Jesus Is Not a Republican

By RANDALL BALMER

In November 2002, 30 years after my previous visit to Wheaton College to hear George McGovern, I approached the podium in Edman Chapel to address the student body. At evangelical colleges like Wheaton, in Illinois, there are two kinds of required gatherings: chapel and convocation. The former is religious in nature, whereas a speaker at convocation has the license to be far more discursive, even secular — or political. The college's chaplain, however, had invited me to preach in chapel, not convocation, and so, despite temptation, I delivered a homily that was, as I recall, not overly long, appropriate to the occasion, and reasonably well received.

I doubt very much that I will be invited back to Edman Chapel. One of the benefits of being reared within evangelicalism, I suppose, is that you understand the workings of the evangelical subculture. I know, for example, that when my new book on evangelicals appears, the minions of the religious right will seek to discredit me rather than engage the substance of my arguments. The initial wave of criticism, as an old friend who has endured similar attacks reminded me, will be to deny that I am, in fact, really an evangelical Christian. When that fails — and I'll put up my credentials as an evangelical against anyone's! — the next approach will be some gratuitous personal attack: that I am a member of the academic elite, spokesman for the Northeastern establishment, misguided liberal, prodigal son, traitor to the faith, or some such. Another evangelical friend with political convictions similar to mine actually endured a heresy trial.

The evangelical subculture, which prizes conformity above all else, doesn't suffer rebels gladly, and it is especially intolerant of anyone with the temerity to challenge the shibboleths of the religious right. I understand that. Despite their putative claims to the faith, the leaders of the religious right are vicious toward anyone who refuses to kowtow to their version of orthodoxy, and their machinery of vilification strikes with ruthless, dispassionate efficiency. Longtime friends (and not a few family members) will shuffle uneasily around me and studiously avoid any sort of substantive conversation about the issues I raise — and then quietly strike my name from their Christmas-card lists. Circle the wagons. Brook no dissent.

And so, since my chances of being invited back to Edman Chapel have dropped from slim to none, I offer here an outline of what I would like to say to the students at Wheaton and, by extension, to evangelicals everywhere.

Evangelicals have come a long way since my visit to Edman Chapel in 1972. We have moved from cultural obscurity — almost invisibility — to becoming a major force in American society. Jimmy Carter's run for the presidency launched us into the national consciousness, but evangelicals abandoned Carter by the end of the 1970s, as the nascent religious right forged an alliance with the Republican Party.

In terms of cultural and political influence, that alliance has been a bonanza for both sides. The coalition dominates talk radio and controls a growing number of state legislatures and local school boards. It is seeking, with some initial success, to recast Hollywood and the entertainment

industry. The Republicans have come to depend on religious-right voters as their most reliable constituency, and, with the Republicans firmly in command of all three branches of the federal government, leaders of the religious right now enjoy unprecedented access to power.

And what has the religious right done with its political influence? Judging by the platform and the policies of the Republican Party — and I'm aware of no way to disentangle the agenda of the Republican Party from the goals of the religious right — the purpose of all this grasping for power looks something like this: an expansion of tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, the continued prosecution of a war in the Middle East that enraged our longtime allies and would not meet even the barest of just-war criteria, and a rejiggering of Social Security, the effect of which, most observers agree, would be to fray the social-safety net for the poorest among us. Public education is very much imperiled by Republican policies, to the evident satisfaction of the religious right, and it seeks to replace science curricula with theology, thereby transforming students into catechumens.

America's grossly disproportionate consumption of energy continues unabated, prompting demands for oil exploration in environmentally sensitive areas. The Bush administration has jettisoned U.S. participation in the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, which called on Americans to make at least a token effort to combat global warming. Corporate interests are treated with the kind of reverence and deference once reserved for the deity.

The Bible contains something like 2,000 references to the poor and the believer's responsibility for the poor. Sadly, that obligation seems not to have trickled down into public policy. On judicial matters, the religious right demands appointees who would diminish individual rights to privacy with regard to abortion. At the same time, it approves a corresponding expansion of presidential powers, thereby disrupting the constitutionally mandated system of checks and balances.

The torture of human beings, God's creatures — some guilty of crimes, others not — has been justified by the Bush administration, which also believes that it is perfectly acceptable to conduct surveillance on American citizens without putting itself to the trouble of obtaining a court order. Indeed, the chicanery, the bullying, and the flouting of the rule of law that emanates from the nation's capital these days make Richard Nixon look like a fraternity prankster.

