



McCain or Obama?

If Jesus is Lord and the Bible provides our normative framework, how should we vote on November 4?

Every four years, as I anguish over this question, I half wish God would send us an e-mail. But he never has. So we are left with the tough task of evaluating the candidates' policy proposals and track records on the basis of what I often call a "biblically balanced agenda." If we ask what the Bible says God cares about, the implications for our political agenda become obvious: We must be pro-life *and* pro-poor, pro-family *and* pro-creation care, pro-racial justice *and* pro-peacemaking. This "completely pro-life" agenda is now the official stance of both the Catholic bishops and the National Association of Evangelicals (see "For the Health of the Nation").

So how do Sen. McCain and Sen. Obama fare if we evaluate them using that basic standard? Here, I will discuss (in alphabetical order) nine crucial areas: environment, family, healthcare, human rights, international affairs/peacemaking, poverty/economic justice, racial justice, religious freedom, and sanctity of human life. (Readers will need to follow the presidential debates carefully this fall to see where the two candidates expand, modify, or nuance their positions in ways that go beyond what is available as I write this column.)

On the **environment**, Obama and McCain have fairly similar positions. Unlike President Bush for most of his two terms, both presidential candidates consider global warming a great threat that we must combat. Both favor market mechanisms ("cap and trade") and higher fuel-efficiency standards to reduce the release of carbon dioxide. Obama

proposing spending \$150 billion over 10 years to create a "green energy sector" in the US economy.

The issue of **family** has more than one aspect. One crucial area is economic. If parents cannot earn enough to escape poverty and provide healthcare for their children and themselves, they suffer enormous stress that undermines marriage and family life. Consequently the sections on healthcare and poverty/economic justice (where I argue that Obama's platform is better than McCain's) are one important part of the family issue.

Another crucial set of components connected to the family relates to marriage, divorce, and sexual practice. The sociological studies clearly demonstrate that it is better for children to grow up with both biological parents, but neither candidate talks much about public policies that would discourage divorce. The example of their personal lives, of course, is different: Unlike Obama, McCain has divorced and remarried.

McCain's position on homosexuality and gay marriage is closer to the historic Christian position than Obama's. Both personally believe marriage is between a man and a woman, and both oppose a federal marriage amendment that would embed this definition in the US Constitution. But McCain opposes a national marriage amendment because he thinks this issue belongs to the states, not the federal government. McCain, however, supported the federal "Defense of Marriage Act" (1996), which banned federal recognition of gay marriage. Obama advocates the complete repeal of this act because "federal law should not discriminate in any way against gay and lesbian couples." If taken literally, that would mean that federal law should not in any way favor the historic understanding of marriage. I disagree.

Increasingly, Christians realize that the richest nation in history ought to guarantee quality **healthcare** to all its

citizens. McCain promises to do some things to move in this direction. He will offer tax credits so individuals are better able to afford health insurance. He wants to make cheaper imported drugs more available and place limits on medical malpractice damage awards to reduce medical costs. But McCain makes no promise to guarantee healthcare for everyone.

Obama believes that universal healthcare is a moral demand and promises to accomplish that by the end of his first term as president. He would not mandate that adults purchase health insurance, but he wants to make health insurance comparable to that enjoyed by federal employees affordable for everyone. He would fund the increased costs in part by letting some of President Bush's tax cuts expire.

There is one important "detail" to watch in Obama's promising healthcare proposals. Will he seek to have this federal health plan pay for abortions? He should not, although he seems to lean that way, arguing that poor women should be able to get an abortion even though they do not pay for it. Insisting on that would force Americans who oppose abortion to pay for it, which would be both morally wrong and politically explosive. One hopes he will accept the basic principle of the "Hyde Amendment," which stipulates that the government does not pay for abortions.

Our fourth area, **human rights**, encompasses a wide range of issues. I focus on only three: the use of torture in "the war against terrorism," capital punishment, and immigration. Both senators clearly condemn the way that the use of torture in interrogating suspected terrorists has become a part of US policy. Both would reverse this immoral policy.

