Polls Apart: Why Believers Might Conscientiously Abstain From Voting[1]

John D. Roth

In the late summer of 2004, I was visiting a Mennonite congregation in the Midwest where I had been asked to give several presentations. It so happened that the Democratic National Convention had just concluded the week before—disputes about the nature of John Kerry's military service were swirling in the electronic and print media, and the general nastiness of the campaign was becoming increasingly evident in op-ed columns, TV ads, and e-mail spam. As I walked toward the church I noticed a small circle of men had gathered in the parking lot around two cars and were clearly engaged in a heated discussion. On the bumper of one of the cars a sticker was posted that read "George Bush IS the weapon of mass destruction." The other car had a somewhat smaller sticker that read "W in 2004" against the background of an American flag. The five or six people participating in the debate did not look as if they were going to suddenly start hitting each other, but there was no mistaking the intensity of the exchange. As I walked slowly past the group, the fragments of conversation that emerged reflected the depth of the disagreement: "I can't believe you actually think…!" "I'm so tired of your Bush-bashing," "It's a *stupid* war," "At least he doesn't support baby-killers!"

The conversation I overheard in the parking lot that Sunday morning was unusual only in the sense that it occurred in such a public place and so early in the day. In the fall of 2004, Americans throughout the country found themselves deeply divided in the midst of a nasty and divisive presidential campaign. To be sure, sloganeering, half-truths, and simplified versions of reality have always been a part of the electoral process. Yet most analysts have agreed that the 2004 campaign reached a new low—at least in modern memory—in terms of the personal vilification, mudslinging, negative campaigning, and outright fabrications on both sides of the race.

The caricatures were deeply entrenched. Kerry supporters attacked Bush as an ignorant, belligerent cowboy—a religious zealot who could only think about the world in terms of good and evil; us and them; patriots and terrorists. Bush supporters in turn branded Kerry as an elitist snob who waffled on key issues and was fundamentally unpatriotic. Add to this the familiar antagonism around such issues as the war in Iraq, tax breaks for the wealthy, gay rights, abortion,

---

* John D. Roth is is Professor of History at Goshen (IN) College in Indiana where he also serves as director of the Mennonite Historical Library and as editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

[1] This essay first appeared in Nathan Yoder and Carol A. Scheppard, eds. *Exiles in the Empire: Believers Church Perspectives on Politics* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2006).

or gun control, and the split between the uncompromising extremes began to look like Grand Canyon. As the election wound to a close, it sometimes seemed as if we were living in two parallel universes with each side determined to reinforce its position by associating only with like-minded people.

Not surprisingly, the chasm dividing our country—along with the simmering tensions evident in offhand comments, eye-catching billboards, or partisan bumper stickers—became increasingly visible in our congregations as well. For the past two years I had been traveling widely in the Mennonite church, visiting dozens of congregations, staying in homes, talking with young people, and engaging in conversations with all kinds of people on topics related to "the gospel of peace." The impressions I gleaned during that period—which happened to coincide with the long presidential campaign—are admittedly anecdotal; but in most of the congregations, I found people keenly aware of national politics and deeply interested in making a link between their Christian convictions and the outcome of the elections. At the same time, however, the nature of the conversation in most Mennonite churches seemed to reflect the tone and substance of the political discourse that was dividing the nation as a whole.

Now the fact of diversity within the Anabaptist family of churches regarding political engagement is not a new thing. The sixteenth-century Anabaptists were far from unified in regard to their understanding of the sword or how Christians should relate to government; and those in the believers church tradition have held a wide variety of positions on voting, political activism, and office holding. There is no well-established believers church "orthodoxy" on these questions. Indeed, it should be clear from the outset that the argument I wish to make regarding conscientious abstention from voting should not be understood as a standard of Christian integrity or faithfulness to Anabaptist principles. To be sure, our general commitment to pacifism and the voluntary church have always raised questions about the limits of our allegiance to the state; nonetheless, our traditions have also been characterized by a spectrum of political attitudes, ranging from vigorous engagement to a strict separatism.

