

Democrats seen as failing in outreach: Ethicist says Dems should focus on compassion

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

After varied efforts by Democratic leaders to convince mainstream churchgoers that they share common moral values, a Baptist ethicist has suggested that the Democrats focus instead on core biblical issues of compassion and begin long-term contacts with centrist clergy at local levels.

“The Democratic Party simply doesn’t have messengers who are preachers of big-steeple churches,” writes Robert Parham, whose online column [EthicsDaily.com](#) is the frank voice of the independent Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville.

Parham, who holds a doctorate from Baylor University, often critiques fundamentalist Southern Baptist leaders but tosses political barbs as well. He rapped President Bush for confiding recently to conservative journalists that he thinks America is in a revivalist Third Great Awakening. By portraying the Iraq war as one between good and evil, the president “diminishes his credibility” in using religion “to rally political support,” Parham wrote.

But Democratic leaders were panned in his September 8 essay. Despite new Web sites such as [FaithfulDemocrats.com](#), a flurry of books in the past year excoriating the religious right, and hope-filled gatherings of religious progressives in Washington, D.C., Parham argued that Democrats’ outreach is not working.

When it comes to cementing ties with religious voters, Parham urges Democrats to concede that they are too far behind Republicans, who have in their corner the large media constituencies of James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy and Pat Robertson.

A recent Pew Research Center survey on whether political parties are “friendly to religion” showed the Republicans at 47 percent, a drop of seven percentage points

from the previous year, compared to the Democrats' slippage of only three percentage points—a single-year contrast noted by the *New York Times*.

But over three years time, Parham pointed out, Democrats' rating has dropped much farther. "Democrats have dropped 16 points," from 42 to 26 percent, "at the very time that they have been hard at work saying, 'We are people of faith, too.'"

In an interview, Parham added: "It's unfortunate that Democrats are in a position that they have to declare they are people of faith." Citing Matthew 7:16, he said faithful people are known "by their fruits" and by their familiarity with scripture and church life.

Parham pointed to such Democrats as Al Gore, who while describing to Parham his documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* moved seamlessly in the conversation from scripture to science. Likewise, Parham said that Democratic member of Congress Harold Ford Jr. of Tennessee, running for the U.S. Senate, recently "was talking about all the complainers in church—which communicates to people that he knows what church is like."

Democrats strike some churchgoers as "wishy-washy with interfaith babble" and attached to politically correct stances, Parham asserted. By talking with local pastors instead of inside-the-Beltway clergy, Democrats might have more success, he said.

"I am not saying local clergy need to be partisan . . . but they can frame more issues that would be fruitful for Democrats," he said in the interview.

Like former Democratic member of Congress Bob Edgar of the National Council of Churches, who emphasized peace and environmental issues over the abortion and homosexuality debates in his book *Middle Church*, Parham wrote that Democrats should show their concern for "the exercise of political power to establish justice in a sinful world, what God expects from believers."

Rejecting any suggestion that being specifically Christian (to some, a code word for conservative evangelicals) will alienate many liberal-to-moderate churchgoers outside the Bible Belt, Parham countered that the Bible Belt really extends from coast to coast.

"The word Christian is a muscular connective word for people within the Christian community," he said. "Interfaith strategy waters down the biblical message in the

hearing of many congregations.”

A more cautious approach is taken by Peter Laarman, a former senior pastor at Judson Memorial Church in New York and currently executive director of Progressive Christians Uniting, based in Los Angeles.

“I certainly agree that statements on interfaith values weaken the message to the Christians in the middle because they are used to Christian language,” Laarman said in an interview. “I believe in interfaith work, but opening up new spiritual horizons can only take place with particular speech in a particular situation.”

But on the West Coast, church attendance is not a given. In southern California, “progressive Christians by the hundreds who have no church home have begun to show up at the rallies and teach-ins presented by my organization,” Laarman wrote in a book he edited this year, *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel*.

“These are passionate, justice-seeking people who have not yet found a congregation that is sufficiently attuned to their own sense of urgency,” he wrote. “They are outraged by the direction of the nation and by conservatism’s suffocating grip on public discourse.”

Borrowing a term from chemistry, Laarman said his organization has created a network for these “free radicals” and young campus progressives to connect their passion for social change to gospel outlooks. “These are not house churches, but small groups that study and celebrate how Jesus drew people together into a movement.”

Laarman said Progressive Christians Uniting is “not interested in being an adjunct to any political organization.” And despite his book’s subtitle, whose reference to the “Christian right” was added over his objections, Laarman said, “Left and right aren’t very helpful terms, but rather ‘How do you understand Jesus and the gospel?’”