



It is about to be the "official" start of the Christmas season - that is once we finish off the Thanksgiving turkey. Even now the stores are in full swing preparing for the big sales. Many of us have already pulled the decorations out of storage and are getting ready to "deck the halls".

But, another season is also upon us - the political season. Things are starting to heat up as presidential candidates prepare for the early primaries.

Before long, we'll be inundated with political campaign advertisements which mostly tell us how bad the "other guys" are. We will choose sides and, as Tammy Wynette sang, "stand by our man" or, in some cases, our "woman".

And during the course of the campaign season, some voters will realize just how true the old saying is, "Politics make strange bedfellows". One person who has already experienced this truth is Pastor Robert Jeffress who, in proclaiming his support of presidential candidate Rick Perry, found himself in the midst of a controversy that would land him on, well-known atheist, Bill Maher's show and at odds with some formidable conservative Republicans.

At the heart of the issue was a candidate's faith. In this issue of CrossingCurrents, we take a look at the controversy surrounding Pastor Jeffress. More importantly, we consider the place of the gospel when faith and politics intersect in culture.

In addition to this article, this issue's Culture Tracks, provides some of the most recent polling data concerning religious beliefs and politics. You can also find links there to read the full reports.

CrossSwords: Serving Those Who Serve

In recent issues we have shared some of our plans to launch a ministry specifically geared to the needs of our soldiers returning from active combat duty. As we continue to prepare for this work, we have now launched a website to begin offering some ministry opportunities. Please take a look at www.CrossSwords.org and if you know any veterans, please pass the link along to them.

Online Store Now Open

If you are looking for a resource to help with cultural issues, visit our new online resource center at: www.crosswindstore.com

As we prepare to enter the last month of this year, let me again thank all of you who have prayed for us and helped us with your financial investments. We could not be here to help others were it not for you.

As you prepare for your end of year giving, please remember Crosswinds and our affiliated ministries in your giving. You can give make secure online gifts by clicking on the "Donate" button to the left, or by visiting us at www.crosswindsfoundation.org.

Blessings,

Bob Waldrep

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Faith and Politics Intersect in Culture By Bob Waldrep

"According to a new poll, 42% of Americans say they are uncomfortable with the idea of having a Mormon president. When asked why, the people said, 'We're still getting used to having a Muslim president'."

**CONAN O'BRIEN, TALK SHOW
HOST/COMEDIAN**

While O'Brien is certainly going for the laugh, his comment is revealing as to how important a role faith still plays in American politics. One Re-

publican presidential candidate who clearly grasps its significance is Mitt Romney, a devout Mormon. Those who support his candidacy, as well as his detractors, are also aware of this "political truth" about faith and politics.

"Mormonism is not Christianity. It has always been considered a cult by the mainstream of Christianity."

**ROBERT JEFFRESS, PASTOR FIRST
BAPTIST CHURCH DALLAS**

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Jeffress made this comment to reporters at the Values Voters Summit shortly after introducing Texas Governor, Rick Perry, the Republican candidate he was backing. Unlike O'Brien, he wasn't going for a laugh. He was expressing a sincerely held belief. He probably could not have imagined the controversy that would follow. Even more incredible, rather than bringing Romney under closer scrutiny (as one might have thought it would), Jeffress found himself and his remarks to be the center of attention.

Political pundits jumped upon it, candidates quickly distanced themselves from it, and the media flocked to Jeffress for an explanation; including, well-known atheist, Bill Maher who managed to book Jeffress as a guest on his show. Romney and his campaign staff discredited it as having no place in politics and then, wisely, ignored it; choosing to let others fight this battle on his behalf.

CNN asked GOP candidate, Jon Huntsman (also a Mormon), to comment on it and reported, "Huntsman [noted], it's a shame that with so much real news in the 2012 election cycle 'the fact that some moron can stand up and make a comment like that' and drive the news narrative for a number of days is a real shame."

