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Refusing to Play It Safe

Shortly before this book went to press, I sat down at a coffee shop close to my church with a seasoned politician whom I respect despite the fact that we don't always see eye to eye on every issue. He is older than I am and has seen more than his share of stump speeches, sermons, elections, political pandering, and partisan games. He also seems to respect me regardless of my relative youth and our differences on politics, faith, social policy, and the like. But we each share a love of this great nation, our home state of Tennessee, and the city of Nashville. And we each love our coffee, prepared differently, of course. On this occasion we had another civil conversation—one that included the purpose and intent of this book.

“Clay, I don't know why you would want to write a book about preaching politics,” he said. “I've always considered what you do to be above the political fray, a much more noble profession than mine. Why would you want to dive into the swamp? It doesn't seem necessary. I just don't want you to regret this later in your life.”

His observation caught me off guard at 6:45 in the morning. I was still waking up. And to be honest, what he said rattled me. Why *do* I want to talk about the potential pitfalls of preaching politics? Why do I want to “dirty myself” in the realm of politicians who have low-digit approval ratings? Why would I want to open Pandora's Box and unleash the howls of those who say politics has no place in the pulpit? Shouldn't ministers of the gospel play it safe and stay as far away from politics as possible? Aren't millennials staying away from the church because they believe it is too political? Haven't preachers on both ends of the spectrum managed to offend enough people and do enough damage already?

My response to these questions has its roots in the denominational ethos that I grew up in and in which I now minister. At thirty-five years of age, I am in my ninth year as senior minister of Woodmont Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I am also a fourth-generation pastor, following my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. In the Stone-Campbell tradition that gave birth to my denomination, we say that we “agree to disagree” when it comes to controversial issues that tend to divide Christians. We stress the unity of Christ’s church and seek to maintain it. “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; but in all things love.” That’s our mantra. This is what we strive to live out in our local churches.

And yet, throughout my adult life, I have watched the church argue, fight, and, in many cases, tear itself apart over a variety of issues. How many issues are there in American society that can be debated eternally without either side conceding an inch of moral high ground? As we prepare for another heated presidential race (2016), many theologians and preachers will endorse a variety of candidates and stake their partisan positions. Controversial issues tend to make their way from the public square and into the pews. Same-sex marriage is just one of many recent examples. This topic has recently dominated the discussion in many congregations and denominations, and among ministers, families, and friends. It has overshadowed many other important topics—many of which, in my view at least, matter far more than this issue does. When the U.S. Supreme Court granted civil-rights status to same-sex unions and ruled that those unions are marriages, I immediately thought less about my own perspective and more about what the Court’s decision would mean for the future of Christianity and the church. My fear was that an ongoing polarization within Christianity would widen, leaving us with conservative churches, liberal churches, and not much in between. Disagreements, passions, and emotions abound. I see this as a growing problem that must be identified and addressed. Christian tribalism has always been the easy way out. Living and preaching in the tension are admirable but never easy. Civil dialogue and mutual respect are absolutely necessary if a united church is to have a future.

Many people already claim that we live in a post-Christian world where the church has lost its influence in society. Some of them point to this Supreme Court ruling on marriage as clear evidence that the church has failed to be a moral light. Others, however, say the Court's ruling will now give the church a chance to reach people it has alienated and marginalized from the pews for years. Who is right? Each side uses scripture to defend its position. The church's unity is taking another major hit. In fact, the ugliness and raw emotion of the debate itself (regardless of which side people are on) seem to bring out the worst in people and have driven many good people away from the church.

The book you hold in your hands is not about this issue or any other single political issue but rather about *how* we debate *any* political issue, and the potential divisions and stressors that pastors and preachers face on a regular basis. Our congregations are split along political, social, and moral lines. Often the moral is wrapped up in the political, and the politics lead to certain perceptions of one another's theological and biblical beliefs. Some people and churches feel that their version of Christianity is superior. Furthermore, obvious divisions related to socioeconomic class and lifestyle differences are also a reality for many churches. Growing materialism, the glorification of money, rampant consumerism, the constant quest for more, and a false sense of security present real challenges to our spiritual lives and the church of the future. As I will contend, Jesus still speaks to all these things.

I intend to probe this confusing and often damaging mix of beliefs, opinions, and inferences within the Christian faith. I will do this using Luke's portrait of Jesus and some of his teachings, as well as by drawing on the fine work of distinguished scholars. What we find as we go along may be surprising, and it will certainly be challenging—regardless of your political or theological persuasion.