What seemed new in the fall of 2004, however, was not the mere fact of diverse political attitudes but rather the growing "fundamentalism" evident among both the Christian Left and the Christian Right within our congregations, along with the sense that political involvement has now become a Christian imperative. I think we would all agree that the issues facing our country—issues of poverty and health care, housing, care for children and the unborn, security, relations with other countries—are all *moral* issues about which Christians might have something distinctive to say. But as I traveled in various Mennonite congregations, it became increasingly clear that the nature of the conversation about values and moral choices has been almost

completely co-opted by the polarized rhetoric of the media: radio talkshow hosts, direct mail campaigns, polemical ads, and web-site bloggers. In short, our congregations do not seem to be ready or able to engage the substantive questions of this presidential election in a framework other than that of the Red/Blue divide in our national culture.

Although my invitation to "conscientiously abstain" from voting goes deeper than the divisive climate of the 2004 presidential campaign, this troubling reality forms an important context for my arguments against the civic ritual of voting. I wish to suggest five reasons that Christians might conscientiously abstain from voting. Even if readers do not find any of these arguments compelling, I hope that reflecting on them might encourage more deliberate discernment about the assumptions that we bring to bear in electoral politics in our dual role as citizens and committed Christians.

1. Not voting in the presidential election might be understood as a practical expression of our pacifist convictions. Those in the believers church tradition agree that the decision to become a Christian involves a choice, one with genuine consequences for our most basic understanding of reality. The heart of that choice is an affirmation of Jesus Christ as the one who saves us from our bondage to self-centered (or nation-centered) pride, and who offers in his life and teachings a model of the true nature of power—a power, as the Apostle Paul writes, "made perfect in weakness." Becoming a follower of Christ implies more than just a "quantitative" change in our actions (where we become a little more moral, decent, or honest than everyone else); rather, it assumes that we will engage the world in a "qualitatively" different way. Indeed, every aspect of our lives should point to Christ's new understanding of power, expressed most dramatically in love for our enemies.

As Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the U.S. president is explicitly charged with the duty of maintaining the military, defending our borders and preserving national interests through the use of violence if necessary or expedient. If I, as a follower of Christ, could not conscientiously serve in that role, then how can I in good conscience cast my support for someone else to do that in my stead?

2. From the perspective of an Anabaptist Christian, differences among the presidential candidates are illusory. George Bush frequently appeals to the notion of compassion (a good thing, in my mind), but is also a staunch defender of capital punishment (something I think Christian pacifists should not support). John Kerry seems to care about the environment (so do I), but his party clearly defends abortion (again, something I think Christian pacifists cannot

support). Adding to the confusion, both candidates supported the decision to go to war in Iraq, both are committed to a "war on terrorism" that includes a very large role for the U.S. military, and both have assured the public that they are committed to some version of an "America First" perspective on the world. So which candidate is the obvious choice for pacifist Christians? We might recall that it was Jimmy Carter—the last overtly evangelical Christian in the Oval Office—who reinstated registration for the draft as a gesture of our military preparedness in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In recent years, Mennonites and Brethren have voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Republican candidacies of Reagan and Bush. Yet I wonder whether these administrations—or that of Bill Clinton—really represent the deepest values of our faith. Rather than making a dubious calculation about the lesser of two evils in this regard, perhaps we should consider refraining from supporting either option.

3. The "Constantianian logic" of voting our faith. Nearly every Christian I have talked with about the subject of voting—whether inclined toward the Moral Majority on the right or the Sojourner alternative on the left—has insisted that there is (or should be) a connection between one's faith as a Christian and the outcome of one's vote. How we vote is an extension of our religious convictions. We vote on the basis of these convictions because we are convinced that society would be better if people who shared our convictions were running the show. Although we might feel a bit uncomfortable about stating it so bluntly, what we really mean is that people who believe as we do—Christians of our ilk—should be the ones holding political power and making decisions on behalf of the rest of society. The Moral Majority model of "reclaiming America for God, block by block, precinct by precinct, city by city" may strike many as distasteful in its swagger, but the basic logic is actually one shared by Christians on the left as well—just with a very different political content.