Where does the religious right stand in all this? Following the revelations that the U.S. government exported prisoners to nations that have no scruples about the use of torture, I wrote to several prominent religious-right organizations. Please send me, I asked, a copy of your organization's position on the administration's use of torture. Surely, I thought, this is one issue that would allow the religious right to demonstrate its independence from the administration, for surely no one who calls himself a child of God or who professes to hear "fetal screams" could possibly countenance the use of torture. Although I didn't really expect that the religious right would climb out of the Republican Party's cozy bed over the torture of human beings, I thought perhaps they might poke out a foot and maybe wiggle a toe or two.

I was wrong. Of the eight religious-right organizations I contacted, only two, the Family Research Council and the Institute on Religion and Democracy, answered my query. Both were

eager to defend administration policies. "It is our understanding, from statements released by the Bush administration," the reply from the Family Research Council read, "that torture is already prohibited as a means of collecting intelligence data." The Institute on Religion and Democracy stated that "torture is a violation of human dignity, contrary to biblical teachings," but conceded that it had "not yet produced a more comprehensive statement on the subject," even months after the revelations. Its president worried that the "anti-torture campaign seems to be aimed exclusively at the Bush administration," thereby creating a public-relations challenge.

I'm sorry, but the use of torture *under any circumstances* is a moral issue, not a public-relations dilemma.

And what about abortion, the issue that the religious right decided in the early 1980s was its signature concern? Since January 2003, the Republican and religious-right coalition has controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress — yet, curiously, it has not tried to outlaw abortion. Why? Could it be that its members are less interested in actually reducing the incidence of abortion itself (in which case they should seek to alter public opinion on the matter) than in continuing to use abortion as a potent political weapon?

Equally striking is the rhetoric that leaders of the religious right use to motivate their followers. In the course of traveling around the country, I have been impressed anew by the pervasiveness of the language of militarism among leaders of the religious right. Patrick Henry College, according to its founding president, Michael Farris, "is training an army of young people who will lead the nation and shape the culture with biblical values." Rod Parsley, pastor of World Harvest Church, in Ohio, issues swords to those who join his organization, the Center for Moral Clarity, and calls on his followers to "lock and load" for a "Holy Ghost invasion." The Traditional Values Coalition advertises its "Battle Plan" to take over the federal judiciary. "I want to be invisible. I do guerrilla warfare," Ralph Reed, former director of the Christian Coalition, famously declared about his political tactics in 1997. I wonder how that sounds in the ears of the Prince of Peace.

Such rhetoric and policies are a scandal, a reproach to the gospel I honor and to the Jesus I love. I went to Sunday school nearly every week of my childhood. But I must have been absent the day they told us that the followers of Jesus were obliged to secure even greater economic advantages for the affluent, to deprive those Jesus called "the least of these" of a living wage, and to despoil the environment by sacrificing it on the altar of free enterprise. I missed the lesson telling me that I should turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, even those designated as my enemies.

The Bible I read says something quite different. It tells the story of ancient Israel's epic struggle against injustice and bondage — and of the Almighty's investment in the outcome of that struggle. But the Hebrew Scriptures also caution against the imperiousness of that people, newly liberated from their oppressors, lest they treat others the way they themselves were treated back in Egypt. The prophets enjoin Yahweh's chosen people to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" and warn of the consequences of failing to do so: exile and abandonment. "Administer true justice," the prophet Zechariah declares on behalf of the Lord Almighty. "Show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other."

The New Testament echoes those themes, calling the followers of Jesus to care for orphans and widows, to clothe the naked, and to shelter the homeless. The New Testament I read says that, in the eyes of Jesus, there is no preference among the races and no distinction between the sexes. The Jesus I try to follow tells me that those who take on the role of peacemakers "will be called the children of God," and this same Jesus spells out the kind of behavior that might be grounds for exclusion from the kingdom of heaven: "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

We could have a lively discussion and even vigorous disagreement over whether it is incumbent upon the *government* to provide services to the poor, but those who argue against such measures should be prepared with some alternative program or apparatus.

The agenda of the Republican-religious-right coalition, moreover, is utterly disconsonant with the distinguished record of evangelical activists in the 19th century. They interpreted the teachings of Jesus to mean that, yes, they really did bear responsibility for those on the margins of society, especially for the emancipation of slaves and for the rights of women.

