

**Thoughts composed in response to “Evangelicals Need to Ask Themselves the Hard Questions,” a *Globe and Mail* column published Dec. 8.**

Columnist John Ibbitson’s recent missive to Evangelicals [available online at link noted below] is based on several myths that many commentators continue to perpetuate.

First, I agree that the attempt by some, including some Evangelicals, to engage in power politics in an effort to manipulate MPs to vote for man/woman marriage did fail. Too many politicians and non-politicians have “played politics” with marriage. I also agree that the institutional church, apart from exceptional circumstances, should not become partisan and identify itself with a political party or a politician.

However, the premise often perpetuated in Canada that religious organizations should not engage in politic debate, let alone the marriage debate, is borne out of a shallow understanding of both religion and politics.

**Myth 1: Faith based politics is not growing in influence.** Faith-based politics is not waning. Politics by its nature is an expression of one’s basic commitments and principles. Sometimes these commitments are shaped by a specific religious tradition, sometimes not. But some faith, be it religious or secularist, will animate political engagement. The alternative is pure pragmatism – politics without principle. To suggest that people of specific faith traditions should not participate in the political process is undemocratic. To suggest that they leave their faith at the door is to impose a reverse religious test on civic participation. Do we desire a free and democratic society or not?

**Myth 2: Legislation to protect public and religious officials from having to perform same-sex marriage is already in place.** The solemnization of marriage is in provincial jurisdiction. Federal legislation like C-38 does not and cannot extend protection to public and religious officials. The Supreme Court of Canada did indicate that clergy would be protected but they did not comment on public officials and already many in various provinces have been compelled to relinquish their provincially granted ability to officiate at marriage ceremonies. Several others are currently before Human Rights Tribunals.

**Myth 3: The opposition to same sex marriage was a battle of the religious right.** Only one of the more than 50 Christian denominations in Canada has publicly endorsed same-sex marriage. Over 40 have signed the *Declaration on Marriage* opposing the redefinition of marriage and these include Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical denominations. Members of these denominations vote across party lines and have differing views on a range of issues from social programs to war. The concern over the redefining of marriage was not restricted to the so-called religious right.

**Myth 4: A fringe was born in the aftermath of the debate.** Surely, 123 MPs and the significant number of Canadians who wanted the issue reopened is hardly a fringe. The issue of marriage is a matter of doctrine for most churches and unless religious freedom is greatly curtailed in Canada, churches, mosques, temples and other institutions of civil society will continue to promote marriage as the union of one man and one woman, will

oversee most of the marriages in Canada, will work diligently to promote healthy marriages and will be on the front lines of caring for those whose marriages are broken.

**Myth 5: Evangelicals by engaging in politics have strayed from caring for the vulnerable** Studies consistently show that Evangelicals are more likely to make charitable donations and volunteer for charitable causes than the typical Canadian. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), for example, is participating in a national campaign to address global poverty, last week held a briefing for MPs on human sex slave trafficking, and is working with its roundtable on homelessness and poverty to advocate on behalf of the people who live on our streets. Caring for the vulnerable does have a political dimension. Marriage and family integrity play a significant role in the lives of children, and the breakdown of marriages significantly contributes to economic and emotional distress. These are people among the vulnerable in our society. Marriage and family policy deserves more than a perfunctory debate; it requires a national strategy and alterations to marriage and family should not be done piece-meal.

**Myth 6: Evangelicals should leave Rome to Caesar.** The call to Christians is not to abandon Caesar but rather to understand that God has given to government certain tasks and that we are to support governments in the proper fulfillment of their task. We are also to remind government that they are not omni-competent and not sovereign – the *Charter* itself refers to both the supremacy of God and the rule of law. Across the breadth of Christianity in Canada, Christians have understood that part of their responsibility includes political engagement. On the issue of marriage, substantive study of the issue and a full, informed debate are not too much to ask of our publicly elected officials and of our government.

**Myth 7: The Great Commission is unrelated to politics:** Ibbitson ends by quoting Great Commission; the call to preach the Gospel, the Good News, to every creature. The Gospel is about repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing through Christ to all people. Christ himself taught and demonstrated that the impact of the Gospel is not simply inward and personal but extends to all of life. Addressing brokenness, vulnerability and injustice and promoting healthy relationships and ways of living is part of authentic worship. Expressing concern over the government's treatment of a critical social institution like marriage and its implications for spouses, children and our society is a worthy subject for churches.

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[Link to online version of Ibbitson article: <http://tinyurl.com/wbtmm>]