

Avoiding the trappings of power

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November 19, 2012

I wrote that [Progressive Christians are entering the age of relevancy](#), but I hope that we can quickly end our back-patting congratulations and get to work. I also pray that we will not respond to our relevancy by becoming ensnared by the trappings of power. On many accounts, it would be good to learn from the Religious Right and their demise. What happened? Why did they fall into irrelevancy? Can we avoid the same problems? How?

First, we should take heed before we ally ourselves too closely with one political party. If we align ourselves with one party, we could lose our moral grounding. We saw it happen with the Religious Right, when Evangelist Billy Graham endorsed Governor Mitt Romney and quickly took Mormonism off the list of cults on his website. Clearly, the Republican agenda took precedence over his beliefs. I applaud the open-mindedness, but the fact that the Religious Right leadership suddenly said that Mormonism was a-okay, did not sit well with many Evangelicals who didn't want to watch their next president being sworn in with a Book of Mormon instead of the Bible.

Similarly, progressives could be so swept up in the agenda of one particular party, that we forget our faith. I have watched as the prominent theologian Dr. Cornell West has spoken for the poor, even amongst criticism that they might be hurting President Obama. But West is not content to become a parrot of the Democratic talking points, and so he keeps speaking on behalf of the poor.

Political power can be a heady experience for many of us who have work in humble roles as religious leaders. But we will need to be on guard that we do not put a party before our faith. There are a number of issues that ought to keep progressive Christians awake at night, and we cannot keep silent because we are afraid of losing power within the Democratic Party.

Second, we need to keep listening to the next generation. When I was growing up in the 80s, my parents became swept away with Religious Right politics

in the era of the Gingrich revolution. Abortion became such an important issue that they seemed to lose sight of all the other things that fueled our beliefs. When I became more engaged in poverty, feminist and environmental issues, I left the movement in search of more compassionate beliefs and subsequent Thanksgiving dinners became unbearable. Without a lot of tenacity and love on both sides, politics could have destroyed my relationship with my family.

This isn't just my story. It's a common narrative. It is the story of many who were not allowed to struggle with their faith in light of their gender, sexuality, care for creation or concern for the poor. Instead, we were asked to toe the party line and our intergenerational relationships have been strained.

Progressive Christians should not make the same mistake. The next generation is much more diverse and they have been hit by the difficult economy in devastating ways. Their issues will not be the same as ours, so we need to keep listening and responding.

Third, we need to reject polarization and seek every opportunity to ally. I know that I've been writing in very binary terms so far, talking about Progressive Christians and the Religious Right. Even as I do, I know we need a corrective to this type of thinking. I know progressives and conservatives who will not unite for a cause together, simply because they refuse to be at the same table together.

This is dangerous because it can cause progressive Christians to form our beliefs in mere reaction to conservative politics. We can get stuck in echo chambers where we never hear other points of view. It can cause us to look at our Christian brothers and sisters as enemies. And it could keep us divided when we need to be working with one another.

In this, I learned from my Evangelical friends. Baptists, Catholics, and Pentecostals did not always have a high opinion of one another, but they learned to set aside those differences when they became concerned about a particular cause.

Likewise, we should always seek unity and common ground whenever possible.

This is an important time for many Christians who have been working alongside the poor, claiming their feminism, respecting scientific discovery, caring for the earth, and yearning for marriage equality. Yet, as we enter this age of relevancy, we will need to proceed with awareness and caution.