
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

April 23, 2008

(8-43)

IN THIS ISSUE:

Catholics, other religious voters propel Clinton to victory in Pa.
Olive wood brings prosperity to CBF-backed microenterprise
Opinion: Our theology of ecology should place us within creation

Catholics, other religious voters propel Clinton to victory in Pa

PHILADELPHIA (ABP) -- Religious voters -- especially the state's all-important Catholic population -- appear to have given New York Sen. Hillary Clinton a big boost in the crucial April 22 Pennsylvania primary. But most religious Catholics and most religious Protestants differed sharply in their support for Clinton and her rival, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama.

Exit polls in the Democratic presidential contest showed that an overwhelming majority of voters who identified themselves as Catholic cast their ballots for Clinton. Catholics -- who represented 36 percent of all Democratic voters -- chose her over Obama by a whopping 40-point margin, 70 percent to 30 percent.

Pennsylvania's Protestants went for Clinton in percentages almost identical to that of the commonwealth's overall Democratic electorate -- 55 percent to Obama's 45 percent. After Catholics, they made up the next largest religious category in the primary, with 24 percent of the total. Jews, who made up 8 percent of Pennsylvania's Democratic turnout, favored Clinton 62-38 percent.

Only three broad religious categories favored Obama in the state. Those who said they were Christian but did not identify as Protestant, Catholic or Mormon made up 13 percent of voters, and they favored Obama by a 2-to-1 margin. He also had a 24-point edge among those listing no religious affiliation, who made up 10 percent of Pennsylvania Democrats. And the six percent of primary voters who listed a religious affiliation other than Christian, Mormon, Jewish or Muslim went for Obama 58-42 percent. The one percent of Pennsylvania voters the exit polls identified as Muslim were not statistically significant enough to measure their support for the respective candidates.

When measured against rate of attendance at religious services, Clinton beat Obama in each of the commonwealth's major categories except those who said they "never" attend worship -- a category he won by the same margin (55-45 percent) that he lost the overall primary. Curiously, the worship-attendance category in which the candidates were most closely matched was among those who said they go to services more often than weekly. Clinton barely edged Obama among those voters 51-49 percent, according to the polls. However, they made up only 9 percent of those who cast ballots in the primary.

One sub-category in which the candidates were statistically tied -- at 50 percent each -- was the 9 percent of voters who said they are Protestant and attend church more than once a week. Conversely, Catholics who said they attend Mass weekly or more often favored Clinton over Obama by a nearly 3-to-1 margin. They made up 18 percent of Democratic voters.

Blue-collar voters experiencing hard economic times -- who make up much of Pennsylvania's Catholic vote -- also preferred Clinton in overwhelming numbers.

Pennsylvania's churchgoing vote for Clinton was in marked contrast to that of many earlier primary campaigns where Obama seemed to have erased her advantage among Catholics. In particular, Obama did well among Catholics in the Feb. 12 "Potomac Primary" contests in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia and the Feb. 19 Wisconsin primary. But her margins among Pennsylvania Catholics were even larger than they were in the two states she won March 5 with strong Catholic support: Texas and Ohio.

Olive wood brings prosperity to CBF-backed microenterprise

ATLANTA (ABP) -- For centuries, the olive branch has been a symbol of peace in Judeo-Christian cultures -- and now olive wood is bringing prosperity through a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-sponsored microenterprise project in the Middle East. "Elizabeth" is one of CBF's field personnel in the Middle East whose full name and specific location the organization does not publicize, citing security concerns. She regularly watches as lives are transformed through the simple process of creating and selling crafts from olive wood. In the project, individuals with disabilities and others who have been marginalized by their communities are able to work and provide for their families. "For many, this is their family's only source of income," said Elizabeth. "The project not only provides employment, but it raises their self-esteem."

In communities where jobs are scarce and many live in poverty, people with disabilities have a difficult time finding employment. In the microenterprise model, a sponsoring organization -- such as a microfinance bank -- lends small amounts of money to people in developing countries as start-up funds for small businesses. For example, an initial loan of as little as \$50 to a woman in many parts of Latin America, Africa, or Asia would enable her to open a business that,

within a few months, could generate enough income to provide for her family's basic needs, employ neighbors, repay the loan and qualify for another one.

Many non-profit groups have begun operating or investing in microfinance programs in the last 30 years. Such loans have demonstrated significant success in lifting small entrepreneurs and entire communities out of poverty while experiencing the dignity of self-sufficiency. In March, CBF officials announced that the organization had received a \$500,000 gift designated for creating a way to invest in microfinance enterprises.

In the businesses Elizabeth has worked with, the women are able to work from home, sewing table runners or tote bags, or carving Christmas ornaments out of the olive wood. They then bring the products back into the shop where they are sold, primarily to overseas clients. From individual online orders to church sales, the linens, ornaments and Nativity sets that are created in this project represent a new way of life for the workers who create them.

