

**Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat? -  
Confessions of a Red Letter Christian**

Rodger Murchison  
First Baptist Church Augusta, GA

*"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory"* is a beautiful anthem. It was written in 1861 by Julia Ward Howe. While she was visiting a Union Army camp on the Potomac River near Washington D. C., she heard the soldiers singing the mournful song, "John Brown's Body," and was taken with the strong marching beat. The words to *"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory"* began to flow, and she wrote them in one sitting.

This song was sung at the funerals of British statesman Winston Churchill, American senator Robert Kennedy, and the American presidents Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon.

Abraham Lincoln was in the White House when this song was first sung. Lincoln was one of our most outstanding Presidents.

Presidential politics is on our minds these days. Obama and McCain are preparing for a national presidential race. With that said, don't let the sermon title offend your partisan opinion - *"Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat? - The Confessions of a Red Letter Christian"*. Those words are taken from the titles of two books by Tony Campolo. Politics and Religion can be a volatile mix.

You probably do not know that I came from a long line of politicians. My father, my Uncle Bill and Uncle Basel were all city mayors. Well, they were mayors of the metropolis of Coy, Arkansas, population just over 200 – a dubious political honor. They were never super delegates to any convention.

Growing up in Arkansas during the 1950's and 60's gave me two political and religious memories.

The first was the long time Arkansas Governor and second was the 1960 presidential election.

Governor Orval Faubus was the Arkansas Democratic Governor for six terms. From the time I was nine years old until I was 21, Faubus was Governor. He ran for President in 1960 as the National State's Rights nominee against Richard Nixon and John Kennedy .

My Dad was a lifelong democrat; most of the Arkansas voters shared his views. So the 1960 presidential race between Kennedy and Nixon was interesting.

Memories of that November: Faubus' very few votes; Kennedy, a Catholic; the debates on TV; a heavy bearded 5 o'clock shadow; a cool, bushy, youthful hair cut Dad voted Republican - a conflicting decision for a lifelong democrat. I think his vote had more to do with religion than politics.

There is a Bible verse that deals with religion and politics.

Matthew 22:15-22

This story must be extremely important because it appears in all three synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke. The key verse is verse 21 *"Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."*

Jesus was being set up in a political and religious trap. The trap was set by the Pharisees and the Herodians. Usually these groups were not partners, but here they are bound by a common enemy - Jesus.

They pose a question they feel defies an answer. The question: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* When it comes to taxes, *"Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat?"*

They had Him trapped. If Jesus said “Yes, pay the taxes,” then the religious community would think that He was submitting to an ungodly dictator, the emperor Caesar.

If Jesus said “No, do not pay the taxes,” then the political community would think He was committing treason.

What’s a Savior to do? He tells the truth. You see, paying taxes was not really their question at all.

Henry David Thoreau has an insightful comment about this Biblical passage; he says that Christ left them “*no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.*” Their purpose was not tax knowledge. Their purpose was discrediting Jesus.

The image on the coin had a double meaning. If you accept Caesar’s currency and use it, then you are bound to accept Caesar’s right to impose taxes. A person should not accept all the benefits which the state offers and then think he or she can opt out of all the civic responsibilities such as paying taxes. During the first century, the Roman Peace or Pax Romana brought with it many privileges. Scholars agree that the early spread of Christianity was due in part to the stability of the Roman government. “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*”

I’m holding up a quarter. Whose image is on this coin? Our first president, George Washington.

That first century coin had Caesar’s image but humanity has God’s image. God created mankind in His own image. We have the ‘*imago dei*,’ the divine image imprinted on our very souls.

That imprimatur, that image of God, carries with it responsibilities as well. In these spiritual responsibilities, ‘*Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat?*’ Tony Campolo, has a response:

If Republicans believe in being faithful to their government and country - then Jesus is a Republican.

If Democrats believe in being faithful to the poor and needy - then Jesus is a Democrat.

If Republicans believe in the intrinsic value of life - then Jesus is a Republican.

