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In Indiana, N.C. primaries, Obama cuts into Clinton's Catholic lead

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Echoing his successes in earlier contests, Barack Obama cut into the recent advantage Hillary Clinton had built among Roman Catholics during the Indiana and North Carolina Democratic presidential primaries May 6. Catholics in Indiana and North Carolina still supported the New York senator over her Illinois colleague, according to exit polls. But the margin by which he lost the Catholic vote -- 61-39 percent in Indiana and 51-48 percent in North Carolina -- was much smaller than the 40-point margin by which Catholics favored her in the crucial Pennsylvania primary two weeks prior. Clinton won that contest by 10 percentage points.

In Indiana, Catholics made up 19 percent of all Democratic voters -- a crucial voting bloc in a state in which Clinton barely edged Obama among the overall electorate. But they made up only 8 percent of Democratic primary voters in overwhelmingly Protestant North Carolina. Obama won that state's primary handily.

A large percentage of primary voters -- about a third in each state -- identified themselves as Christians but not as Catholics, Protestants or Mormons. As in several earlier states, they voted overwhelmingly for Obama in North Carolina and by a 10-point margin in Indiana.

Among Democratic voters in both states who did not identify with any religious group, Obama beat Clinton soundly -- by 16 points in Indiana and 40 points in North Carolina. The religiously unaffiliated made up just over a tenth of voters in each state.

In the Hoosier State, Clinton and Obama ran fairly even among all categories of voters as measured by religious attendance. But, as in many earlier contests, Obama had advantages with both the most religious and the least religious as gauged by church attendance.

Voters who said they attend religious services more often than weekly favored him over his rival by 10 points, 55-45 percent. They made up 13 percent of Indiana Democratic primary voters.

But Indiana Democrats who said they worship once a week, but not more often, favored Clinton by a 6-point margin, 53-47 percent. They made up 26 percent of the state's Democratic voters.

Clinton, meanwhile, had a 10-point edge among voters who said they only attend services a few times a year. And Obama -- as he has in the past -- was preferred by voters who never go to church or synagogue. His margin among non-attenders in Indiana -- only four points -- was lower than in other states.

Unlike in Pennsylvania and Ohio contests, frequency of Mass attendance among Catholics seemed to have little effect on candidate preference. Clinton's margins among the most frequent Catholic churchgoers in those states -- both rich and blue-collar voters -- were even higher than her overall Catholic advantage. But in Indiana, which also has a large population of working-class Catholics, the most frequent Mass-goers favored Clinton by a margin similar to that of their less-faithful members.

In North Carolina, meanwhile, Obama did dramatically better (69-29 percent) than Clinton among the 13 percent of primary voters who listed no religious affiliation. However, his support among all voters who said they never attended religious services was only slightly off his overall margin in the state. Those voters made up 12 percent of the Democratic electorate.

Clinton maintained an advantage among the most frequent self-described Protestant churchgoers in the Tar Heel State, but those figures did not count the high percentage of voters who failed to identify themselves as Catholic or Protestant. In North Carolina -- as in other pro-Obama states where exit polls showed high percentages of such non-identifying Christians -- a significant portion of such voters may be members of Baptist, Pentecostal or non-denominational congregations that don't consider themselves Protestant.

The North Carolina Catholic vote, according to the exit polls, was not statistically significant enough to sub-divide it by frequency of Mass attendance.

In both states, the Democratic primaries drew large numbers of people who attend services weekly or more often. They made up 40 percent of the vote in Indiana, and half of Democrats in North Carolina.

Iraq status reportedly divides panel on religious freedom

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- An independent, non-partisan federal panel's failure to issue a recommendation to the State Department about Iraq is reportedly due to political division. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom released its annual report and recommendations May 2. But conspicuously absent from the document was a recommendation on whether to black-list Iraq, which the commission has been eying warily since the United States overthrew dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. "The commissioners said at the press conference several times that they haven't finished their deliberations on Iraq and they will be traveling back to the region later this month to collect more information so they can make a considered decision," Judith Ingram, the panel's spokesperson, said May 8.

The report and recommendations -- made to Congress, President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- included information about religious-freedom conditions in dozens of countries around the world. Although it did not contain information about Iraq or a recommendation, the commissioners sent a separate letter to Rice mentioning their concern about that country. "The Commission has been concerned about the particularly dire conditions affecting non-Muslims in Iraq, including Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, other Christians, Sabeen Mandaeans, Yazidis, and other minority religious communities, who face widespread violence from Sunni insurgents and foreign extremists, as well as pervasive violence, discrimination, and marginalization at the hands of the national government, regional governments, and para-state militias, including those in Kurdish areas. The Commission also concluded that Iraq's government was failing to curb the growing scope and severity of other religious-freedom violations," the letter said, noting the commission's decision last year to focus on Iraq's deteriorating conditions for religious freedom. "We remain seriously concerned about religious freedom conditions in Iraq," the commissioners wrote.

The 1998 law that created USCIRF requires it to report annually on the status of religious liberty worldwide and to recommend that the State Department name nations that commit or tolerate "severe and egregious" violations of religious freedom as "Countries of Particular Concern," or CPCs. Administration officials retain ultimate authority to make those designations and impose sanctions they deem appropriate.