My hope is that this book will help us foster a more productive approach to ministry, preaching, and community in our generation and beyond—an approach that will permit differences that refuse to yield to division; an approach that will produce constructive dialogue instead of diatribes, promote the

faith's essentials over its nonessentials, and make Christianity more attractive to a world still very much in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Clay Stauffer

Nashville, Tennessee

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CHAPTER 1



Preachers, Politics, and Partisanship

Every Sunday preachers across the United States enter their pulpits attempting to deliver faithfully sermons that convey the truth of God’s word in ways that speak pastorally and prophetically to the lives of those in their congregations. Any minister charged with this weekly task is keenly aware of this ongoing challenge—requiring courage, creativity, study, exegesis, preparation, revision, and delivery. What makes the preaching task difficult is that many congregations are composed of members with diverse backgrounds and political ideologies. On any given Sunday morning at Woodmont Christian Church in Nashville, I look out and see liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, super wealthy CEOs and members of the working class sitting on the same pew, all expecting to hear a word from God. What unites them is a common belief in Christ. What often separates them are political tendencies and socioeconomic realities.

In our tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we take great pride in this diversity. Christian unity is our polar star. We agree to disagree. Our denomination’s slogan says that we are a “movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.”¹ We honor Alexander Campbell’s and Barton Stone’s vision to unite all Christians regardless of their differences. Yet I will be the first to admit that, as good as this sounds, it is not an easy task for the one charged with delivering the sermon.

Many in the pews feel that preaching and politics should never be intertwined, especially if you happen to proclaim a position or perspective with which they disagree. Some of this stems from the old adage that faith and politics are two subjects that should not be discussed or debated in polite company, at a dinner party, in casual conversation, in a social situation, or—at least when it comes to politics—in the pulpit. Why? Because these two topics incite an emotional and even visceral response from so many people. Most people in our world maintain strong opinions and viewpoints on these topics, and they have formed their views over time through thought, reflection, and experience. Other opinions have been systematically (and often thoughtlessly) passed down from family members, friends, churches, and communities.

In my view, the emotion and passion that arise when faith and politics meet illustrate why these topics *should* be discussed. There is a correlation between the two. We cannot deny that faith is often linked to politics, and many political candidates use the language and rhetoric of faith to excite and motivate their supporters. In a similar manner, certain preachers are also guilty of using political rhetoric to subvert a text, motivate a base, and gain a following. Context always matters when it comes to preaching.

The United States is a country with a unique religious history. Former *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham makes this case in his 2006 book *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*: “The great goodness about America—the American Gospel, if you will—is that religion shapes the life of the nation without strangling it. Belief in God is central to the country’s experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding Fathers is that the sensible center holds.”² Meacham clearly indicates that the Founding Fathers sought to establish a nation where religious freedom was pivotal and could not be taken away by the government or any human being. The *Declaration of Independence* states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights.”³ Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders struggled to find the proper place for religion in

American life. One could make the case that their endeavor proved successful. The Founders' intention was to create a Republic that maintained a separation of church and state, but in no way did that mean a complete separation of faith and politics. These two concepts are fundamentally different, and many individuals and groups fail to recognize and appreciate the distinction. This misunderstanding has led to what has been called an estranged relationship between faith and politics. The relationship is there, but preachers often struggle with how to find a balance between them in homiletics.

Many preachers experience this tension on a regular basis, especially if serving a politically diverse congregation. Jesus spoke truth to power in his day and calls us to courageously do the same. Churches are tax-exempt as 501C3 organizations. By law a church (or other religious organization) cannot officially endorse political candidates or parties without putting that tax-exempt status in jeopardy. However, this does not mean that churches and preachers must avoid controversial topics. Faithfully preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ requires taking bold and prophetic stands when it comes to particular issues and situations. There is a political side to Jesus' life and ministry that cannot be ignored. The dilemma for many preachers is that taking "prophetic" stands that are anti-war, anti-poverty, and that promote social inclusion often lead to a minister being labeled as "liberal." But are such stands liberal, or are they simply biblical? If we take the time to seriously study and reflect upon the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the gospels—including what he did, what he said, and how he treated others—should our findings influence our politics? I would argue yes. Still, some will say that Jesus was apolitical. I grant that he may not have been political in the way we define that word today (Red, Blue, etc.), but he was certainly a political figure who proclaimed a Kingdom that is very different from the kingdoms of this world.