If Democrats believe in and desire global peace - then Jesus is a Democrat.

So which is He?

Which are you? Are true Christians Republicans or Democrats? I have a new title for all of us. What about being called “Red Letter Christians?”

Campolo’s book is just off the press - 2008. His title reminds me of one of my first Bibles; it had a zipper, and all the words of Jesus were printed in red.

Republican or Democrat - that’s our answer - we will be Red Letter Christians. And “Hail to the Chief,” do we want our United States President to be a Jesus-loving, Bible-thumping, abortion-condemning, gay marriage-hating, Creation-believing, troop-supporting President?

Or do Red Letter Christians want our United States President to be a Jesus-loving, Bible-embracing, homosexual-understanding, stem cell research-supporting, world peace-promoting President?

Most of those comments were taken from an internet weblog written in April 2008 with the title, “*Who Would Jesus Choose?*”

Well, maybe when it comes to presidential preference, Mike Huckabee was right: “*Jesus would have the good*

*sense to stay out of politics.”*

We can laugh, but with all due respect to my fellow Arkansan, Jesus threw Himself squarely in the middle of hot-potato political issues.

Republican, Democrat, Red Letter Christian. Does it really matter if America has a Christian President or not?

Is our country more spiritual, more faithful, more committed to Godly principles just because the right person is in the right office, with the right staff believing the right stuff?

Our national spiritual identity may have less to do with who sits in the White House and more to do with who sits in your house and the house of your neighbor.

Peace, justice, beneficence, self-sacrifice, kindness, humility - well, does that remind you of someone?

Jesus was not born on this earth as a Prince or a President. He did not lead his fellow Jews to rebel against the Roman authority; on the contrary He said, *“Render unto Caesar.”*

Jesus did not seek any political office to change the laws of the land; on the contrary He said, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”*

Other than Jesus Christ, many would say the most outstanding religious figure to influence United States political leaders is the Reverend Billy Graham. From Harry Truman to George W. Bush, he counseled them all and played a role in almost every presidential election between 1952 and 2000.

Graham once said, *“Very few people will tell the President about spiritual things and religious things or have prayer with him,”* Graham continued, *“and I felt that this was a way that God used me.”*

God used him, indeed, in a most unique way. Many evangelical leaders, Republican, Democrat, Independent, and others would crowd into the political public arena, organizing voters, promoting candidates, and elevating social issues.

Billy Graham was somewhere else, always a welcoming voice to all believers. This preacher had entree to the White House and influence on possibly the most powerful person in the world, the President. And what did Graham do with everyone of them - from Truman to Bush? He prayed.

Some of you more zealous Christians might be saying, “This sounds pious and preachery, but in the real world decisions have to be made and political action must be taken.”

In 1994, thirty Christian leaders decided to do something. Bill Bright, Larry Burkett, James Dobson, James Kennedy and others founded the Alliance Defense Fund. They encouraged pastors to support certain political candidates from the pulpit, knowing this is in violation of the Internal Revenue Service code and puts a church in jeopardy of losing its tax exempt status.

The Alliance Defense Fund provides sample sermons for pastors to use and is prepared to furnish free legal defense for those pastors who break the law, in case they are sued by the federal government.

This organization proclaims that pastors have a right to speak out on moral, social, and governmental issues and to endorse political candidates who adhere to their conservative agenda.

What’s a preacher to do?

Well, before the liberals protest too loudly, may we not forget the civil disobedience of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, Roger Williams, and Thomas Paine.

C. S. Lewis speaks to this issue in his book, *God in the Dock*. Lewis cautions Christians who become involved in politics – not that they shouldn't, but he sounds the alarm to all Christians who believe they have a corner on the truth, as if they could speak for all Christendom.

Lewis warns us to beware of forming a Christian Political Party. The demon inherent in every political party is at all times ready to disguise himself as the Holy Ghost. And when the disguise has succeeded, even those who consider themselves the most Christian can be persuaded to condone the most unlawful and sinful acts if they believe these acts are for the greater good of the Party.

