

Dare to discipline? Kerry and communion: Kerry and communion

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

Is there anything laypeople can do to get themselves kicked out of the United Methodist Church?" My question stumped the speaker, expert on Methodist church law though he was. He had just delivered a detailed list of offenses that could get Methodist ministers cast into outer darkness. Wanting to democratize the misery a bit, I wondered if the church disciplined anyone other than ministers.

He thought hard, then replied, "I think there's something in the Book of Discipline about not being able to belong to a hate group."

That's it! As long as you don't join the Ku Klux Klan, you can be a Methodist. It is hard to imagine setting the bar any lower.

From this perspective, Roman Catholic efforts to discipline John Kerry because of his support of abortion rights look singularly odd. Kerry is not a minister in his church, nor is he a theologian. Yet some Catholics want him barred from communion.

To some extent, the effort reeks of partisan politics, not religious fidelity. Catholic politicians have been running on pro-choice platforms for years without this degree of angst. Why the concern now? And why just for Kerry? Other Catholic politicians may be targets, but they seem an afterthought compared to the focus on a candidate for the highest office in the land.

Deal Hudson, editor of the Catholic magazine *Crisis* and a consultant to the White House on Catholic issues, has explicitly said the denial of communion should begin and end with Kerry, and not extend to pro-choice Catholic candidates for other offices. Even more strongly, he suggests that priests should denounce Kerry from their pulpits "whenever and wherever he campaigns as a Catholic" (*Washington Post*, May 7). The focus on Kerry alone—not on other Democratic or Republican candidates—seems blatantly partisan.

It also contrasts starkly with previous modes of Catholic witness. In 1984, when pro-choice Catholic Geraldine Ferrara was on the Democratic ticket with Walter Mondale, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin articulated a comprehensive Catholic perspective: “Our moral, political, and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker . . . Consistency means we can’t have it both ways” (quoted by Mark Shield on CNN.com, May 7).

What has traditionally made Catholic political engagement so interesting is precisely that it could not be reduced to one issue. It has linked opposition to abortion with opposition to the death penalty. Catholic proponents of traditional teaching about sex have also opposed the arms race and have advocated for the poor and the environment. That venerable tradition of Catholic moral teaching is in danger of being reduced to the level of a bumper sticker.

For all of that, it is difficult to disagree with the idea of excommunicating or disciplining a church member in cases of extreme moral failure. The complaint that conservative bishops are “mixing religion with politics” is an odd one for liberal Protestants to take up. After all, liberal Protestants defended church leaders in the civil rights movement when they were charged with mixing religion and politics. And they defended the work of pastors like Desmond Tutu and Peter Storey in fighting apartheid in South Africa. They rightly celebrated the current pope’s fight against communism.

My own preaching saddlebag is chock-full of sermon examples in which the church has wielded its political muscle for good in the broader society—Oscar Romero opposing El Salvador’s brutal repression of dissidents to the point of his own martyrdom; Dietrich Bonhoeffer working against the Nazi empire to the point of being willing to use violence (and thereby, he feared, risking his own salvation); Christians courageously standing up against American aggression abroad.

The *New York Times* has been apoplectic at the way Kerry’s critics are supposedly mixing church and state. But it once praised Cardinal Joseph Francis Rummel of New Orleans when he excommunicated a white supremacist Democratic political boss (cited by Shields).

The church should not be silent in the face of moral failure in the political sphere—that much is a given in mainline Protestantism. Some United Methodist bishops spoke up when two of its sons, George Bush and Dick Cheney, led the nation into war in Iraq on flimsy evidence and for questionable motives. Bishops signed petitions, took out ads in major national publications, filmed TV commercials—all in an effort to change their leaders' minds and stop an unjust war before it started.

What if they had simply excommunicated them? What if they had said, "Jesus is clearer about violence than about almost anything else in scripture. The burden of proof for going to war has not been met. Please repent before you come back to us."

The move probably would have backfired. Bush would have looked quite the martyr for standing up to a church brazen and foolish enough to mix religion with politics. It would probably have hurt the church in the offering plates. Yet it still might have been the right thing to do. Grace, as Bonhoeffer wrote and then demonstrated, must be costly, and not only to those on the receiving end of such severe discipline.

But if such an exercise of church discipline were to make sense, it would have to be based on concern for Bush's and Cheney's souls. The church has traditionally excommunicated those who arrogantly continue in open and obvious sin without repentance. How could the church do otherwise when souls are in danger? The church responds by making its split with the person public and unmistakable in hopes that the dramatic gesture will return them to grace. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 lay out clear guidelines for such a procedure.

Church discipline matters not just for the sake of affecting elections, but for the care of souls and for the holiness of the church "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb.12:14).

In a sense, what it means to be a mainline Protestant, as opposed to a Catholic or an Anabaptist, is that one cannot be excommunicated for anything (except, apparently, for joining the Klan). While such severe forms of ecclesial discipline are rare in Anabaptist or Catholic circles, and problematic when exercised (as in the case of the Catholic Church barring remarried persons from communion), they remain options that help define those communities. Any gathering of persons requires some sort of boundary to have integrity. How much more so in the case of the church, which seeks to grow in grace and witness to the world.

Perhaps the Klan example is salutary here. We would be right to remove a klansman from our midst. His soul is in grave danger for his racism. Our fellowship is doing him a disservice to let him think he is a Christian in good standing with the Lord and in communion with the church. He would be “eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor. 11:29).

Proponents of the movement to excommunicate Kerry point out that abortion differs from such issues as just war and capital punishment in that Catholic teaching on the issue is unequivocal. Abortion is always and essentially wrong under any circumstance in Catholic morality, whereas the church has made and continues to make exceptions in the cases of war and the death penalty. Mainline Protestants, among others, would make a similarly unequivocal moral claim about racism.

So perhaps the lesson to take from this controversy within the Catholic Church is not about abortion but about church discipline. It is difficult, on theological grounds, to disagree with those who would discipline a politician who strays wantonly from church teaching on a key moral issue. A willingness publicly to excommunicate any member of a church is a risky one. It has terrible potential for abuse; it could turn into a witch hunt in which no one's standing in the community is safe. But it can also be a mark of the integrity of a community. It is a form of costly grace to say to a sister or brother in Christ, “We simply cannot let you think you are a member of our body in good standing if you continue to teach or practice x.”

One could undertake such a risky move only with great fear and trembling, hoping it represents a step down the narrow and difficult way that leads to life.