

## **Alabama's "Values Voters"**

**by Stephen Foster Black**

In the days since the November 2nd election, much has been written about the growing religious and cultural divide reflected in our national politics. We have heard a great deal about the impact of "values voters" – that growing segment of the electorate who says that "moral values" is the issue that matters most to them in deciding how to vote. Abortion, school prayer, gun control, a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage – all are issues that increasingly define, for many voters, the central story on the stage of national politics.

But what about state politics? How do moral values shape our political identity on the stage of Alabama government? With a state constitutional ban of same-sex marriage a forgone conclusion, and abortion, school prayer and gun control left on the national stage, what will define the future of moral politics in Alabama? I ask because no matter how hard state governments work to keep taxes low, improve education, care for the elderly, and so on, true progress can only be built on values. Progressive change in Alabama will require a spirituality of social responsibility - a reason for action that transcends individual interest.

Before we can answer how moral values will shape our future, however, we must first understand how our culture is shaping our moral values. I suggest a focus on, arguably, the most important cultural trend over the last generation – suburbanization.

One of the most significant cultural markers reached as America entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century was that, for the first time in our country's history, the majority of Americans had moved to the suburbs. In an effort to seek "safer neighborhoods" and "better schools", this continuing trend has led to increased social homogeneity and fewer opportunities for social networks across class and racial lines. Simply put, we are isolating ourselves in communities with people who walk, talk and think just like us. Suburbanization has vividly impacted our moral values as well – specifically - by changing the face of our faith communities. Not surprisingly, as people flock to the suburbs, churches follow. For most congregations, the new suburban structures being built are larger than the ones left behind. Although a natural sign of success, a larger newer structure brings with it a larger new financial responsibility. Unable to count on a traditional network of neighborhood support, (remember - most suburbs were open fields one generation ago) many suburban churches must devote increased energy to attracting and retaining new members. A marketing campaign of sorts, launched before our very eyes, has blanketed the suburbs of America with a feel-good message of comfort and affirmation awaiting new parishioners.

As new arrivals to a community in search of a congregation to join, my former law professor, Stephen Carter, and his wife were continually asked about their politics – assuming that what they wanted was a church where they would be assured each Sunday from the pulpit that all their opinions coincided with God's will. "Rather than challenging the faithful to do what is difficult, many pastors and preachers share with

their congregation only the part of God's word they want to hear. And so the worship of God, too, becomes an embodiment of the values of the market, language carefully selected to fill the pews -- and the faithful carefully shopping for congregations that will offer them comfort rather than challenge.”

In a state with a proud tradition of hard work, close knit communities, and faith in God, too many of us have become captive to a consumer-driven faith culture that encourages a purely personal understanding of self-fulfillment, causing us to feel less and less obligated to our fellow citizens in common projects and goals. Not surprisingly, many pastors perpetuate a definition of obligation that stresses charity while ignoring justice. By simply focusing on alleviating the effects of poverty, charity does not risk causing tension or discomfort by challenging the complacency of the parishioners. Justice, on the other hand, by seeking to eliminate the causes of poverty, leads directly to challenge, self-reflection and often discomfort. What is required of us as citizens should be understood in its theological dimensions, because in authentic communities of faith, obligation and justice have a biblical foundation. Revealed to us by the Prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ of the New Testament, is a justice that requires an obligation to understand that every individual's life has dignity and worth, and everyone's health, education and potential to succeed is worth fighting for. We owe others this duty because they are part of God's creation.

Our faith leaders cannot, in good conscience, merely be service providers to the poor, but must also take on a more Prophetic role. Often best situated to offer vision, credibility and trust, our faith leaders must participate in helping Alabamians increase the realm of duties we define as moral responsibilities. As our state tax structure places an unfair burden on the working poor, as countless children remain uninsured and thousands of our seniors are unable to afford prescription drugs, people of faith should feel a duty to act! With Alabama's distinctive sense of values rooted in the church, the land and the community, no part of America is so well furnished to embrace the Biblical commandment: love thy neighbor.

The Alabama Poverty Project seeks to reform certain institutions, change specific policies and work to pass needed legislation. But we also strive toward a larger goal – that of changing minds and opening hearts. We realize that for political leadership to shape public opinion, rather than simply react to it, it must grow from a moral source. Therefore, we intend to partner with faith leaders as well as representatives of business, civic and education communities to inspire people to reconsider their priorities, raise questions and move from silence and accommodation to active engagement. By choosing hope over cynicism, this new era will be stamped in history as the point at which voices from our faith communities joined with business and civic leaders in asking what we stand for – and then, as one united voice, act on our beliefs.

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