In addition, the commission has made a practice of producing a "watch list" of nations in danger of earning CPC status. Last year, it added Iraq to the watch list. In 2006, the panel added Afghanistan -- another nation struggling to recover from a U.S.-led invasion -- to the watch list. In 2007, the panel was divided -- mostly along party lines -- on whether to elevate Iraq to the watch list or to full CPC status. But the *New York Sun* reported May 1 that the division was even sharper and more partisan this year.

The 10-member panel has nine voting members. Of those presently serving, five commissioners were appointed by Republicans, and four by Democrats. According to the *Sun*, all Democrat-appointed commissioners supported elevating Iraq to CPC status this year, while most Republican-appointed commissioners opposed the designation and the report accompanying it.

A draft of the Iraq recommendation reportedly was harshly critical of the Bush administration's military strategy in Iraq because of its lack of provisions for protecting religious minorities. Some Republican commissioners planned to issue a dissenting report accusing the panel's Democrats of injecting partisanship into the process.

The commission's members and staff almost always make recommendations by consensus and decline to speak publicly about ideological divisions on the panel. Ingram would only say that commissioners will make a recommendation following the trip to the region later in May. They will visit places, such as Syria, to which Iraqi religious minorities have been forced to flee.

Other than Iraq, the panel's recommendations for CPC status and its watch list are unchanged from last year. Commissioners recommended the State Department designate Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam as CPCs.

Although the commission has long recommended most of those nations for CPC status, the State Department has not followed that recommendation for Pakistan and Turkmenistan, has been slow to take action against Saudi Arabia and, last year, removed Vietnam from its CPC list.

The commission's report criticized those decisions, noting that religious-freedom violations are widespread in Pakistan and Turkmenistan. The commission also contended that Vietnam has not improved conditions enough to warrant its removal from the CPC list, which happened on the eve of Bush's November 2006 trip there.

With the exception of Iraq, the panel's watch list is the same as the last two years: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria.

Speakers tell British Baptists fight global warming, poverty

BLACKPOOL, England (ABP) -- British Baptists heard warnings against overconsumption and further degradation of the environment during their annual meeting May 2-4 in Blackpool, Lancashire. Theologian Elaine Storkey told members of the British Union of Great Britain to reject "false prophets" of consumerism, and renowned climate-change expert Sir John Houghton encouraged listeners to switch to clean energy for the earth's sake.

Taking Jeremiah 29:11 as her text ("I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope") Storkey spoke of the effects of global poverty, and warned against those who suggested that the present levels of consumption in rich countries could be sustained indefinitely. "Don't listen to the false prophets; don't listen to the dreams they dream; don't listen if they are proclaiming anything but the good

news that comes from God," she said. "False hope is anything that doesn't have its grounding in the plans and purposes of God."

Storkey, a prominent British evangelical feminist who also runs a Christian charity, said false prophets are those who "offer easy answers, easy solutions, complacency and self-indulgence." She added, "The false prophets have prophesied continual growth and rising consumption. But the earth cannot sustain these levels of consumption and these levels of growth."

Reflecting on the Israelites' experience of exile, she reminded listeners that, even as aliens and strangers, they were called to work and pray for the welfare of their nation, to "live in a land that was not their own as if they belonged there." "We should live respecting our earthly location, respect its cities and work for their welfare," Storkey said.

Her theme built on an earlier on-stage interview with Houghton, one of the United Kingdom's foremost experts on global warming. It was conducted by the Alistair Brown, who was attending his last British Baptist Union meeting as general director of BMS World Mission, the denomination's missions agency. Brown is to become president of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary outside Chicago later this year.

Although it may cost slightly more, Houghton said, British Baptists could make a powerful statement by signing up for Good Energy. The company supplies electricity from wind, hydroelectric and solar-power generators located all over Britain. "We simply must cut down our emissions of greenhouse gases, and one thing we can all do is sign up for greener electricity through Good Energy," said Houghton, the country's former chief meteorologist. "By doing this, it means none of our energy is from fossil fuels. If everyone in this room were to do it, it could make big news."

Houghton's call came in a hard-hitting and impassioned presentation on the disastrous effects of global warming. Using a mixture of slides, clips from the Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth* and an interactive question-and-answer session, Sir John outlined how human activity has led to "unprecedented levels" of climate change. "The impact of global warming is such that I have no hesitation in describing it as a 'weapon of mass destruction,'" he told the audience, referring to a famous quote in a newspaper article he had written on the subject. "I was criticized for writing that, but I have studied climate change for many years -- and it was meant to be strong language."

Houghton explained that the use of fossil fuels over the last 200 years had led to a marked increase in greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere. The combined effect of these gases has been to gradually raise the temperature of the earth's surface. If it continues at the current rate, by the end of the century there will be between a two- and four-degree rise in temperature -- and a corresponding and catastrophic rise in global ocean levels, inundating places like the Netherlands and parts of New York.

