



The Bottom Line of Faith

Joshua 3:7-17; Ps 107:1-7, 33-37; Matt 23:1-12; 1Th 2:9-13

We have all heard of a bottom line. In democratic politics it is the final result after Election Day. In the court system it is the judge's final ruling when appeals are exhausted. In sports, it is the final score or a World Series title. Perhaps more often, it is an accounting phrase that regarding the final balance after all income, expenses, and losses. It is the final result, the profit after which one plans, dreams, and works. In Christianity, we are tempted to think of the bottom line as the determination of where we spend eternity. Shouldn't the bottom line of faith be more than a destination?

We are embroiled in the final throes of a political race, debate, and campaign strategies. We are encouraged to believe that on Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday, but at least by the end of the week it will all be over. In the back of our minds, we are aware of the possibility of lawsuits alleging voting irregularities, fraud, or the rigging of electronic voting, as well the looming threat of recounts. At least we can rest assured that there will be a new president by January 20th.

That is the bottom line, after all, isn't it? Or is that only the beginning? After all, elections are about more than a slate of people taking office. It is about the application and definition of policies, laws, and administration over the near term future. At the end of Election Day, it will only have just begun. There will be cabinets and ministers to appoint, staff to select, and policies to draft, fine-tune, implement, and issues to face in the days, weeks, and years ahead. The bottom line will not be the Election Day results. It will be the judgment of historians fifty years hence that determines the bottom line results of Tuesday's election.

It is easy to get wrapped up in an election campaign. For so many, faith is even wrapped up in electing the specific slate they believe God to have ordained. I am not one to say that God does not desire to be part of the electoral process, but perhaps we should take a step back and remember that God's issues are rarely as neatly defined as two or three campaign platform issues. After all, Jesus did not give credence to the political processes of his own day, rejecting the people's clamor to grant him the political power to instill a new theocracy in Jerusalem. Setting all that aside, Jesus determined that faith was about changed lives on the individual level rather than in the political realm. He told us to see that God's reign was carried out in our lives, regardless of the political struggles and pressures around us. His was a different bottom line than the one the people used to pigeon-hole faith.

While it should inform our political process and decisions, faith in Christ is not designed to wield political power to advance its causes. Faith is rather about allowing God's causes to direct us in spite of those who would settle for the use of politics, force, and coercion. We cannot vote faith into being. We should not relegate faith to a ballot-box issue. Nor should we attempt to relegate faith to some ethereal level of spirituality divorced from our daily existence and interaction with the world. Faith's bottom line includes determinations that include interaction with our economic plans, our leisure activities, our politics, and our dreams for the future. For faith to be real, it must change the world because it has changed us individually and corporately.

How many millions of dollars have been raised to elect one or another politician to Washington? Would our money not be better spent serving the goals, dreams, and desires of God through our churches, convention agencies, and mission organizations? I have the impression that the Baptist General

Association of Virginia does much more to advance the cause of Christ than our political processes. We are cutting our budget this year by half-a-million Dollars, though, while many too place more resources behind our politics than our faith.

When Joshua came to the Jordan River, it was not with the power and resourcefulness of the Army Corps of Engineers. It was with a simple dependence upon God. Though he did not seemingly have the resources to address the issue before him, he did not need resources he could envision, tally, add, and subtract. He needed to place his life in the hands of Almighty God. This is where the real battle was being fought within Joshua and within the hearts and minds of the people. Would they place their confidence in God or in some lesser issue of greater visual appeal?

The psalmist recognized *Yahweh* as ever faithful in times of distress. God can and does take what seems fruitless and powerless to create new life for those God loves. It does not require the power of political process, but the inner workings of God's breath to change our lives from the inside out.

The powerful of Jesus' day were concerned with their status, position, and privilege. They were interested in telling others what to do, enforcing laws, interpretations of law, and tradition upon the shoulders of others. From a position of privilege, they used power to advance their own causes rather than the cause of God. They sought their own advancement, power, privilege, and wealth while ignoring the kind of commitment and submission that God required of them.

To avoid that kind of self-serving status, Paul ignored his own rights to live from the offerings of those he served. In part, he was fleeing the self-serving traditions of which he had been part. He had seen the abuse of some who abused right and privilege to advance self at the expense of others. He had seen how those wielding power and position could abuse it and inadvertently fight against the will and purpose of God. He placed his life in opposition to that kind of abusive power with the recognition that the gospel of faith is not advanced by power, popularity polls, and the promise of earthly reward. He knew faith as the quest of a lifetime to strive toward becoming worthy of God's gift of grace.

Fundamentalist believers were not the first to consider power as a means to advance the cause of God. They were not the first to misuse power for reportedly spiritual aims and ambitions. Baptists were born amid this misuse of power. Before attempts to merge religion and coercion, Baptists determined that the power of state is not God's choice instrument. Rather it is those who would bow our lives before God's will to minister God's grace outside the halls of power. The gospel is not at home in those halls, so much as in the tenements of need.

The bottom life of faith is not winning elections, races, World Series titles, or accounts unaffected by raising the FDIC limits. It is not about what we gain for ourselves, so much as what we contribute to the lives of others. Faith is almost the reverse of that accounting definition. It is not what we have left over after all income, loss, and expenses. It is what we have invested in the cause of Christ not what we have kept for ourselves.

It is in our attempts to out-give God, placing our all in commitment and dedication to the gospel that grace ultimately appears in its full splendor. It is on this journey of self-giving that faith shines in its fullest expression. Reducing faith the question of a destination is simpler, but it misses the point. Are we prepared to live with God through eternity?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*