state can flourish.

Governor Palin is not the first official to run afoul of this wise balance. Democrats and Republicans are both guilty of this unfortunate tendency to interject particular religious views into policy debates. As people of faith, and citizens of this great land, we must be alert when this happens. Our religious heritage is too precious to allow leaders to distort it for personal ends. And patriotism demands that we protect our democracy from all attempts to favor one faith over another.

—Jack