But generally, poorer nations will be worse affected, Houghton said. He said there was a "moral imperative" for Britons to act, as the average carbon-dioxide emission per person was much higher in the developed world. "We have become very rich because of all this coal, oil and gas. Initially, we didn't know the damage, but now we do," he said. "We have benefited from this, and now we need to share our right to have all these things we have with the poor nations of the world. "This is a real opportunity for Christians to make a difference."

Houghton has already exerted a global influence of his own on the subject. One of his talks several years ago directly led to the vice president of governmental affairs of America's National Association of Evangelicals, Richard Cizik, changing his views on global warming.

In other business, British Baptists installed John Weaver, principal of South Wales Baptist College, as president of the denomination.

They also took up donations toward scholarship fund for the Amsterdam 400 conference, scheduled for next July. The European Baptist Federation is holding a major celebration in Amsterdam marking 400 years since the Baptist movement began there in 1609. The gifts will be used to help participants from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Opinion: How are Christians accountable to each other?

By David Gushee

(ABP) -- One of the most vexing issues in Christian life is the question of accountability. At every level of Christian community, the question arises. We know that Christians are accountable to God for their lives and will one day actually give an account (Mt. 25:31-46; 1 Cor. 4:4, 2 Cor. 5:10). But are we accountable to each other? Which others? Are you accountable to: your pastor? Fellow church members? Fellow Sunday school classmates? All members of your church? All Baptists? All Christians everywhere? And, if the answer is "yes" to any of these, how is this accountability exercised?

It might be helpful to begin with those relationships in which accountability seems clear, and then move from there to the gray areas. I will speak in a personal voice here, and you can draw the parallels to your own life. I know that I am accountable to God for the entirety of my life. Even though I trust Christ for salvation, I do not presume that this frees me from accountability for the conduct of my life. Quite the contrary -- it heightens my accountability as one who has publicly confessed to serve Jesus Christ as Lord of my life.

As a Sunday school teacher at a particular local church, I know that I am accountable to the church leaders who appointed me to this role, and to the members who choose to attend the class. I am accountable to them for the fulfillment of my specific duties in this role -- most particularly competent Bible teaching, but also a measure of pastoral care for the little community under my charge.

As a teacher at McAfee School of Theology and Mercer University, I am likewise accountable to the dean, provost, and president, to the students, and in a sense to my colleagues. I am accountable in a specifically Christian sense because

of the nature of my work, but also in a general “workplace” sense like anyone else who has a job that comes with specific accountability relationships.

As a husband, I am accountable to my wife for the conduct of my life in every area that relates to her and touches on her life -- which is nearly everything. I am accountable to my children for a number of specific responsibilities, as I am to my parents for other responsibilities and my sisters for yet others. As a citizen I have certain responsibilities for which I may be held accountable.

I can think of only one biblical category that can encompass all of these types of accountability and yet can set some coherent limits on them: the category of the covenant. So my tentative thesis is that we are accountable in every relationship in which we have explicitly covenanted with a person or a community for the fulfillment of certain specific promises and responsibilities.

We do that explicitly at weddings, baby dedications, baptisms, ministerial installations, and in starting work at most jobs. We even do it implicitly in many instances in which our conduct affects the well-being of others. One might say that a restaurant has a covenant with its customers to serve them clean food, and a car company has a covenant with its customers to offer them a road-worthy vehicle.

Still, this leaves us with a number of murky and unresolved questions of accountability. Am I accountable as a church member to every other member of First Baptist Church? Am I accountable as a Baptist to all other Baptists? Am I accountable as a writer to everyone who reads my columns and books? Am I accountable as a Christian to all other Christians?

Errors abound on all sides, leaning either toward hyper-accountability or toward non-accountability. Probably many of us have known Christian friends or fellow church members who believe it is their God-given role to correct us for our faults on a regular basis. Here the words of Paul resonate: “it is a very small thing I should be judged by you or any human court. I do not even judge myself...It is the Lord who judges me” (I Cor. 4:3-4). Paul here says that while servants of Christ are indeed “stewards of God’s mysteries,” their master is God, and only to God will they give an account.

On the other hand, probably many of us have also known of cases in which outrageous stuff is going on in a family, church, workplace, school or nation -- and no one is holding anyone to account. This silence may be occurring in the name of personal freedom, or a commitment to non-judgmentalism, or fear of a confrontation, or in a diffusion of responsibility in which no one is accountable to anyone else for anything. Paul himself was certainly unwilling to accept that the congregations he founded would be characterized by such laxity (I Cor. 5).

One possible solution for us is to do better in clarifying on the front end what vision of accountability, if any, will characterize our relationships. If we voluntarily covenant together -- in a friendship, or a congregation, or a workplace -- to have X level of accountability to each other, related to Y matters, exercised in Z fashion, then uncertainty about accountability can be diminished.

I am coming to believe that only when we covenant together about how accountability will work in a relationship should we expect either to hold others accountable or to be held accountable ourselves. Otherwise, all accountability is left to God alone -- who alone can be trusted to get accountability right, in any case.

-- David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University. His latest book is titled, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center*.
