

Hispanic Evangelicals and the 2008 Presidential Elections

By Rev. Samuel Rodriguez

As a member of the fast growing Brown Evangelical community, we find ourselves between the proverbial rock and the hard place. Surely, we resonate with the Vietnam War Hero, Republican presumptive nominee Sen. John McCain, on issues such as marriage, life, and immigration. However, what do we say to our children and grandchildren when they ask whom we voted for in the election that embodied the prophetic possibility of permanently knocking the legs off and crippling the behemoth of racism in our nation via the candidacy of Sen. Obama?

Let us contextualize the narrative a bit. Brown Evangelicals currently stand at the nexus of a righteousness and justice platform. Historically, white evangelicals thrived by the continual impetus of a two item platform agenda, life and marriage. On the other side, progressive evangelicals and particularly black Christians coalesced around the social-economic issues such as health care, education, and poverty alleviation. Suddenly, Hispanic Christians, particularly Hispanic Evangelicals arrive with a commitment to reconcile both sides with a platform that incorporates the aforementioned issues within a framework of righteousness and justice.

So what do we do? On one hand, do we support the candidate that invested, in comparison to all the other, more political capital in supporting comprehensive immigration reform and deterring the deportation of 12 million of our brethren? Yet, how do we support McCain when his party stands responsible for a xenophobic and nativist strategy rekindling the racist elements within our society?

Or do we support Obama who stands on the polar opposite end with Hispanic Christians on issues such as sanctity of life and traditional marriage advocacy, yet resonates with us on health care, education, poverty alleviation, immigration and other justice concerns?

Correspondingly, the 47 million strong Hispanic populous and particularly the entire Hispanic faith community may very well determine the outcome of the 2008 election via the swing states of New Mexico, Florida, Nevada, Ohio, Arizona and Colorado. The question is not whom do we vote for? The true question is, which Isaac do we place on the altar?

In order to address the question, The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference hosted the "Hispanic Evangelicals and the 2008 Presidential Elections Summit" this past weekend in Costa Mesa, Ca. Both McCain and Obama sent representatives to this unprecedented gathering. Dr. Jesse Miranda stated that for the first time in American history, Hispanic Evangelicals stand committed to contextualizing the narrative of political social activism within the framework of the Presidential elections.

Accordingly, the summit participants, including the denominational leaders of America's largest Hispanic Christian denominations, from the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Pentecostals and others along with mega church pastors, organizational leaders, scholars and members of the evangelical Hispanic media, discussed which candidate best addresses the concerns in the Hispanic Evangelical electorate and which one best reflects the core values of such constituency.

Dr. Juan Hernandez, McCain's National Hispanic Outreach Director explained to the group that McCain should be the candidate of choice simply on three key areas: Immigration reform, sanctity of life and traditional marriage. Hernandez in essence stated that McCain's commitment to Immigration Reform alone should prompt all Hispanics to make him the candidate of choice. The only problem with Dr. Hernandez's assertions is that according to research presented by Dr. Gaston Espinosa from Claremont McKenna College a few minutes earlier, Immigration does not even appear in the top 5 concerns for Hispanic Americans voters. On the life issue, McCain does have more traction. The leaders unanimously voted and determined that a commitment to a life platform stands as the deal breaking issue for Hispanic evangelicals.

After Joshua Dubois, Faith Outreach Coordinator for the Obama Campaign, addressed the gathering via Speakerphone, Dr. Shaun Casey, who flew in on the final day of the gathering addressed the summit on behalf of Sen. Obama. Shaun was recently appointed as the National Evangelical Outreach Director for Obama 08. Dr. Casey articulated the position of Sen. Obama as it pertains to the other half of the Evangelical platform, justice issues. In addition, Shaun expressed the Senators' commitment to reducing abortion while addressing the causes of abortion such as poverty and the lack of a high school education. Undoubtedly, Casey's presentation provoked many questions and exchanges with various summit attendees.

Conclusion? Obama is one issue away from capturing the Hispanic Evangelical vote", stated Bishop Steve Perea of Christian Worship Centers, a multi ethnic mega church Pastor and participant. If he can move a bit center right on abortion, than the Democratic nominee may capture a constituency that voted 68% for George W. Bush in 2004.

Even America's largest Hispanic Evangelical organization stands divided on the Presidential candidates as NHCLC Vice President for Social Justice, Rev. Wilfredo De Jesus, Senior Pastor of the 4500 member strong New Life Covenant Church in Chicago, just joined the Obama Campaign and serves as spokesperson for Matthew 25, a progressive evangelical Political Action Committee committed to Obama's election, while Rev. Mark Gonzalez, NHCLC V.P. for Governmental Affairs, serves on McCain's faith advisory board.

At the end of the day, here's the question. Will abortion trump immigration? Will Latinos ignore the xenophobic and nativist rhetoric allowed by the Republican Committee and vote for McCain? In other words, will Hispanics vote for McCain in spite of his party or will they vote for Obama in spite of his abortion stance? The answer may very well determine who occupies Pennsylvania Avenue come January 2009.