

Why Tax Policy Matters

Susan Pace Hamill

When deciding who to vote for in this year's presidential race, it is very easy to overlook tax policy given other emotional issues, for example the war in Iraq, abortion rights and displays of religious expression in the public square.

Let me explain why taxes are a moral issue and why we must apply the standards of biblical justice to President Bush's and Senator Kerry's tax policy positions.

In the Gospel of *Matthew* when Jesus said "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's", Jesus made it clear that taxes are a necessary part of life. Other places in the Bible reveal the moral principles of justice that evaluate tax policy. When the Prophet *Isaiah* cried out "seek justice" he was admonishing the people for ignoring the Laws of the Old Testament guarding the minimum well-being of those without power and wealth, which Jesus clearly affirms. A community that reflects the teachings of Jesus cannot solely guard the well-being of the powerful and wealthy.

Only through fair taxes can we raise enough revenues to guard the minimum well being of all Americans, including "the least of these" among us. Federal law must compel us to pay taxes because none of us, especially those of us with much income and wealth, would ever voluntarily pay our fair share. Charitable giving alone will never raise enough revenues. Anyone who doubts this should study the Fall in the third chapter of *Genesis*.

President Bush's tax policy deeply troubles me. His tax cuts for the rich, which would have been far more had he fully gotten his way, are enormously benefitting the wealthiest families, while offering scant relief to the struggling middle classes. President Bush seems unconcerned that the ballooning federal deficit resulting from these tax cuts and the escalating costs for the war in Iraq is threatening things such as programs for the poor, public health insurance, and federally subsidized college loans that allow Americans who were not born into a wealthy family an opportunity to reach their full potential.

What troubles me even more are the justifications offered by President Bush and his advisors. They promise that tax cuts for the wealthy will foster economic growth benefitting everyone, when in fact the complicated economic studies behind such promises are badly flawed, with most reputable economists agreeing that we cannot rely on these claims. Even worse, President Bush and his advisors have used this flawed information as a substitute for rigorous moral reflection. That may follow certain secular-based moral frameworks, but it is not acceptable for an evangelical Christian - for that matter any Christian or any other person of faith.

Senator Kerry has denounced President Bush's tax cuts for the rich, but has otherwise offered nothing specific. Not exactly a positive endorsement.

So how should a Bible-believing evangelical vote? Especially evangelicals attracted to President

Bush's strong statements of faith, his absolute pro-life position and his support of religious expression in the public square and faith-based initiatives?

True faith is in the heart, and as with any individual only God knows for sure. However I am not impressed with President Bush's strong statements of faith.

A wealthy person's attitude about tax policy reveals their true moral compass because fair tax policy requires real personal sacrifices. Absolute pro-life stances lose their punch if the believer is unwilling to insist on adequate tax revenues so that low income children can have a chance for a better life. Religious expression is meaningless if our real values exalt mammon. Faith-based initiatives noble in their own right cannot replace fair tax policy. The biblical requirements of charity and justice are separate and distinct. An "A+" in charity will not average an "F" in justice to a "C".

And finally, given his callous attitude towards our least fortunate at home, I have to wonder whether President Bush really cares about the "least of these" in Iraq.

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