Toward the end of his book *Disruptive Grace*, Old Testament scholar and prophetic theologian Walter Brueggemann makes the case that preaching will be very challenging yet absolutely necessary in the coming century. He even refers to the preaching task resulting from healthy biblical exegesis as "urgent." He gives the following reasons:

- The matter is urgent because our consumer economy reduces everything and everyone to a commodity, just as Pharaoh had done.
- The matter is urgent because U.S. militarism now stalks the earth and generates resistance among local cultures and local economies; the enormous, unrestrained power of the U.S. military is itself a reflection of the pervasive violence that marks our society.
- The matter is urgent because the public infrastructure of our society—health, education, housing, jobs—all is at risk, and we increasingly seek to go “on the cheap” about everything except military assertiveness.
- The matter is urgent because our use and abuse of the earth is rapacious and cannot be sustained, even in the interest of a growing economy.⁴

Brueggemann views the God we find in both the Old and New Testaments as calling us not to remain silent but to speak out boldly in the face of these issues. However, bold preaching is not always well received, especially in affluent contexts. To use two examples, a discussion of the U.S. military’s role around the world or the pros and cons of our welfare system will evoke profound disagreements among well-meaning Christians.

Partisan Divisions within Congregations

In 2012, Mike Slaughter, Charles Gutenson, and Robert Jones published a fascinating book titled *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide*. It is well-written, well-researched, and most helpful in understanding what has caused the partisan divide in churches and how to deal with political tension and disagreement within a congregation. The authors frame the question well: “Why is it, then, that we have allowed political partisanship to enter so deeply into our churches? And, perhaps more importantly, how is it that we have allowed those differences to divide us, to create obstacles among us, and to have created an environment in which one or the other can be somehow considered less a ‘follower of Jesus’ simply on

the basis of one being the supporter of a particular party or ideology?"⁵ They argue that many people in our society believe that if you are a Christian, you will identify with a particular party and hold deep convictions on certain issues. Everything is black and white, and there is no grey. Of course, life is not that simple, but it is amazing how many people feel this way when it comes to politics and controversial issues. Slaughter and Gutenson believe that it is problematic when Christians combine theology with a certain brand of politics and try to categorize everybody as either "liberal" or "conservative." "It seems popular lore in contemporary American culture to assume that there are only two theopolitical positions. According to the popular way of categorizing people, there are conservatives and liberals. If you are conservative, then you are politically and theologically conservative; if you are liberal, then you are politically and theologically liberal."⁶

The words *liberal* and *conservative* are loaded terms in our culture. And there is little consensus as to what they mean. "One can be theologically conservative and politically conservative; one can be theologically liberal and politically conservative; one can be theologically conservative and politically liberal; and one can be theologically liberal and politically liberal."⁷ Simply throwing around the terms "liberal" and "conservative" is not very helpful. It is actually part of the problem.

In his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt shows that both liberals and conservatives make valuable contributions to society because of their different interests and passions.

My research confirms the common perception that liberals are experts in thinking about issues of victimization, equality, autonomy, and the rights of individuals, particularly those of minorities and non-conformists. Conservatives, on the other hand, are experts in thinking about loyalty to the group, respect for authority and tradition, and sacredness. When one side overwhelms the other, the results are likely to be ugly. A society without liberals would be harsh and oppressive to many individuals. A society without

conservatives would lose many of the social structures and constraints that Durkeim showed are so valuable.⁸

This is also the case in the case in the church, demonstrating the ongoing need for mutual respect and healthy dialogue.

Slaughter and Gutenson address the fact that many Christians say they are willing to “agree to disagree” when it comes to political issues, but in reality many are unable to actually do this.

Let’s face it, we as Christians are perhaps as unsuccessful as any at being able to disagree passionately, while still maintaining fellowship with those with whom we disagree. As Christians, it is true that we need to look for unity in the things essential to the faith. It is true that we need to allow diversity of opinion on things that are not essential. But regardless of whether we agree or disagree, it is a fact that we are to always model love for one another.⁹

What should identify and distinguish Christians is the abiding love and respect that we have for each another. This gets tested when we find ourselves at odds with other church members. The way disagreements are handled, especially within the church, is a direct reflection of spiritual depth and maturity: “Remember that Jesus said Christians would be known, not by their ability to draw lines between themselves and those with whom they disagree, not by their ability to hold only true opinions on all matters, but rather by their love for one another quite apart from whether they fully agree on all the issues.”¹⁰

We now live in a culture in which tolerance, healthy dialogue, and mutual respect seem to be in short supply. A primary reason for this is the “sound-bite” culture driven by twenty-four-hour cable news that thrives on pitting extreme positions against each other. The most hostile, partisan, and extreme politicians and faith leaders get the media coverage and air time. The reason? They are not afraid of conflict and confrontation. News has turned into arguing, yelling, pandering, and entertainment. Anybody willing to compromise, find middle ground, and work with leaders of another party is

viewed as “selling out.” Unfortunately, the same is often true when it comes to religious leaders and pastors. Those who hold the extreme positions and stir the greatest controversy get the airtime.