Many Christians disagree with my view that respect for human rights means that we should not use capital punishment. That includes McCain and Obama.

Both favor retaining capital punishment in some situations. And both have worked to promote measures that would make it less likely that people are wrongly executed. But Obama emphasizes his belief that the death penalty “does little to deter crime” while McCain wants us to know that he would consider adding more crimes that carry the death penalty.

On immigration reform, McCain and Obama have rather similar positions. Both advance proposals that combine border security and a legal path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. For years McCain has been a leader (and a minority in the Republican Party) in advocating a legal path to citizenship, although the political pressures of the primary season led him to say that border security must come before immigration reform. Obama has vowed not to support any bill that does not provide an earned path to citizenship for the undocumented.

In the area of **international affairs** (including Iraq), the two platforms are strikingly different.

McCain supported the invasion of Iraq as a just war, insists the US must continue the battle until we win (even if it takes many years), and supports the continued presence of American troops in Iraq after the war is over. Obama opposed the invasion of Iraq from the beginning, considers it a “dumb” and “rash” venture, and promises to have all US combat troops out of Iraq within 16 months.

More basically, Obama calls for a fundamental change in US foreign policy. The unilateralist approach of President Bush (Iraq, global warming, the International Criminal Court, etc.) has precipitated a vast loss of respect for and trust in the US around the world. Obama wants to move to a much more multilateral, cooperative approach to global problems. He wants to emphasize diplomacy and is ready to meet with the heads of “enemy nations” like Iran, Syria,

and Cuba. McCain mocks Obama’s eagerness for diplomatic solutions.

I believe that fundamental values about respect for the freedom and independence of all people and nations as well as our long-term self-interest require a more multilateral, cooperative approach to international affairs. Not even the world’s sole superpower can unilaterally force its views on the rest of the world. Obama’s election would prompt the rest of the world to reassess its current low image of the United States.

Obama and McCain differ substantially on the question of **poverty and economic justice**.

Obama worked as a community organizer in low-income neighborhoods in Chicago for three years. He has pledged to seek to cut child poverty by 50 percent in 10 years. He regularly supports efforts to increase the minimum wage and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit.

McCain promises to make overcoming American poverty a priority, but it is not clear how he will accomplish this. He did vote to raise the federal minimum wage in 2007, but historically he has opposed such increases.

Tax policies, as I have argued in *PRISM* for years, are closely related to the issues of poverty/economic justice. Over the last 30 years, the poorest 20 percent of Americans have lost ground in real dollars while the richest 20 percent have gained enormous wealth. The gap between the richest 20 percent and poorest 20 percent has ballooned. President Bush’s tax cuts are one significant reason, because about 70 percent of the benefits went to the richest 20 percent.

McCain has pledged to make Bush’s tax cuts permanent—even though they have significantly increased inequality, expanded the federal deficit, and made it more difficult to fund effective anti-poverty programs. He wants to cut the

federal corporate tax rate, thus further benefiting corporations and their shareholders. (On the other hand, McCain’s proposal to raise the personal exemption from \$3,500 to \$7,000 is a good pro-family policy.)

Obama plans to abandon many of Bush’s tax cuts. He plans to keep the estate tax, raise the rate on capital gains taxes, and repeal the Bush tax cuts on those earning over \$250,000 (this figure should be significantly lower!). Obama also plans to cut taxes by \$80 billion a year for lower-income workers, homeowners, and retirees (e.g., no income taxes for elderly workers earning less than \$50,000). In my judgment, Obama’s tax policies are more likely to move us a little toward economic justice and poverty reduction.

On global poverty, Obama wants to double US foreign aid to \$50 billion per year by 2012. McCain has not yet made any specific commitment.

