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2/28/2008--This morning I heard an NPR interview of Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, which was presented as part of NPR's "Conversations with Conservatives" project. You can read and listen to the interview at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=78666288>. (By the way, this interview is an example of why I admire NPR so much. Even if you think some of the questions were loaded, Land no doubt rarely has this kind of uninterrupted air time to make his case and explain his points. I'm sure he would agree he was fairly and intelligently treated.)

I like Land, but I should add at the start that he favorably reviewed my book, *American Religious Democracy*, in the *Journal of Law and Religion*. So, I owe him.

The matter that Land wanted to address in the interview was calls for Evangelical Christians to "broaden" their political concerns beyond abortion and gay rights to include matters such as social justice, the environment, peace and so forth. Land made it clear that he did not oppose these other concerns, but he did not feel they should be pursued at the expense of opposition to abortion and gay marriage, which he plainly regards as core concerns. Not stated, but implied, is that supporting a Democrat for President would be pursuing these other matters at the expense of abortion and gay marriage.

Land's position in the interview illustrates the ability of politics to corrupt religion, in two senses. First, how can the issues of abortion and gay marriage possibly be linked, except in the sense that both are political issues? If one believes that abortion is always evil because abortion always takes an innocent human life, how can that be compared with the establishment of a marriage context for gay people? How can killing someone and marrying someone be compared in terms of moral seriousness? You cannot respond that both involve commandments from God because then all commandments are equal and abortion cannot be set above feeding the hungry, which Land denies. The Bible, after all, itself sets forth other models for marriage than one man and one woman. In addition, if gay people cannot marry the other gender because of the way they are made, their desire to love and to marry in the only way they can seems to me to be a glorification of heterosexual marriage rather than a denigration of it. Anyway, gay marriage is certainly debatable from Land's perspective in a way that abortion is not.

This error in linkage raises a more fundamental mistake. The Bible, especially the Gospels, generally do not speak in terms of issues. There is some legal material in the Old Testament and divorce and the Sabbath get some specific treatment in the New, but on the whole, the Bible is about something else. As Jesus says, the core commandments are to love God and one's neighbor. Issues, and ethics generally, fall out of that commitment as implications, not as commandments per se.

I don't mean that Land is wrong about abortion and gay marriage, though I believe he is wrong about gay marriage, but he is wrong in putting things this way. He sounds more like a Pharisee than a Christian. Politics will do that to you.

I also urge Richard Land to drop the reference to Martin Luther King. In the interview, Land likened the criticism that Evangelical Christians are too narrowly focused on abortion and gay marriage to a hypothetical criticism that Martin Luther King was too narrowly focused on racial justice and reconciliation. The problem with this comment is that, toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King evidently came to precisely that conclusion. This is why, before he was killed, he broadened his message to include matters of war and peace and economic justice.