Yet Christians in the believers church tradition should be very cautious about the "Constantinian logic" embedded in these assumptions. Having frequently been on the receiving end of theocratic governments throughout our history, it would seem odd for us to be thinking now in terms of wielding the machinery of political power to advance our particular religiously-informed causes, no matter how benign, enlightened, or morally "correct" those causes may be (something that Christians on both sides of the aisle assume is true of their position).

Our tradition has served the body politic best not as magistrates but in a prophetic role—questioning, challenging, discomfiting, and tweaking those holding power, reminding them that they are ultimately accountable to God for their actions. In 2003, Mennonites in the city of Goshen gained control of the city council. Four of the seven council seats are now held by

Mennonites, while the mayor (a Goshen College graduate), is a member of the Church of the Brethren. Presumably, if the Mennonite city council members "vote their faith"—as Christian voters should do—their majority voice will soon be aligning our fair city more closely with the Kingdom of God. Yet this prospect, not surprisingly, has evoked a great deal of grumbling and consternation in a city where Mennonites compose only about 20 percent of the population.

"No, no," Mennonites in the area have assured their worried neighbors: "Just because we are Mennonites doesn't imply that we think alike on the issues." In fact, one council member echoed the argument offered by John F. Kennedy in the controversial presidential election of 1960, with assuring words to the effect of "I'm a Mennonite on Sunday, but during the week I'm a citizen of Goshen. In other words, my faith is a personal and private matter. You don't need to worry that I will be dragging it into our city council debates or that it will determine the outcome of my vote."*

The insistence that local residents need not worry about a Mennonite theocracy—that faith convictions somehow turn personal or universal once the candidate is in office—brings me to a fourth argument for your consideration.

4. The individualism and privacy of voting is in sharp tension with our communal understanding of faith. If we actually do believe that we should "vote our conscience"—if responsible voting entails a process of moral discernment that is rooted in Christian convictions—then Mennonites and those in the believers church tradition should "be of one mind" about the matter and agree to cast our vote collectively. Most Christians, of course, would react allergically to the prospect of congregations collectively deciding who their members should vote for. Dragging politics into the church is unseemly; and in fact congregations could even lose your tax exempt status with the IRS if they did so! But if our faith is to have a bearing on the outcome of our choice, then shouldn't we agree on the candidate who best embodies our understanding of God's transformative work in the world, and cast our votes together?

On the other hand, if we are going to defend the privacy of the voting booth and the inviolability of individual choice, then we seem to imply that our political choices are really of no great significance—more a matter of personal inclination or taste (some people like white bread; some like brown bread) than a profound expression of our faith. If voting is so important, then why shouldn't the church's voice in this important moral decision be more foundational to our choice than the political demagogues who currently dominate the radio and TV airwaves?

5. Not voting in national elections may have a symbolic and pedagogical value. . In the past,

members of the believers church tradition have paid a very high price for their "upside down" view of power—loss of property, forced emigration, imprisonment, and even martyrdom have all been a part of our collective story. Now living in the lap of material abundance and prosperity, North American Mennonites could choose not to vote as a kind of "spiritual discipline"—a tangible reminder that our ultimate identity is not contingent upon the political process or dependent on the powers-that-be. Combined with a clear commitment to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, and to bind up the wounds of the hurting, conscientious abstention from the presidential elections could be a powerful symbol of our conviction that true power—the primary locus of God's hand in history—resides ultimately in the gathered church, not among the policy makers in Washington, D.C.

Voting, after all, is not just a "right." It is also a "rite"—a ritual of identity and loyalty binding the individual to the nation. Abstaining from presidential elections could signal to our children and to the global church that our first loyalty is to the worldwide fellowship of Christian believers, not to the nation-state.