Perhaps, the story would have had a shorter shelf life or, none at all, had Jeffress simply left it at "Mormonism is not Christianity". Instead, he identified it as a "cult" - a word which many hearers tend to equate with aberrant suicide groups like as those at Jonestown and Heaven's Gate. Certainly, the Mormon Church would not be identified with such groups, in that regard. However, in fairness to Jeffress, on numerous occasions he has clarified this is not his position. Rather, he says that when applying the term cult to the Mormon Church he was speaking of it from a theological perspective rather than a sociological one.

In numerous interviews he has supported this position stating his view is based on such facts about the Mormon Church as: "[it] was invented 1800 years after Jesus Christ and the founding of Christianity, and it has its own founder, Joseph Smith, its own set of doctrines, and its own book, the Book of Mormon." Jeffress has also gone so far as to

imply that, given the choice, he would vote for a Mormon - in this case, Romney - over Obama.

And, while Huntsman and others might think him a "moron", many Christian leaders have expressed their support of his view. In a Huffington Post interview, Lifeway Research President, Ed Stetzer referred to a recent Lifeway poll of 1,000 pastors, stating, "The view that Mormons are not Christians is the widely and strongly held view among Protestant pastors. That does not mean they do not respect Mormons as persons, share their values on family and have much in common. Yet, they simply view Mormonism as a distinct religion outside of basic teachings of Christianity." (www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/08/mormons-are-not-christian-survey_n_1001712.html#undefined)

"O'Brien's comment loses all comedic value if there were not those who have and/or are still promoting the idea that the President is a Muslim."



Considering where we are as a nation, one might think Americans could care less about a candidate's religious persuasion. This would seem to be borne out by the fact that, prior to Jeffress' comment and despite such polls as Lifeway's, Romney's faith had not been a major point of discussion. Interestingly, this was not the case when Romney sought the Republican nomination in the last presidential election.

In fact, during the 2008 election I was often asked if I thought Christians should vote for a Mormon. Without question, many Christians were concerned about whether it would be "okay" to vote for a Mormon. But, they weren't the only ones with concerns. Unlike in this election, in 2008 the mainstream media was also looking for answers about Romney's Mormon faith.

In an article I wrote during the 2008 election cycle (**A Mormon White House?**), I noted the media seemed focused on two aspects of Romney's faith: first that Mormonism was different from the beliefs of other candidates professing to be Christians; and, secondly, that the polls were reflecting a significant percentage of the population had reservations about the Mormon faith.

www.crosswindsfoundation.org/articles/A%20Mormon%20White%20House.pdf

Interestingly, when the Jeffress story broke, this same media now seemed to be insisting that such questioning is inappropriate and that a candidate's faith is not part of the story. However, Conan O'Brien's joke and the storm created by Jeffress' comment are revealing in that they indicate a significant number of people in the culture would disagree with the media on this point.

For example, O'Brien's comment loses all comedic value if there were not those who have and/or are still promoting the idea that the President is a Muslim (If he is, he is a very poor example of one since he publically and consistently identifies himself as Christian). Those who continue to propagate this story do so because they understand the idea of a Muslim candidate, and even more so a Muslim President, is not going to be embraced by a significant percentage of the American electorate. Those who opposed Romney's election in 2008 understood the same was true of a professing Mormon.

This is still true today, as evidenced by polling such as the recent **2011 American Values Poll** (October 2011) by the Public Religion Research Institute. This poll found that two thirds of voters say it is very important (39%) or somewhat important (28%) for a presidential candidate to have strong religious beliefs. It also found this desire for strong religious beliefs in a candidate does not translate to a level of comfort with all religions. For example: 64% said they would be, at least, somewhat uncomfortable with a Muslim serving as President; 67% with an atheist as President, and 42% said they would be at least somewhat uncomfortable with a Mormon President. Only 28% said they would be somewhat or very uncomfortable with an Evangelical as President.

