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# Pastor Nudges Evangelicals to Center

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WASHINGTON — Anyone who still doubts that the evangelical Christian world is going through a political revolution was not watching Pastor Rick Warren's presidential forum over the weekend. The era of reducing Christianity to a narrow set of ideological commitments is over.

Just a few years back, who would have imagined that Barack Obama and John McCain would hold a discussion of this sort in a church? Who would have thought that the session would be moderated by an evangelical pastor who was emphatic in counting both the Democrat and the Republican as his "friends"? Who would have predicted that in such a setting, the issues of abortion and gay marriage would not dominate the pastor's queries?

Oh yes, and who would have anticipated that the passions of the pastor in question would be engaged not in the divisions created by the culture wars but in the imperative of civility in politics and the plight of the world's 148 million orphans? Here's betting that the next president will help those orphans find homes.

The notion that Christianity in general and evangelicalism in particular are by nature right-wing creeds has always been wrong. How can a faith built around a commitment to the poor and the vulnerable be seen as leading ineluctably to conservative political conclusions?

And when political commentators talk about "evangelicals," they are almost always talking about white evangelicals, forgetting that millions of African-Americans are devout evangelical Christians and are hardly part of the conservative base. The civil rights movement was one of the greatest faith-based mobilizations in American history, even as it also drew on the energies of thousands of secular liberals who walked hand in hand with believers.

Warren is an important figure not just because he's sold tens of millions of books but also because he has been leading evangelicals out of a political dead end that chose to ignore large parts of the Christian message.

In 2004, Warren took the view that Christians should vote on a short list of "nonnegotiable" issues, including abortion. But in 2006, on Fox News of all places, Warren declared: "Jesus' agenda is far bigger than just one or two issues. ... We have to care about poverty, we have to care about disease, we have to care about illiteracy, we have to care about corruption in government, sex trafficking." That is the new politics of evangelical Christianity.

None of this means that white evangelicals will convert en masse to the Democratic Party. McCain, who carefully touched every hot button on the control panel of religious conservatism, will certainly get a substantial majority of their votes. The question is whether Obama can cut the Republican margin among white evangelicals by, say, five or 10 points.

"If Obama ever establishes any kind of trust (with evangelicals), there will be a noticeable shift," the Rev. Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church outside of Orlando, Fla., and a leading evangelical moderate, said in an interview. "It will not be huge, but it will be significant."

The fact that the Saddleback discussion took place at all is a sign that both parties now intend to fight for the votes of religious Christians. And little noticed is language in this year's draft Democratic platform that "strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child" by ensuring access to health care, income support and adoption programs. The platform also backs efforts to decrease the "number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions."

Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life, said her group had sought much stronger abortion-reduction language. But the discussion, she says, has changed a lot in just four years. "The encouraging thing is that in 2004, we didn't have any part in the platform discussion," she told me. "This time, the party wanted us as a partner in the process. They reached out to us and wanted to hear what we had to say."

Will this make a difference? During his hour with Warren, McCain was crisp and relentlessly on-message, no doubt winning over many for whom opposition to abortion trumps all other causes. Obama was more a wrestler than a boxer as he struggled with the big questions.

For a Democratic nominee four years ago, a meeting at Warren's church would have been an away game — if it had taken place at all. This time around, Pastor Rick made sure that in a Christian house of worship, there would be no

home-court advantage.

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