However, there is something to be said about being passionate when it comes to faith and core beliefs. In the church, when two passionate, well-educated people are at odds with each other, pride and ego create division. I serve an affluent, well-educated church in Nashville. The leaders and members of our church all have strong opinions. As a pastor and preacher, my role is to encourage them to maintain that passion while not using it as a way of lashing out or denigrating somebody else. Passion is good, but only if it is channeled in the right way. In the church, it is often true that the more deeply convicted people are about an issue, the more passionate they are and the less willing they are to listen to other perspectives. So, when it comes to political topics discussed within the church, passions run high.

Slaughter and Gutenson believe that the church must set the example for love, mutual respect, and dialogue. If the church, which is grounded in the love, peace, and tolerance of Jesus Christ, is not able to accomplish this, then we risk allowing partisan differences to divide the beloved community. Again, the preacher and pastor must be the one who leads the effort and encourages others to do the same:

Members of Christ’s Body have been guilty of demeaning and demonizing those with whom they disagree. We have allowed worldly political ideologies to become determining factors for our theology rather than grounding ourselves in a sound biblical theology for determining our politics. Some well-meaning believers have become more passionate about engaging in the heat of partisan political debate than they have been in sharing the good news about Jesus.¹¹

Our responsibility is to be Christians first, and Republicans or Democrats second. When these get reversed, the dialogue turns into resentment. In their book, at the end of chapter 6, “The Role of the Local Church,” Slaughter and Gutenson sum

up what they have been saying: “Unity in Christ will not mean an end to differences. The Democrats and Republicans in our pews will still disagree over the issues and people governing our nation. But if our common mission as disciples takes precedence over our partisan political views, we can live and work for good peaceably together in Jesus’ name.”¹² When Christians allow partisan and ideological differences to divide the body of Christ, we have missed the goal of forming a community built on love and mutual respect.

Harvard professor Robert Putnam and Notre Dame professor David Campbell published a book in 2010 entitled *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. They deal with partisan politics within congregations. Contrary to what many believe, “[T]he people who are most likely to report political activity at church are liberals who attend a politically homogenous congregation.” This may come as a surprise to many who feel as though it is always the Religious Right who use churches and pastors to motivate the base. Putnam and Campbell say, “A longer historical view, however, reminds us that many denominations have long been catalysts for political action on socially progressive, left-leaning causes. Surveys of religious leaders have found that, even today, liberal clergy bring more politics to their churches than do conservative pastors.”¹³ In light of this, a logical question to ask is: How does a congregation become politically homogenous?

I once served on the staff of a politically homogenous church, The Riverside Church in New York City. In hindsight, I’m not sure how healthy that context really was. Anybody who does not agree with the politics preached there (liberal, Democratic politics) is made to feel very uncomfortable and out of place. Riverside serves as a liberal example of what happens when a church becomes politically homogenous and overtly political. There is no balanced dialogue regarding political issues because, generally speaking, everybody is in the same camp. This would also prove true in a politically conservative congregation such as Thomas Road Baptist Church at Liberty University.

If we take a long look at the history of our nation, it is true that religion has been and continues to be used as a source of inspiration for both the political left and the political right. Both

liberals and conservatives get their motivation from the Bible and from their faith. Putnam and Campbell put it this way:

American history teaches us that religion is neither exclusively left nor right, progressive nor conservative. Instead, religion of different sorts has been associated with political causes of different sorts. On some issues, notably those related to race, religion has been invoked to justify both sides of the debate. In the nineteenth century, religion animated advocates of both abolition and slavery. No one made the point better than Abraham Lincoln, who, in his second inaugural address, referred to the two sides of the Civil War by noting that “both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other.”¹⁴

In many ways, this continues to be true. A careful analysis of scripture and even the words of Jesus himself do not lead us all to the same conclusions. So, if there are good people who continue to read the same Bible and come up with different conclusions, that only points to the importance of dialogue. In politically homogenous congregations, there doesn't seem to be much dialogue; mostly we find a lot of what could be called “preaching to the choir.”

