

WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT

David Schelhaas

A few years ago one of my granddaughters was told by her Christian school teacher that Christians voted Republican. Walking out of the classroom, one of my granddaughter's friends said to her, "I'm sure glad my parents and grandparents are Republicans."

"But my grandpa is a Democrat," she replied. "And he's a Christian."

Most Reformed Christians in this part of the country hold views similar to those of my granddaughter's teacher. To be a Christian and a Democrat hardly seems possible to them. The primary reason is the abortion issue. After *Roe v. Wade*, Democrats supported abortion. Republicans made opposition to abortion a critical issue in their campaigns, and most conservative Christians joined them.

While many Christians started out as "one-issue" Republicans, over time they have adopted other Republican positions such as 1) a belief that it is not the government's job to create programs and provide funding to help the poor with housing or food or healthcare, 2) an almost religious faith in free markets and 3) a distrust of scientific research on climate change.

BEING TRULY PRO-LIFE

Before I address these issues, I want to say a few words about how I, a Christian, can be part of a group, the Democratic Party, that supports abortion. I do not support abortion, but I don't believe our system works when it is made up of one-issue voters. James Skillen, former executive director at The Center for Public Justice says, "Basic justice in the land includes more than [being] anti-abortion" and I agree with him. A genuine pro-life should seek to reject all kinds of situations that diminish human life: poverty, hunger, racism, unjust labor practices, lack of health care, climate change – the list could continue. As I look back over my lifetime, I see that it was the Democrats that gave us Social Security, The Civil Rights Act, The Voting Rights Act, Medicaid, Affordable health care and a number of poverty programs.

Consider the Republicans' position on the responsibility of government to the poor.

Republicans who are Christians often say that it is the church's job to take care of the poor, and they are partially right. But it has never been just the church's job. Scripture says governments are appointed to do justice and that justice involves more than the punishment of lawbreakers. It also requires taking positive steps to help the downtrodden make better lives for themselves. No one believed that more firmly than the great Reformation scholar and preacher, John Calvin: "Calvin advocated public loans for the poor and refugee, measures relating to public health ... the fixing of the price of corn and wine and other commodities, the determination of the proper rate of interest, even the ownership by the State of a silk industry ... In fact, so much social legislation was enacted by the Genevan government at the time and through the influence of Calvin that his government has been termed Christian socialism," writes Jim Bratt in his 2013 book *Abraham Kuyper, Christian Democrat* (Eerdmans). "Calvin's commentary on II Corinthians 8:15 is that God wills there be equality and proportion among us, that is, each person is to provide for the needy according to their means so that no one has too much and no one too little," Bratt writes. Shocking! Sounds like "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

But my Republican friends will have none of this. To them, one of President Obama's great sins was that he opposed gross income inequality. Shocking!

INSTITUTIONALIZING GREED

This leads me to the Republican Party's seeming reverence for free market capitalism. Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch theologian and statesman (and patron saint of neo-Calvinist Reformed people) denounces laissez-faire capitalism as "inimical to human well-being, material or physical, out of tune with Scripture and contrary to the will of God" (Bratt), believing that laissez-faire capitalism not only brought about injustice to the poor but was fundamentally un-Christian in its promotion of greed. I agree.

Finally, climate change. About 25 years ago, I ran into two books that changed my life: Wendell Berry's *What Are People For?* and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*. In the ensuing years I have become more and more convinced that nothing will do more to promote the wellbeing of the people of the world than the careful stewardship of earth, water and air. The CO₂ and pollutants we pump into the air not only warm it, causing climate change, but they go into the oceans, causing acidification with its disastrous effects. Along with all kinds of environmental losses, human suffering and death will be the eventual result of unchecked global warming. Most Republican politicians won't even acknowledge that climate change is occurring, and those who do hesitate to say much about it for fear of losing voters.

So, I am a Democrat because with a few notable exceptions (like abortion): Democrats promote policies I believe a Christian should support. And Republicans oppose them. I am sympathetic to the social democracies in Europe that support a distributive concept that makes sure that wealth and assets are not controlled by the wealthy few. I support collective action for the collective good. But rather than calling myself a Social Democrat, I would choose Abraham Kuyper's name for himself, Christian Democrat. It might even be time to organize a wing of the Democratic Party called the Christian Democrats.

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