The simple fact of a black person being elected president for the first time in our history would contribute enormously to **racial reconciliation** and justice. It would demonstrate to ourselves and the world that we have made (some) progress in overcoming our tragic, wrenching racist history. It would bring new pride and hope to African Americans. And it would strengthen Obama’s already powerful ability (as a son who grew up without his dad) to speak truthfully and courageously about single parenthood, family brokenness, and the importance of education. Frequent speeches like his Father’s Day (2008) address in a black church given by our first black president would be powerful.

Whether McCain contributes to racial reconciliation will depend primarily on whether he will do all he can to rein in and silence the legions of political operators not directly connected to his campaign who will try to appeal to continuing white racism to defeat Obama.

If McCain does that, then (win or lose) he will make a great contribution to racial justice. If he does not (win or lose), he must bear substantial responsibility for our failure to take another major step forward as a nation.

On most aspects of **religious freedom**, Obama and McCain agree. One significant concern of American foreign policy should be to promote religious freedom around the world. At home, we must maintain the First Amendment's prohibition against the government's either establishing religion or hindering its free exercise. And that means, as both candidates also agree, that religious voices have every right to debate in the public square. They also both plan to continue government's substantial partnership with faith-based organizations in solving our nation's social problems.

There is, however, one significant area to watch. Thanks in part to four pieces of federal legislation signed by President Clinton and executive orders by President Bush, present practice allows faith-based organizations that receive direct government grants to retain the right to hire staff who share their moral/religious beliefs. In spite of the fact that President Clinton signed four pieces of legislation with Charitable Choice provisions specifying this hiring right and in spite of Vice President Gore's explicit embrace of Charitable Choice, most Democrats chose, after Bush became president, to denounce this right as "hiring discrimination." McCain, however, clearly supports the right of faith-based organizations to hire on the basis of their religious beliefs.

Some stories have seemed to suggest that Obama wants to abandon the hiring right in Charitable Choice. Fortunately, I have good reason to think that is not the case and that he would retain the key protections for religious organizations.

Something very important is at stake. A rigid, sweeping application of the idea

that faith-based organizations that receive direct government grants cannot hire on the basis of religious beliefs would have two adverse effects: (1) It would go far beyond the actual practice of many decades; (2) It would mean that Christian colleges and Christian social service agencies would either experience enormous financial loss or accept widespread secularizing pressures as more and more staff no longer shared their original beliefs. There is good reason for Democrats to embrace ways for faith-based organizations to partner

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with government that respects the First Amendment, protects the religious freedom of clients, and does not force faith-based organizations to abandon precisely those religious beliefs that make them unique (and effective).

Finally, the **sanctity of human life**: ESA believes in a "completely pro-life" agenda—i.e., life does not begin at conception and end at birth. When millions die of starvation or diseases we know how to prevent, when millions die prematurely from smoking, when ter-

rorism and war destroy innocent persons, the sanctity of human life is violated. But that broader "completely pro-life" agenda does not mean we forget about abortion.

On abortion, McCain and Obama have strikingly different positions. McCain wants to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and ban abortions except in the case of rape, incest, or a threat to the mother's life. His voting record is clearly anti-abortion: He supported the bill to prevent partial-birth abortions, and he has promised to appoint Supreme Court justices like Roberts and Alito named by President Bush.

Obama is strongly pro-choice. He acknowledges the moral dimensions of abortion and favors some policies that would reduce abortions, but he insists abortion must be legal. Obama's appointments to the Supreme Court would obviously be pro-choice.

If the above analysis is roughly correct, then one thing is clear: On some issues, Sen. McCain is closer to what I consider a biblically shaped agenda; on others Sen. Obama is.

But the bottom line? On balance, overall, who is better? I'll answer that question for myself in the privacy of the voting booth on November 4. You must decide for yourself.

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Study each candidate's platform and character. Talk with friends. Form a bipartisan study group in your church to discuss both candidates. Pray fervently for divine wisdom. Then vote knowing that God calls us to act on our best insight even though our knowledge is always limited. ■