Finally, there is a very personal dimension to my own decision to abstain from voting—an argument that will likely not be equally compelling to everyone. I happen to be passionately interested in politics: I read the papers regularly, follow the debates, and closely track the progress of each presidential campaign. As a 12-year-old in 1972, I supported George McGovern's campaign against Richard Nixon with a deep passion; and I was crushed by Nixon's landslide victory that year when it seemed so obvious to me that he was misguided about Vietnam, callous toward the poor, and outright unethical in his campaign practices. I recognize in myself a strong temptation to become deeply enmeshed in the world of politics—to the point where I could easily believe that the most important force for change in the world really does reside in Washington or Ottawa or Tokyo or London, rather than in the gathered church where "Jesus is Lord." So for me, voting is a kind of spiritual discipline; a conscious restraint on my natural impulse to give electoral politics more attention than it truly deserves.

Some readers will undoubtedly regard these arguments for a "conscientious abstention" from voting to be ethically naïve, if not arrogant. Abstaining from voting, people often argue, does not make one any less culpable or responsible for political decisions of those in power. If anything, it makes one more accountable for these decisions because one did not speak out in support or opposition to those who are acting on behalf of the general society. All of us—voters and non-voters alike—are implicated in a thousand different ways in the political structures of our country. To pretend that we can somehow "disengage" or claim some high ground of moral purity

by not voting is disingenuous at best, and outright irresponsible at worst.

In response to these concerns, I begin with a point of agreement: namely that there is no place of "moral purity" for the pacifist Christian—we are indeed inextricably woven into the fabric of our communities; we are indeed implicated in the shadow sides of power and affluence. Because of this, I believe passionately that the gospel of peace calls us into the world—not to flee from it. My case against voting is *not* an argument for turning our back on the world's brokenness. Far from it! Christians—and especially Christians in the believers church tradition—should devote their lives to the healing work of reconciliation in their families and congregations, in their communities and countries, and in the world.

God loves this world—and we should be actively, creatively, passionately going about the work of extending God's compassion to all those around us. Christians should care about the *polis*. But at the same time theyshould not allow narrow definitions of "political involvement" to set the terms for how they should express that care.

Being "political" as a Christian can take many, many forms beyond active participation in a presidential campaign that culminates in a vote. The scope of these activities is extremely broad: you might choose to get involved, for example, in your local neighborhood association; or encourage your congregation to support homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network; or volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. Consider giving a portion of your life in service to Brethren Volunteer Service or Mennonite Central Committee; becoming a foster parent; adopting a child; becoming a surrogate grandparent to a child in a dysfunctional family; testifying before a legislative committee out of your experience "on the ground" with MCC; or speaking to your congressperson about what you have seen in your mission trip to Central America or your Christian Peacemaker Teams experience in Hebron. All these, and countless other forms of witness, are expressions of "political" responsibility. But Christians should be doing all this not as Democrats or Republicans but as a citizens of the Kingdom of God; as a conscious ambassadors of Christ's incarnate body in this broken world; as followers of the Prince of Peace who rules "not by might, nor by power but by the spirit of the living God."

In the end, I do not wish to imply that my brothers and sisters in the church who go to the polling booths are being unfaithful Christians or are somehow turning their backs on the whole weight of the Anabaptist tradition. I readily acknowledge that my convictions against voting are much stronger for presidential campaigns than for local elections on county commissioners, school boards, or tax levies. But during the election year cycle, when the airwaves grow foggy with appeals to our pocketbooks and our allegiance—as passions mount, and partisan appeals become increasingly reckless and extreme—I urge us to enter cautiously into the arena of national

politics, to withhold absolute judgment about God's will in regards to any particular candidate, and to give at least some passing consideration to an older tradition of conscientious abstention from this national ritual.

* A more consistent Anabaptist position might have been for Mennonites in the area to consciously decide *not* to seek out the fourth seat on the council so as to remain in a minority role.