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November 22, 2008: Mike Huckabee's Christian Party

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Title: Mike Huckabee's Christian Party

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11/22/2008--Henry Olsen, a Vice President of the American Enterprise Institute, wrote a column for the Wall Street Journal last January, after Mike Huckabee's victory in the Iowa caucuses, that argued that Huckabee was trying to create a new kind of political movement along the lines of the Christian Democratic tradition in Europe. Huckabee's populist economics combined with his Christian identification suggested, said Olsen, a "pro-faith" "pro-government" position that would be a challenge to the more secular, private property oriented Reagan wing of the Republican Party.

Now, while the Republicans are trying to figure out what comes next, Huckabee is back with a new book, "Do the Right Thing: Inside the Movement That's Bringing Common Sense Back to America", which judging by his appearance on NPR last week, represents his position in this Republican Party debate.

Huckabee's position is probably out-of-touch politically at the moment, since our economic crisis is dominating everything. But that should not rule him out, since Ronald Reagan was also out of touch for awhile. The wheel may turn back to the questions that Huckabee is raising.

Undoubtedly some would say that creating a Christian Party of any kind violates constitutional principles of the separation of church and state. [Notice I don't say it would be unconstitutional, since it plainly would not be that]. It is probably true that political division along religious lines would be anathema to the framers of our Constitution. So, let's consider the constitutional principles that might be involved.

One fundamental constitutional principle seems to me to be that votes for a candidate should not be cast on the basis of identity. Of course voters violate this principle all the time, but just as President-elect Obama would be the first to say that African-Americans voters should not have voted for him because he is black, Huckabee would agree that voters who are Christian should only vote for him if their interpretations of the Gospel yield the same policies for public life that his interpretation does. He would agree that Christians should not vote for him just because he is a Christian. It is true that some of those policies touch on faith, such as literal expressions of faith in the public square. But, unless a display of the Ten Commandments on public property is itself ruled unconstitutional by the courts, having such displays there is just another policy. We can see plainly that Huckabee is not running on Christian identity because if offered support by "values conservatives" who are Jewish, Muslim, or secular, Huckabee would welcome them on principle—and not cynically.

This latter observation suggests that the legitimacy of voting for a substantive proposition, including Proposition 8 in California, does not usually depend on the motivation for the vote. The fact that Huckabee claims his policies are supported by the Gospel is not itself a ground to assert that his project violates constitutional principles.

Why then does Huckabee often use the visual symbols of Christianity? I suggest it is not to make a pitch to Christians. It is a different shorthand. It is a quite specific and well-understood shorthand for a collection of otherwise perfectly constitutional policies. I don't agree with much that Huckabee proposes, but his kind of faith electioneering threatens no constitutional principle.