For Elizabeth, the most important part of this whole project is the relationships. She said she loves to sit at a table with girls who are creating crafts or to visit the workers in their homes in the evenings. In fact, hospitality is one of the greatest lessons Elizabeth has learned from living in the Middle East. "The people we work with, they have so little, but when they invite you into their homes, they share everything they have," she said.

When she first began serving in the Middle East 11 years ago, Elizabeth said it took time for her to adjust to the new language and culture and she was often discouraged. With a medical background, Elizabeth's ministry originally focused on medical missions. She continues to use her medical skills as she visits workers and their families, providing health education and screenings.

Opinion: Our theology of ecology should place us within creation

By David Gushee(ABP) -- During the most recent Earth Day April 22, Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection ran high-profile TV ads in which Newt Gingrich and Nancy Pelosi, and then Al Sharpton and Pat Robertson, sat together on couches telling the world of their shared concern about climate change.

To those who continue to take the "climate change is a dirty lie" line, you might want to reconsider whether you really want to find yourself to the right of Newt Gingrich and Pat Robertson on this issue.

The climate-change debate may be over, but the deeper theological problems that helped to get us here are definitely not resolved. It may be that the most important work that Christian ministers, scholars and other leaders can do on behalf of the climate and the creation is theological rather than activist. Many people can lobby for a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions. I have. I hope you will. But few have the authority and role to teach our nation's majority Christian population to think differently about God's creation. Theology matters. We neglect it at our peril.

The working theology of most Southern Baptist churches has been privatistic, other-worldly, and soteriological. Church is where you went to find out how you as an individual can find personal happiness and eternal life through a saving relationship with Christ. This goes back before the denominational split in the SBC. I remember being taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1980s that every sermon must take the hearer to the Cross and to a personal decision in relation to the Cross. Another way it was said is that we must preach the gospel in every message through whatever text or issue happens to be before us.

This gospel had little or nothing to do with this world in itself. At most, the world was an inert backdrop against which the drama of individual salvation or damnation played itself out. Many of our most controversial theological debates, such as the Arminianism/Calvinism conflict that still afflicts so many Baptists, assume the same basic paradigm. Does God give us free will in choosing salvation or it is predetermined by God's choice? At this very moment all over the nation you can find earnest young theologians engaged in coffee-shop arguments over this question—a question that once again leaves everything other than soteriology out of the picture altogether.

Somehow a theological paradigm got into our Protestant/Baptist/evangelical bloodstream in which the drama of personal salvation is all that really matters. Modern forms of that paradigm might jazz up the storytelling or extend the emphasis to lifestyle salvation and not just eternal salvation, but the basic paradigm remains the same.

We need a robust and contextually sensitive theology of creation that actually plays a working role in our daily practical theology. We need an updated theological anthropology that goes with that theology of creation. And, yes, we also need a theology of salvation that is congruent with this theology of creation and this anthropology.

When we have turned to creation, many Christians have embraced a fundamental God/world/humanity triple split. The transcendent God creates the "world" or "creation" or "nature." This "world" contains many magnificent creatures and abundant beauty. Human beings are fundamentally distinct from both "world" and "Creator," but have been declared by their Creator to stand in a relationship of dominion or rule over the "world" and its creatures. Meanwhile, what really matters theologically is the action between God and humanity, which is played out in the drama of sin, judgment and salvation.

This kind of theology separates human beings from the rest of the created order. We are perceived as "other" to the rivers and the otters and they are "other" to us. Moreover, we are seen as superior to the rivers and the otters and can freely exploit the "resources" they offer as we see fit.

Climate change is just one reminder that *human beings are part of creation*. So are the many toxins that turn out to be transmitted by every breastfeeding mother in the world to every nursing infant in the world. If we warm up the atmosphere, trigger more intense weather events, and alter rain patterns, we do it to ourselves. If we release toxins into our groundwater, soil and air, we do it to our nursing mothers and their babies.

Remember the bumper sticker "Save the babies, not the whales"? What a nice "pro-life" slam against those lefty environmentalists. But what if it turns out that you can't save the babies unless you are also saving the whales? What if it

turns out that we must save the health of the planetary ecosystems that sustain life for all creatures if we want to save our own lives?

This means more than the obvious but important reminder that caring for God's creation is an aspect of a consistent pro-life ethic. The more fundamental point is theological. Human beings are unique in our status as *imago dei* and we are fellow-creatures with the millions of other species on this planet. And all creatures depend for their life and health on the well being of the air, land, sea, forests, climate and so on.

The interconnectedness of all living things can no longer be seen as an airy slogan of a few dreamers. It is a fact established by hard experience. When China belches dirty coal, Los Angeles gets asthma, and all of us live on a planet a little bit hotter than the year before. It is time that our theology caught up with both scripture and the facts on the ground.

-- David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University.
