

Saddleback questions: The clout factor makes us uneasy

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When introducing the presidential forum at Saddleback Church last month, Rick Warren noted that the separation of church and state does not mean the separation of faith and politics. He was right about that. Warren or any other pastor is entitled—as the government is not—to ask Barack Obama and John McCain about their faith in Jesus and to judge them accordingly. If Warren has the clout to get the presidential candidates to answer his questions, he has the right to pose whatever questions he wants.

It's the clout factor that makes us uneasy about the Saddleback event—uneasy both about the integrity of Christianity when it gets a lot of political clout, and especially uneasy about a political culture in which trumpeting one's Christian faith is a way to gain some more clout.

Warren certainly succeeded in provoking some revealing answers. Unfortunately, despite his concern for addressing climate change, poverty and AIDS, which has helped legitimate a broader political agenda among evangelicals, in the forum he never asked questions about those issues. He used the occasion to press issues that the religious right has long focused on: opposition to abortion, gay marriage and stem cell research.

The questions were also phrased so as to suggest what the appropriate answer would be for Warren and most of his constituency. “At what point does a baby get human rights?” “Define marriage.” “Would you insist that faith-based organizations forfeit [the right to hire people who share their beliefs] to access federal funds?” A discussion more illuminating for political life would have emerged if the questions had been phrased this way: “What's the best way to reduce the number of abortions?” “Should homosexual couples be able to have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples?” “Should government funds be used for religious purposes?”

Several times Warren spoke about how “everybody’s got a worldview,” suggesting that his questions were meant to reveal the candidates’ worldviews. Everybody does have a worldview. But the term is often applied in evangelical circles in a reductive way, as if the Christian worldview can be succinctly itemized according to a laundry list of stances, and either you are on board with them or not.

A significant contrast at the worldview level did emerge in response to a question about evil and how humans should respond to it. McCain, with an eye on Osama bin Laden, said that evil must be defeated. Obama said that evil must be confronted, but that we should be mindful as we do so of the evil in ourselves, and that it is finally God’s task to erase it. Assuming that St. Paul and Augustine had something to do with defining the Christian worldview, then on that question, Obama nailed it.