Polling, such as the Public Religion Research Institute's, suggests that if a candidate is going to talk about their faith, they will be better received if identifying themselves with the Christian faith. Perhaps this is why it is so important to Romney that Mormonism be identified with Christianity; and, why so many candidates who had little interest in religion, prior to running for office, suddenly become frequent Church attenders. While I may not agree with such tactics, I find both completely understandable; after all, the candidate wants the best chance to be elected President.



Less clear, at least in this election cycle, is why so many media pundits seem determined to back off religion and give Mormonism a free pass in presenting itself as being part of the Christian Church; something they did not allow during the 2008 election. In fact, had Jeffress made his comment during the 2008 election, based upon how the media handled the issue of Romney's faith then, Mormonism would be much more central to the coverage.

Instead, the media now seems much more focused on trying to marginalize Jeffress, and those who hold his viewpoint, than on asking the hard questions about the compatibility of Mormon beliefs with those of Christianity. And, as Jeffress surprisingly discovered, when it comes to Romney's Mormon beliefs, many in the media; including some professing Christians, seem to be going out of their way to try and convince their readers and/or viewers that Mormonism is part of the Christian Church.

During the interview with Bill Maher, Jeffress stated, "Since I made those comments, the left has been pretty kind to me. It's the conservatives who have been after me with

a meat cleaver...Laura Ingraham, Karl Rove...what they feel like I am doing is hurting their candidate...They think, 'Jeffress if you'll just be quite [whispers] they won't know he is a Mormon.'" (WATCH VIDEO AT: <http://crosswindsfoundation.org/Videos/Jeffress%20Maher.html>)

MSNBC, *Morning Joe*, host, Joe Scarborough, (a Republican and self-attested Southern Baptist) also took Jeffress to task for his comments and used them to seemingly, express a broader view of Christianity that might better allow for the inclusion of Mormonism. Scarborough stated: (WATCH VIDEO AT: <http://crosswindsfoundation.org/Videos/Scarborough.html>)

"Jesus was asked by his disciples, "Who is getting to heaven? How do we sit on the right hand of the father?" This is what Jesus Christ said, and, by the way, Pastor Jeffress, if you open your Bible to Matthew, it's in red letters. That means Jesus said it. This is what Jesus said:

'Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the king-

dom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Mt 25:34-36

And that was not Jesus talking about some side issue, some sidebar to his ministry - that was Jesus talking about when asked what his ministry was about, it was about taking care of the poor. And yet we don't see that from the very people who wave their Bibles around the most."

As Scarborough states, he was directing these comments particularly to Pastor Jeffress. The inference seems to be that as Mormons do these things, they fit within the definition of being Christian. Of course, by the same measurement, so would many who do wonderfully good works and don't even claim to be Christian - even political parties.

While I generally enjoy Mr. Scarborough's

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Culture Tracks

Statistical data reflecting the cultural footprints of Americans.

The following information is from the 2011 American Values Survey released October 2011 by the Public Religion Research Institute.

Religion Values and the 2012 Election

- 67% of voters say it is very important (39%) or somewhat important (28%) for a presidential candidate to have strong religious beliefs.
- 64% said they would be, at least, somewhat uncomfortable with a Muslim serving as President
- 67% said they would be, at least, somewhat uncomfortable with an atheist as President
- 42% said they would be at least somewhat uncomfortable with a Mormon President; interestingly, the same number (42%) can correctly identify Mitt Romney's religion as Mormon.
- 28% said they would be somewhat or very uncomfortable with an Evangelical as President.
- 50% of Democratic voters said they would be uncomfortable with a Mormon serving as president; 70% with an atheist serving as president, 56% with a Muslim, and 32% with an evangelical.
- 36% of Republican voters said they would be uncomfortable with a Mormon serving as president; 80% with an atheist serving as president, 81% with a Muslim, and 18% with an evangelical.
- 38% of Independent voters said they would be uncomfortable with a Mormon serving as president; 56% atheist serving as president, 58% with a Muslim, and 31% with an evangelical.
- 54% of Millennial voters (age 18-29) say they would be at least somewhat less comfortable with a Mormon serving as president, as compared to senior citizens (39%) who felt the same way.