Statistics show that church attendance and religious affiliation among the younger generations (the Millennials) are in sharp decline. There could be many reasons for this, but Putnam and Campbell argue that over-politicization in churches has been a turnoff to the millennial generation. “The politicization of religion has triggered a negative reaction among some, mostly young, Americans. They have pulled away from religion precisely because they perceive it as an extension of partisan politics with which they do not agree. They see religion tied up with conservative politics, and their aversion to the latter has led them to reject the former.”¹⁵ The truth is, both blatantly conservative and liberal politics can drive somebody away from the church. If the message that comes from the pulpit is overtly political, that can and probably will be negatively received even if the person happens to agree with what is said. Preachers must always be careful with the wording they choose.

Phrases such as, “I know this is a divisive issue, but...,” and, “I wrestle with this subject myself but feel led to say something about it...,” are always wise in presenting potentially divisive topics. There is a prophetic element to Christ’s message that cannot be overlooked, and to completely avoid all political topics would mean watering down much of what Jesus had to say. At the same time, how these matters are presented is what matters. Beating a congregation over the head with one point of view usually backfires.

Politics, Money, and Self-Interest

Often times, political differences are directly tied to two subjects: money and self-interest. These topics and their relationship to the spiritual life will be the primary area of focus for this book. In his 2010 book *Rediscovering Values on Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street*, Jim Wallis wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession. He talks about the role that greed and instant gratification played in sending our economy off a financial cliff. He says, “Without a clear sense of self, a strong identity, and a community of purpose, it seems our default mode is to identify ourselves by the things we own. We try to convince ourselves and signal to others who we are almost solely by the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the restaurants we eat at, and the houses we own.”¹⁶ When we build our identities and define ourselves by these things, we are setting ourselves up for great disappointment. These are the “treasures on earth” that Jesus warns against. They do not last because they are temporary. Wallis also talks about how materialism has gradually turned our culture into a narcissistic one. The focus is now on “me, me, me.” Advancements in technology (iPhones, iPads, social media) have largely contributed to a rise in both individualism and narcissism. “Technology has allowed for the creation and sharing of new information at levels never seen before in human history. But, it has also created an unprecedented number of ways to say ‘Look at me!’”¹⁷ Narcissism, greed, and selfishness were significant factors leading to the financial collapse.

In his chapter titled “Enough Is Enough,” Wallis talks about the importance of the way that we see our possessions in life:

Is it wrong to have a nice house? No. But do we use that house to be more hospitable? Is it wrong to eat good food? No. But does that food help us become more generous? Is it wrong to have clothes? A television? A computer? No. No. No. But are we becoming more aware of the world around us and more compassionate towards it? With everything we buy, we need to ask ourselves not only if we need it, but what type of person we are becoming when we buy it.¹⁸

Wallis is clear that there are many lessons to be learned from the financial crisis of 2008–2009. These lessons include not turning the market into God, not becoming greedy, identifying the difference between wants and needs, and looking out for those who have little or nothing. The years following this crisis have been the most difficult since the Great Depression. The recovery has been slow, and time will tell if we have learned anything or not. Wallis says, “Seeing, feeling, and knowing people in difficult straits is what creates empathy. When enough is never enough and greed is good, our lives are in constant tension. There are always more toys to buy, more stuff to accumulate, and much more to worry about. The more we accumulate, the greater our fear and concern that it might all be lost.”¹⁹ The key in life is to be satisfied with what we have and not always want more. We should not continually compare ourselves with those who have more because that’s a moving target: there will always be others who have more. As Paul eloquently writes in the final chapter of his letter to the Philippians, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.”²⁰ For Wallis, Paul, and Jesus, the antidotes to narcissism and individualism are the biblical principles of humility and community.

Jonathan Haidt has done extensive research on happiness, meaning, and its relationship to consumerism and materialism. In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, he refers to the work of economist Robert Frank, who once identified the difference between conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. “Frank’s explanation is simple: Conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption follow different psychological rules. Conspicuous

consumption refers to the things that are visible to others and that are taken as a marker of a person's relative success. These goods are subject to a kind of arms race, where their value comes not so much from their objective properties as from the statement they make about their owner." Haidt then refers to Frank's understanding of inconspicuous consumption: "Inconspicuous consumption, on the other hand, refers to goods and activities that are valued for themselves, that are usually consumed more privately, and that are not bought for the purpose of achieving status."²¹ Preachers are called to point out the futility of conspicuous consumption as a means of addressing spiritual hunger. It is a serious problem in North America, especially in affluent congregations.

