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Bill Clinton's Bully Pulpit

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Speaking from the pulpit of The Riverside Church in New York City, Clinton addressed one of America's most liberal congregations. The church, founded in 1927, meets in a great Gothic structure built by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. From its founding, the church has been a beacon for theological liberalism in the United States. Its founding pastor was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the most famous liberal preacher of the early twentieth century. Fosdick, a Baptist, had formerly served as preaching minister at New York's First Presbyterian Church, but he was later forced out after controversy arose when Fosdick denied basic Christian doctrines from the pulpit. Along with Rockefeller, Fosdick founded The Riverside Church as a bastion of progressivist thought mixed with theological and political liberalism. Addressing the 1,500 worshippers gathered at the church this past Sunday, Bill Clinton was right at home.

The former president was introduced by The Riverside Church's current pastor, Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. Forbes told the congregation, "What some among us have forgotten is what a profound force that faith has been for progress and social justice." Mr. Clinton picked up on this theme in his initial comments: "I want to say what I think the sermon means. It means that politics and political involvement dictated by faith is not the exclusive province of the right wing in America."

Clinton's appearance at the church was part of the launch of "Mobilization 2004," a campaign led by Forbes and other liberal religious leaders intended to organize the "Religious Left" politically in order to counter the influence of the so-called "Religious Right." Timed to coincide with the 2004 Republican National Convention, the Mobilization 2004 campaign is to include rallies, voter registration efforts, and networking among liberal congregations and religious institutions.

Clinton called for liberal Christians to tie their votes to values. He accused conservative Christians of claiming "the exclusive allegiance of America's real Christians." Pointing to the Southern Baptist Convention, Mr. Clinton reflected: "I looked at the recent meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention where the president went and one of their leaders was wearing a button he was giving to everybody else that said, 'I am a values voter,' implying that those of us that didn't agree with them didn't have any values."

Not that he would be troubled by the facts, but Mr. Clinton got that story almost right. President George W. Bush did not attend the Southern Baptist Convention, though he did deliver an address by video. The SBC's public policy organization, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, is sponsoring a voter education effort known as "I Vote Values." Of course, conservative Christians do not believe that liberals are without values. The fault line of disagreement is over what those values should be and how the Christian faith—and most especially, the Bible—should form and establish those values.

The former president was clear about his own position on critical issues of the day. Mr. Clinton, who twice vetoed legislation that would have banned partial-birth abortions, commented: "I have never met anybody who is pro-abortion, and that's not what pro-choice means. It just means we don't want to criminalize the mothers and doctors." That is

absolute nonsense. The women wearing “I Had an Abortion” t-shirts at the Democratic National Convention last month were not merely “pro-choice.” They celebrated abortion itself. Mr. Clinton knows full well that “pro-choice” effectively means unqualified support for abortion on demand.

Addressing the issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, Mr. Clinton asserted, “I am not ashamed to believe that gay people shouldn’t be discriminated against, and I don’t think Jesus had much to say about that.” In those few words, Mr. Clinton offered about as much theological and moral confusion as one sentence can bear. First of all, it was President Clinton who in 1996 signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA]. Has he now changed his mind? Apparently so, for when he now argues against all forms of discrimination, he certainly implies that this would extend to the most controversial issues of the current debate. More troubling, when the former president asserted that Jesus had little to say about homosexuality, he was playing an intricate theological game that must be named for what it is. Taking his argument seriously, Mr. Clinton rejects what the Bible so clearly teaches about homosexuality—in passages ranging from the Old Testament to the letters of the Apostle Paul—and explains this solely on the basis that Jesus made no direct comments concerning homosexuality itself. This is a direct subversion of the authority of scripture. If the entirety of scripture is not true, trustworthy, and authoritative, then the church has absolutely nothing of significance to say, not only on homosexuality, but on any issue of importance. Since Bill Clinton’s edition of the “red letter” Bible includes no specific statements by Jesus about homosexuality, the former president obviously feels free to contradict the Apostle Paul, the wisdom of the church, the structure of divine law, and the Christian consensus throughout twenty centuries. Yet he did so without batting an eye.

In the most fascinating section of his sermon, the former president encouraged his congregation to lean into ambiguity when interpreting the Bible. Recalling a conversation with former SBC president H. Edwin Young, Mr. Clinton went on to draw a moral from the story. “I will never forget a conversation I had in 1993 with the then-president of the SBC—a man I like very much and whose sermons I still watch on television when I get the chance. He’s a great pastor, but he belongs to the values voter crowd. And he looked at me and said, ‘I just want an answer, not a political answer, a straight yes or no answer: Do you believe the Bible is literally true?’ I said, ‘Pastor, I think it is completely true, but I don’t believe you or I or anyone on earth is smart enough to understand it completely.’”

Doubtless, no finite mind can fully comprehend the infinite mind of God. Nevertheless, God has revealed Himself in the Bible precisely so that we would have a sure, authoritative, and trustworthy knowledge of all things necessary for our salvation and for obedient living.

President Clinton also stated his case for an ambiguous interpretation of scripture in other words. “The most important political verses for 2004 [are] where Saint Paul contrasts life today with life in heaven with God. He says, ‘But now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three. But the greatest of these is love.’”

In citing First Corinthians 13:12-13, Mr. Clinton misuses the Apostle Paul’s words. Paul was not resigning himself and his fellow believers to ambiguity when interpreting the Bible. To the contrary, he was comparing our finite, but real knowledge of God granted us by scripture in this life with the perfect knowledge of God we will be given when in His presence for eternity.

Sunday’s sermon at The Riverside Church was not merely an effort to mobilize religious liberals for political action. In his sermon, President Clinton probably revealed more than he intended when he tried to construct an interpretive defense for his use of scripture. The issues of biblical authority and the absolute truthfulness and trustworthiness of God’s Word are of paramount importance for the church. Without confidence in the Word of God, the church cannot speak with authority. If the Bible is treated with casual disregard or when its clear teachings are declared to be ambiguous, the church is deceived and headed for theological disaster.

A full affirmation of the Bible’s authority requires belief in the clarity of the biblical text. This clarity—known to theologians as “perspicuity”—assures us that the Bible is indeed meant to be understood. In the Holy Scriptures, we are not confronted with a secret code, a hidden message, or a massive ambiguity. To the contrary, the Bible speaks with divine authority on all matters and on every issue it addresses.

For President Bill Clinton, the real problem is not that the Bible sends an ambiguous message about sexuality, but that he rejects or relativizes those texts that speak without question or confusion to the sinfulness of homosexual behavior.

Across the worldview divide that marks our cultural landscape, the disagreements over issues ranging from abortion and homosexuality to embryonic stem cell research and same-sex marriage reveal a far deeper divide—a division between those who see the Bible as the Word of God and those who see the Bible as a fallible human instrument containing some degree of spiritual wisdom. President Clinton helped to make that point as he preached to the congregation at The Riverside Church this past Sunday. He sought to awaken religious liberals to the peril of conservative Christian political action. Nevertheless, his sermon deserves the attention of every thoughtful believer, for in setting out his doctrine of biblical ambiguity, the former president provided us all with a clear demonstration of where such ambiguity leads. Once again we were reminded that when it comes to Bill Clinton, the medium is the message.

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