Although divided over his job as president (45% approve and 44% disapprove); a majority, 53% have a favorable view of President Obama, personally.

Of those who disapprove of the president's job performance, 37% cite the reason as primarily economics, whereas 41% cite leadership; only 6% cited the reason is related to the health care law.

Read complete report, [2011 American Values Survey](#)

For additional information about these and other cultural trends, email your request to: info@crosswindsfoundation.org



commentary and often find myself in agreement with him, in this instance he has taken Jesus' words out of context. The reality is, Jesus was not answering a question about who is getting to heaven; nor, was he, in the passage Mr. Scarbrough quotes, responding to a question about how one sits on the right hand of the father. (Although, five chapters earlier, in Matthew 20:21 a mother does ask that her sons be allowed to sit on the right and left of Jesus, but her question had nothing to do with getting into heaven.) Rather, Jesus makes the quoted statement in reference to his judgment of the "sheep" and the "goats".

I would agree with Mr. Scarbrough's assessment that those who wave their Bibles around the most, are the ones who often do the very least. However, how high one raises their Bible, how many good deeds they do, their family background, and/or the religious organization they belong to, has nothing to do with determining if they will stand on His right or left at the judgment. That is solely based upon faith, not in our own works but in the person and work of Christ on our behalf.

As the Apostle Paul stated: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This is in complete agreement with Jesus teaching concerning who will enter heaven - have eternal life. In fact, had Mr. Scarbrough truly desired to communicate the essence of the gospel, as taught by Jesus, he would have done better quoting from the third chapter of John; also, in "red letters":

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

Jesus makes it clear that the determining factor for becoming "a sheep", and standing on his right at the judgment, is faith in him - in his work. It is those who reject this or place their faith in another - the unbelieving - who are found on his left.

Despite the attempts to turn the discussion from issues of religious beliefs, it is obvious that a candidate's faith still matters to the American voter. And, while a candidate is guaranteed the right to embrace any religious view they choose, the fact is, most Americans still prefer their candidate's religion of choice to be the Christian faith. This may very well change one day, maybe soon; but, for now, a Mormon, Muslim, or atheist will probably not be elected to the office of President.

Political figures understand this and, if not a Christian, they tend to either distance themselves from discussing their faith or try to make their faith fit within Christianity. Christians could help diminish this practice by not gravitating to a candidate simply because he claims to be a Christian. Candidates need to know that, first and foremost, we expect them to be qualified and competent, to share our common values

and a shared vision for what is best for the nation and its people. If such a candidate also shares a common faith with the voter, that is even better.

The reality is, being a Christian candidate does not guarantee one is the best candidate any more than the Christian surgeon is automatically the most gifted surgeon to operate on one's child, or the Christian dry cleaner is the best one to get the spot out of your new suit. When candidates understand their faith will not be the primary criteria for our vote, perhaps they will begin to feel the freedom to be truly candid about their beliefs, rather than having to duck the issue.

As I observed in 2007, "When Mr. Romney says he holds the same beliefs as other Americans, perhaps he does. However, if he holds to the teachings of his [Mormon] Church then his is a different God, a different Jesus, and a different view of the Scripture than that of the Christian Church. Until the record is clear on this, it is understandable that the media and Evangelicals will continue to question him on these points of difference."

The underlying concern then, as it is now, is not so much that Mr. Romney is a Mormon. It is the simple fact that, in promoting his candidacy, the essential beliefs of the Christian faith are being altered so a candidate can be presented as Christian; regardless, of what he truly believes. Christians must be careful that in their debate over whether a Christian should support a candidate of another faith - be it Mormon, or some other - the gospel is not being altered or misrepresented in hopes of making a candidate more electable.



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