This book will wrestle with one of the greatest tensions of our time: *proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ regarding money and possessions in an age of conspicuous consumption, in which the accumulation of wealth and possessions is glorified and coveted.* When reading the gospels, it becomes clear that Jesus had more to say about money and possessions than almost any other subject during his life and ministry. He knew they were a stumbling block in the first century, and they still are today.

Preachers who find themselves in affluent pulpits preaching to wealthy and powerful church members will certainly feel the tension when it comes to preaching and teaching about money. Many of the passages are incredibly challenging. Moreover, preachers who find themselves in poorer churches must find a way to give hope and comfort to those who are struggling to pay bills and make ends meet. All Christians, regardless of socioeconomic status, must wrestle with Jesus' teachings and parables. Simply avoiding the subject of money is not an option if we seek to be faithful to the gospel. Unfortunately, many will choose avoidance rather than faithfulness.

In some churches, money talk remains taboo, yet we live in a culture that is obsessed with money, driven by money, and focused on money. Money means power and influence, accomplishment and prestige. Money is often the way we judge the value of people and whether or not they have been successful in life. Money drives political passions, perspectives, and elections. The Great Recession brought the subject of money

and materialism to the forefront, and it became an excellent teaching moment for preachers to focus on priorities and what really matters in life. The stock market plunged, banks went belly up, corruption scandals were unveiled, retirement accounts were cut in half, and millions of jobs were lost. Everybody was affected in one way or another, including churches and other charitable organizations that suffered financial consequences. The subject of money and possessions is timeless and relevant to all Christians.

Most churches have an annual stewardship campaign either in the fall or spring to raise commitments and funds for the church's operating budget. At our church, it usually happens in the spring immediately following Easter, with the new church year beginning on July 1. During the stewardship campaign, preachers will often focus on one of the many texts or parables that have to do with money. However, if this is the only time of the year that this happens, they are doing their congregation a great disservice. It then appears that we only preach and teach about money when the church needs it. But how we use our money throughout the year is a direct reflection of our spiritual lives and our values. I agree with Jim Wallis that bank statements and calendars are moral documents. To learn what is most important to a person, just look at the way that person spends his or her time and money. Money makes a great servant in life, but it can also make a terrible master. If we allow our money to serve us and the things that we want to support, that is good. But if we are enslaved to our money and to the accumulation of wealth and possessions, we will be miserable. The people in life who know best that money is not the secret to happiness are those who have plenty of it and yet remain restless and miserable. Some of the happiest and most joy-filled people in our world are those who have little or nothing and have learned to live simply.

Baylor University sociologists Paul Froese and Christopher Bader published a book in 2010 titled *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us*. The premise of the book is fairly straightforward: Americans generally believe in God but our concepts of God are very different. Froese and Bader focus on two primary questions. First, How engaged

is God in the world? And, second, How judgmental is God? Their research indicates that there are four basic conceptions of God. The “Authoritative God” is both engaged in the world and judgmental. The “Benevolent God” is engaged but nonjudgmental. The “Critical God” is judgmental but disengaged. And the “Distant God” is nonjudgmental and disengaged.²² In a chapter titled “God and Mammon,” Froese and Bader say, “Overall, Americans tend to agree on two basic points: capitalism is good, and poverty is bad. How we reconcile a system that fosters inequality with an ethic to alleviate poverty is a function of what we think God wants from us. Social status plays a primary role in how we view God and his attitude about our economic system.”²³

Therefore, in an economically diverse congregation, there will be multiple perspectives as to what God expects, and there probably will not be a consensus on issues of money and politics. “At the end of the day, we are all ‘values’ and ‘pocketbook’ voters. In general, your values reflect your God and your God reflects your pocketbook. Lower economic status is strongly related to the belief that God harshly judges and is angry with the world. In turn, belief in a judgmental God (both Authoritative and Critical Gods) is related to the belief that the solution to poverty is personal faith or faith based solutions and not government intervention.”²⁴ For Froese and Bader, theology, politics, and economics are clearly interconnected.

Money and Stewardship

The issue of money and stewardship is relevant to pastors, churches, and religious organizations because, as our culture has become more secular and materialistic, religious giving and financial support for the church has declined at an alarming rate. Christian Smith, Michael Emerson, and Patricia Smell published a book in 2008 titled *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. Their research was extensive, eye-opening, and in many ways disappointing for those concerned about the future of Christianity. In their chapter “Toward Explaining Ungenerous Giving,” they offer nine hypotheses concerning why religious giving is less than