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Religion, the Sabbath, and Public Policy (Work Station One)

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W O R K S T A T I O N O N E



Roland R. Hegstad

One of the most glorious Sabbaths I've ever enjoyed followed a Friday disaster.

Heavy rains had turned the mountain creeks of southeastern Kentucky into rivers of mud and debris. In this fabled feud-land of the Hatfields and the McCoys, many homes were damaged or destroyed. Mud half a foot deep covered many floors. I saw the mountain folk hauling rustic furniture out of their modest homes. Few, it seemed, would be habitable again.

My notes for a story in hand, I slipped into Oneida's Adventist church on Sabbath morning. The congregation, as I recall, numbered something short of 30, including children. Two were physicians; the wife of one taught 12 to 15 children in a home school. Each day they memorized a Bible verse. I heard them recite what seemed to be about half of the Book of John.

As I recall, it was a verse about Jesus healing on the Sabbath that

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emboldened me to get up and suggest that everyone go home, change into work clothes, collect shovels, rakes, and whatever, return to the church

for a prayer, and then help a neighbor's ox out of the ditch, which translated reads: Dig mud out of houses and heal the spirits of distraught mountain people.

We did. I wonder what Sabbath-keeper Joe Lieberman would have done?

Why does it matter? We'll see.

Faith-full Politics

For the first time since John F. Kennedy's candidacy 40 years ago, religion—not just the Sabbath—is at the heart of presidential campaign dialogue. For one example of many: On August 27, speaking to members of the Fellowship Chapel in Detroit, Lieberman praised the Founding Fathers for finding guidance in Scripture and suggested America is “moving to a new spiritual awakening.”

“I stand before you today,” he

said, "as a witness to the goodness of God. For me, . . . faith provided a foundation, order, and purpose to my life."

With all the conviction of an Adventist evangelist, Lieberman observed: "While so much of our economic life is thriving, too much of our moral life is still stagnating. As a people we need to reaffirm our faith."

Most captivating to the electorate, however, is Lieberman's observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. At least one Adventist television speaker and the editor of *Liberty* see God's hand in Gore's choosing Lieberman for the vice-presidency.

This issue of *PD* seeks to answer to questions: Just how *does* an Orthodox Jew observe the Sabbath? Does keeping it holy in our secular society mean the same as it did to first-century Jews and Christians? And if Lieberman does become Vice-President of the United States, to what degree, if any, must he adjust his conscience to political realities?

Rabbi Shmuel Kaplan of Potomac, Maryland's Chabad Center does not believe Lieberman will have a serious conflict, but anticipates that he will

find problems in travel and other rules regarding the Sabbath. Kaplan noted also that Inauguration Day, January 20, is the Sabbath.

"I don't prejudge the situation," says Kaplan, but added that he would be interested in how Lieberman handles Sabbath concerns on that day.

Another Washington, D. C., rabbi, Joel Tessler, expressed confidence in

Lieberman's ability to juggle both faith and politics.

"Jews have 2,000 years of practice at being committed to both their faith tradition and the country in which they live," he said.

Tessler cited a passage in the Talmud that dictates civil law must be honored in cases of conflict between civil law and

religious law. According to Tessler, the passage, loosely translated, reads: "the law of the land is the law," and emphasizes that religious ideologies should be consistent with the local populace. "There are ways," he said, "to work responsibly within Jewish law."

Kaplan feels that Lieberman's vice-presidency could be a national learning experience.

"People will learn more about



"I stand before you today..."

proper Sabbath observance,” he said.

That seems debatable. It appears to me that people will learn instead how Orthodox Judaism accommodates Sabbath observance to civil or social mores. Christians did it too, as theologian Keith Burton explains. (See page 29.) Ed Zinke’s “Is There One Sabbath for Joe Lieberman and another for Joe Adventist?” (see page 19) explores traditional elements that distinguish Sabbathkeeping of first-century Judaism from the biblical Sabbath.

Personal Faith and Public Policy

What about the faith of the top two presidential candidates? (Yes, mother, there are a couple more whose candidacy can safely be minimized.) Let’s see what George W. Bush and Vice-President Al Gore have to say. (Keep in mind that there are no “firsts” involved in their religion.) Why should their faith matter at all? *Because personal faith can have an impact on public policy.* Since I’ve spoken of the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, let’s start with Republican presidential candidate George Bush.

A few years ago, during a visit to George Bush’s parents in Kennebunkport, Maine, Billy Graham asked the presidential candidate to be: “Are you right with God?” Bush replied that he wasn’t sure but thought he should be. A few months later he quit drinking, cold turkey,

and soon after, smoking. His explanation: “I made up my mind and here’s what I’m gonna do.” Today, with his wife, Laura, Bush attends a traditional Methodist church in Austin, Texas. In a recent interview, Bush said that Jesus was his “favorite philosopher,” a response that endeared him to many evangelicals. After meeting with Catholic thinkers Richard Neuhaus and Michael Novak, he incorporated concepts from Catholic theology—such as Pope John Paul II’s phrase “a hospitable society, a welcoming culture”—into his speeches. From the political perspective, one could write off this incident simply as shrewd politics. However, his proclamation of “Jesus Day,” which in April, as governor of Texas, he proclaimed June 10 to be, clearly violates separation of church and state.

And what of Al Gore?

Gore, a member of the New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Carthage, Tennessee, has said he makes no decision without asking himself what Jesus would do. He vies with Bush in promising, if elected, to channel public funds to faith-based organizations so that they may provide a number of social services. Perhaps here, too, we are being subjected to the flapdoodle of politics. Then again, perhaps not.

Whether or not, it appears that we had better be about our Father’s business. □