In addition to distorting the teachings of Jesus, the religious right has also been cavorting with some rather unsavory characters in its quest for political and cultural power. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, who last year pleaded guilty to accepting $2.4-million worth of bribes, had earned a 100-percent approval rating from Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition while a member of the House of Representatives. During more than two decades as a member of the state Legislature, Jim West, a former mayor of Spokane, Wash., sponsored various bills aimed at curtailing the rights of gays and lesbians, as well as a bill that would have outlawed any consensual sexual contact between teenagers; the voters of Spokane recalled West last December, after he admitted to arranging gay sexual liaisons over the Internet and offering city jobs in exchange for sexual favors.

For the better part of three decades now, we've been treated to the moral sermonizing of William J. Bennett, who wrote *The Book of Virtues* and served as Ronald Reagan's secretary of education and as one of Bill Clinton's most relentless critics. We now know that Bennett is a compulsive gambler. Ralph Reed, currently a Republican candidate for lieutenant governor of Georgia — the first step on his road to the White House — has always preached against gambling as part of his "family values" rhetoric. He has also done consulting work for Enron (which engaged in other forms of gambling) and accepted as much as $4.2-million from Indian tribes intent on maintaining a regional monopoly for their casinos. "I need to start humping in corporate accounts," he wrote to the lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Tony Perkins, a graduate of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University and head of the Family Research Council, arguably the most influential religious-right organization aside from Focus on the Family, has had ties to white-supremacist organizations in his native Louisiana.

The purpose in ticking off a roll call of rogues associated with the religious right (and the list could have been longer) is not to single individuals out for obloquy and certainly not to suggest the absence of moral failings on the other side of the political spectrum — though I must say that

some of this behavior makes Bill Clinton's adolescent dalliances pale by comparison. The point, rather, is to argue that those who make it their business to demand high standards of moral rectitude from others ought to be able to approach those standards themselves. My evangelical theology tells me that we are, all of us, sinners and flawed individuals. But it also teaches the importance of confession, restitution, and amendment of behavior — whether it be an adulterous tryst, racial intolerance, or prevarication in the service of combating one's enemies. We have seen nothing of the sort from these putatively Christian power brokers.

"Do not be misled," St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians. "Bad company corrupts good character." Jesus himself asked: "What good would it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" The coalition with the Republican Party is blasphemy, pure and simple.

It has also led to a denigration of the faith. The early years of the religious right provide a case in point. The pursuit of political power and influence in the 1980s came at a fearsome price. For most of the 20th century, evangelicalism had existed primarily within its own subculture, one that protected individuals from the depredations of the world. It was an insular universe, and the world outside of the subculture, including the political realm, was corrupt and corrupting. Believers beware. Along about 1980, however, evangelicals, newly intoxicated with political power and cultural influence, succumbed to the seductions of the culture. It was during the Reagan years that we began to hear about the so-called prosperity gospel, the notion that God will reward true believers with the emoluments of this world. Evangelicalism was still a subculture in the 1980s, but it was no longer a counterculture. It had lost its edge, its capacity for cultural critique.

A number of people have asked me what the religious right wants. What would America look like if the religious right had its way? I've thought long and hard about that question, and the best answer I can come up with is that the religious right hankers for the kind of homogeneous theocracy that the Puritans tried to establish in 17th-century Massachusetts: to impose their vision of a moral order on all of society.

The Puritans left England and crossed the Atlantic in the 1630s to construct what John Winthrop called a "city on a hill," an example to the rest of the world. The Puritans configured church and state so the two would be both coterminous and mutually reinforcing, but only one form of worship was permitted.

Without question, Puritanism in 17th-century Massachusetts was a grand and noble vision, but it ultimately collapsed beneath its own weight, beneath the arrogance of its own pretensions. By the middle of the century, Puritanism had become ingrown and calcified, the founding generation unable to transmit its piety to its children. By the waning decades of the century, in the face of encroaching pluralism — Anglicans and Quakers — and the rise of a merchant class, the Puritan ministers of Massachusetts were making increasingly impassioned, frantic calls for repentance. What frightened them — no less than the leaders of the religious right at the turn of the 21st century — was pluralism.

Despite the best efforts of the Puritan clergy, spirituality in New England continued to languish into the 18th century. The tide began to turn when fresher and more energetic preachers entered

the scene in the 1730s. George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Isaac Backus, and others challenged the cozy relationship between church and state and thereby reinvigorated religion in New England. The force of their ideas and their assault on the status quo spread throughout the Atlantic colonies in an utterly transformative event known as the Great Awakening.

