

INCARNATION CATHOLIC CHURCH

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In the past few months, both presumptive presidential candidates Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain have had to deal with public backlash following statements from religious leaders that they have associated with. Obama has been hamstrung by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose sermons blame U.S. policies for the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. And two evangelical pastors that McCain won over—John Hagee of Texas and Rod Parsley of Ohio—were tied to statements that many people found offensive. Why does religion and religious affiliations play such a major role in politics, specifically the selection of a president?

I believe the recent publicized connection of politicians with religious leaders is an extension of the old axiom, “If you want to know someone, look at who their friends are.” If a politician has a long relationship with a particular pastor by membership in a church as did Senator Obama with Pastor Wright, we might safely deduce that the politician is aligned with that pastor’s religious message and philosophy. Were this not the case, we might expect that the politician would leave that particular house of worship. On the other hand, we might also assume that a politician like Senator McCain who seeks the endorsement of a religious leader outside of their own denominational preference, should be cognizant of the message and religious views before attaching their name to that pastor.

We may differ with friends over fundamental issues of life including politics but still remain friends. That’s part of the give and take of friendship. Because pastors represent large congregations or church bodies, the words they speak, usually in the public arena, are carefully weighed and critiqued by those who attend those houses of worship. Religion should challenge us, stretch us, and help us grow. When religion is used in a destructive way, or unjustly judges the motivation of people of good faith, it crosses the line. Unfortunately, many believers have left religious institutions all together because the messenger misused or abused their role in communicating the truth of who God is!

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