So then how does a Christian influence the political process? Lewis says that he who converts his neighbor has performed the most practical Christian-political act of all.

Speaking of neighbor, I was mowing my yard last week and my neighbor, John, waved me over for a conversation. After some small talk, the subject of this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend and this sermon topic was discussed. When I posed the question, "*Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat*" he never paused with an answer. John quickly replied with determination, "Of course, Jesus was a Republican; everybody knows that."

With "everybody" including another neighbor, I decided to test neighbor John's conclusion by asking neighbor Frank his opinion. Frank was a bit more reflective but felt that Jesus teachings could associate Him with the Democrats.

Neighbors John and Frank - one is Republican, the other is Democrat (so Democrat that he has been elected a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado); one neighbor is Methodist, the other is a member of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ; one is white, one is black; one neighbor takes care of our cat and house plants when we are away, the other neighbor uses his yard blower and cleans off our driveway of pine cones and needles almost every week.

John and Frank are great neighbors. Which one is right? What's a neighbor to do?

Well, then, *Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat*? Do I have to say it? Jesus is neither a Republican nor a Democrat. And true Christians can be either Republican or a Democrat. Now that should be obvious.

On this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, isn't religious liberty and freedom one of the primary principles for which our forefathers and mothers fought? The freedom politically to be right or wrong, the freedom to be Republican or Democrat, or neither or something else, the freedom to make your own decisions about presidential candidates and any and all moral, social and governmental issues.

I told you earlier that my father was a lifelong Democrat. But he often voted Republican. I don't recall my Dad teaching me much about politics, but I do recall his teaching me a lot about life: he was a church deacon, a Boy Scout leader, a member of the local school board, a faithful father, a loving husband. He cared about the poor and needy; people would come to our house in Coy, and be it money or clothing, Dad would find a way to help. A young boy was learning, he was learning about life.

Not long before he died, Dad called me, encouraged me in my ministry and ended the phone conversation as he usually did with his favorite verse of scripture, Psalm 46:1 "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*" Mother was on the phone line with him and she said, "O, Thomas, you tell Rodger that ever time we call." Dad replied, "*It's important that he remembers.*" He has been dead 14 years and I have not forgotten. Dad was teaching me about life. And just maybe I was learning more about politics than I first thought.

Did we ever answer that sermon title? *Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat*? I think we did.

The next time you hear, “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s,*” just remember, it all belongs to God. We are His “*imago dei;*” we are in His image. May we live that way.

1. The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House. Gibbs and Duffy
  2. “Who Would Jesus Chose” [weblog.revelife.com](http://weblog.revelife.com)
  3. William Barclay: *The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*
  4. *The Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*
  5. Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat?, Tony Campolo
  6. Red Letter Christians, A Citizen’s Guide to Faith and Politics, Tony Campolo
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Dear God of Freedom:

Liberate us from the bondage of selfishness. Teach us to respect our neighbor’s opinion and leave the judging to You. Grant more wisdom like Jesus, who loved neighbor as self, and love You with all heart, soul, mind and strength. In His name we pray. Amen

Dear God of Deliverance:

Deliver us, Lord, into a spirit of praise and gratitude for all of Your blessings. Deliver us from ever taking for granted the freedoms of America.

We thank you for our free land and our armed forces, past and present. We thank you for our elected officials. Bless all their families and grant them comfort in times of stress and challenge.

Help us to see that the forces that threaten our freedoms cannot be argued down, nor can they be shot down...they must be lived down.

So give to the leaders of our nation the inspired ideas that shall lead this country into making the American dream come true.

Dear God of Deliverance - may our hearts sing, Glory, Glory Hallelujah as faithful eyes see the glory of the coming of the Lord and steadfast feet march on toward Holy truth. March on, Oh God, March on, in Jesus name. Amen

### **The Question about Paying Taxes**

15. Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ 18. But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19. Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. 20. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ 21. They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ 22. When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.