The lesson was clear. Religion functions best *outside* the political order, and often as a challenge to the political order. When it identifies too closely with the state, it becomes complacent and ossified, and efforts to coerce piety or to proscribe certain behavior in the interests of moral conformity are unavailing.

Thankfully, the founding fathers recognized that wisdom and codified it into the First Amendment, the best friend that religion has ever had. The First Amendment was a concession to pluralism, and its guarantee of a "free market" of religion has ensured a salubrious religious marketplace unmatched anywhere else in the world.

Unfortunately, some of the clergy in New England still refused to concede their prerogatives and surrender to the religious marketplace. Congregationalists in Massachusetts and Connecticut clung stubbornly to their establishment status, not wanting to forfeit the tax subsidies afforded them by the state. From his post in Litchfield, Conn., Lyman Beecher resisted "the fall of the standing order" in Connecticut. In 1820, however, a scant two years after Connecticut did away with state-subsidized religion (Massachusetts would follow suit in 1833, the last state to do so), Beecher was forced to repent. Although he and his fellow Congregationalist ministers had feared "that our children would scatter like partridges," the effect of disestablishment was quite the opposite. "Before we had been standing on what our fathers had done," Beecher recalled in his autobiography, "but now we were obliged to develop all our energy." After disestablishment, he wrote, "there came such a time of revival as never before."

The leaders of the religious right are also frightened by pluralism. That's understandable, especially for a movement that propagates the ideology that America is — and always has been — a *Christian* nation. Pluralism is messy. It requires understanding, accommodation, and tolerance, especially if we hope to maintain some semblance of comity and social order. The Puritans hated pluralism, as did the Protestants of the 19th century in the face of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Italy. Changes in the immigration laws in 1965 brought to the United States new hues of ethnic and religious pluralism, a rich and diverse palette unimaginable to the Protestants of the 1950s, let alone to the Puritans of the 1650s.

By the late 1970s, the leaders of the religious right felt their hegemony over American society slipping away. One reading of the religious right is that many evangelicals believed that their faith could no longer compete in the new, expanded religious marketplace. No wonder the religious right wants to renege on the First Amendment. No wonder the religious right seeks to encode its version of morality into civil and criminal law. No wonder the religious right wants to emblazon its religious creeds and symbols on public property. Faced now with a newly expanded religious marketplace, it wants to change the rules of engagement so that evangelicals can enjoy a competitive advantage. Rather than gear up for new competition, as Beecher did in the 19th century, the religious right seeks to use the machinations of government and public policy to impose its vision of a theocratic order.

But pluralism is a good thing. It keeps religious groups from resting on their laurels — or their endowments, in the case of mainline Protestantism — and makes them competitive in the marketplace of ideas.

Ironically, the one movement that, more than any other, has in the past exploited the free marketplace of religion to its advantage is evangelical Protestantism. Evangelicals have understood almost instinctively how to speak the idiom of the culture, whether it be the open-air preaching of George Whitefield in the 18th century, the circuit riders and the camp meetings of the antebellum period, the urban revivalism of Billy Sunday at the turn of the 20th century, or the use of radio and television by various preachers in the 20th and 21st centuries.

America has been kind to religion, but not because the government has imposed religious faith or practice on its citizens. Quite the opposite. Religion has flourished because religious belief and expression have been voluntary, not compulsory. We are a religious people precisely because we have recognized the rights of our citizens to be religious in a different way from us, or even not to be religious at all. We are simultaneously a people of faith and citizens of a pluralistic society, one in which Americans believe that it is inappropriate, even oppressive, to impose the religious views of a minority — or even of a majority — on all of society. That is the genius of America, and it is also the reason that religion thrives here as nowhere else.

As I argued in my testimony as an expert witness in the Alabama Ten Commandments case, religion has prospered in this country precisely because the government has stayed out of the religion business. The tireless efforts on the part of the religious right to eviscerate the First Amendment in the interests of imposing its own theocratic vision ultimately demeans the faith even as it undermines the foundations of a democratic order that thrives on pluralism.

Jesus himself recognized that his followers held a dual citizenship. "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's," he said, "and to God what is God's." Negotiating that dual status can be fraught, but it is incumbent upon responsible citizens of this earthly realm to abide by certain standards of behavior deemed essential for the functioning of the social order. Much as I would like all of my fellow Americans to be Christians or vegetarians or Democrats, I have no right to demand it. The leaders of the religious right have failed to observe even the most basic etiquette of democracy.

Is there a better way? Yes, I think so. It begins with an acknowledgement that religion in America has always functioned best from the margins, outside of the circles of power, and that any grasping for religious hegemony ultimately trivializes and diminishes the faith. The Puritans of the 17th century learned that lesson the hard way, as did the mainline Protestants of the 1950s, who sought to identify their faith with the white, middle-class values of the Eisenhower era. In both cases, it was the evangelicals who stepped in and offered a corrective, a vibrant expression of the faith untethered to cultural institutions that issued, first, in the Great Awakening and, second, in the evangelical resurgence of the 1970s.

For America's evangelicals, reclaiming the faith would produce a social and political ethic rather different from the one propagated by the religious right. Care for the earth and for God's creation provides a good place to start, building on the growing evangelical discontent with the rapacious

environmental policies of the Republican-religious-right coalition. Once thinking evangelicals challenge religious-right orthodoxy on environmental matters, further challenges are possible. A full-throated, unconditional denunciation of the use of torture, even on political enemies, would certainly follow. Evangelicals opposed to abortion would be well advised to follow some Catholic teaching a bit further on this issue. As early as 1984, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the late archbishop of Chicago, talked about opposition to abortion as part of a "seamless garment" that included other "life issues": care for the poor and feeding the hungry, advocacy for human rights, and unequivocal opposition to capital punishment. Surely the adoption of what Bernardin called a "consistent ethic of life" carries with it greater moral authority than opposition to abortion alone.

As for abortion itself, evangelicals should consider carefully where they invest their energies on this matter. Both sides of the abortion debate acknowledge that making abortion illegal will not stop abortion itself; it *will* make abortions more dangerous for the life and health of the mother. The other complication is legal and constitutional. Especially at a time when the government's surveillance activities are already intruding on the privacy and the civil liberties of Americans, we should consider carefully the wisdom of allowing the government to determine a matter properly left to a woman and her conscience.

I have no interest in making abortion illegal; I would like to make it unthinkable. The most effective way to limit the incidence of abortion is to change the moral climate surrounding the issue — through education or even through public-service campaigns similar to those that discourage smoking or drugs or alcohol or spousal abuse.

Taking such a broader approach to "life issues" would affect evangelical attitudes not only toward abortion and capital punishment but also to matters related to race and to the poor. The social and economic policies of this nation seem to have created a permanent underclass. If evangelicals believe that God cares about the fate of a fetus, it shouldn't require a huge leap in logic to surmise that God also cares about people of color or prisoners or immigrants or people with an orientation other than heterosexual.

Finally, an evangelical social and political ethic would take into account the pluralistic context of American society and recognize the genius of the First Amendment. That requires respect for the canons of democracy and for the importance of public education to ensure its future. It acknowledges, for example, that the proper venue for the teaching of creationism or intelligent design is the home or the Sunday-school classroom, not the science curriculum. It means refusing to identify the symbols of the faith — the Bible, prayer, the Decaloguewith the political order. In short, our best hope for the recovery of an evangelical social and political ethic lies with recognizing that the faith functions best independent of the political order.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of this grand experiment of democracy in America has been its vigilance over the rights of minorities. Evangelicals should appreciate that, for they were once a minority themselves. Evangelicals need once again to learn to be a counterculture, much as they were before the rise of the religious right, before succumbing to the seductions of power. The early followers of Jesus were a counterculture because they stood apart from the prevailing

order. A counterculture can provide a critique of the powerful because it is utterly disinterested — it has no investment in the power structure itself.

Indeed, the most effective and vigorous religious movements in American history have identified with the downtrodden and have positioned themselves on the fringes of society rather than at the centers of power. The Methodists of the 19th century come to mind, as do the Mormons. In the 20th century, Pentecostalism, which initially appealed to the lower classes and made room for women and people of color, became perhaps the most significant religious movement of the century.

The leaders of the religious right have led their sheep astray from the gospel of Jesus Christ to the false gospel of neoconservative ideology and into the maw of the Republican Party. And yet my regard for the flock and my respect for their integrity is undiminished. Ultimately it is they who must reclaim the gospel and rescue us from the distortions of the religious right.

The Bible I read tells of freedom for captives and deliverance from oppression. It teaches that those who refuse to act with justice or who neglect the plight of those less fortunate have some explaining to do. But the Bible is also about good news. It promises redemption and forgiveness, a chance to start anew and, with divine help, to get it right. My evangelical theology assures me that no one, not even Karl Rove or James Dobson, lies beyond the reach of redemption, and that even a people led astray can find their way home.

That sounds like good news to me. Very good news indeed.

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