



The Gospel according to the Boone County Commission

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COLUMBIA — The 2,000-year-old history of the Christian church can almost be summed up in the Boone County Commission.

Fred Parry, Southern District Commissioner-elect, was baptized about a decade ago. He attends Woodcrest, one of many non-denominational churches spreading across the United States.

Dan Atwill, the presiding commissioner, is a member of Columbia's First Baptist, a progressive church born out of one of the most established Protestant denominations in the world.

Northern District Commissioner Janet Thompson goes to Calvary Episcopal. The Episcopal Church is an extension of the Anglican Church, formed at the height of the Protestant Reformation when King Henry VIII was itching for an annulment, and the pope wasn't keen on granting him one.

Southern District Commissioner Karen Miller, who is stepping down after 24 years in office, was raised Catholic and attends the St. Thomas More Newman Center. The Catholic Church can trace its 266 popes all the way back to the Apostle Peter, who Scripture says alternated between comforting and infuriating a rabbi named Jesus.

(As soon as citizens elect a Greek Orthodox priest, the commission could staff a seminary.)

This history informs how the Boone County Commission sees the world. There are few things more important in a democracy than understanding the beliefs of elected officials — especially because those beliefs are often far more nuanced than they may appear.

In recent interviews, Parry, Atwill, Thompson, and Miller each discussed how their faith backgrounds influence how they govern, or hope to govern. Their answers revealed subtle differences in theology, differences that point to both areas of conflict and areas of surprising unity.

One area of difference can be found with Parry and Thompson.

On a recent Friday, Parry and about 20 other men gathered for an early-morning Bible study. On three TV screens hanging above them, a DVD menu listed titles of lessons the men were discussing: "recovering contentment," "restoring intimacy," "revealing authenticity."

Those titles reflect one strain of Christian thought about how to solve societal problems: Start with yourself.

In this world view, social transformation begins with personal transformation. That world view is reinforced by books like "Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus." Parry has two copies of that book in his office, as well as an accompanying DVD.

"Men lead lives of quiet desperation," Parry said, quoting Henry David Thoreau. The Bible study is an opportunity to support others in their individual struggles.

That approach contrasts with something called liberation theology, which influences Thompson's view of the world.

Liberation theology was born in Latin America in the 1960s. At the time, a group of Catholic clergy were growing increasingly frustrated with their church's approach to the poverty they saw around them. They felt that preaching personal transformation was difficult when their parishioners lacked food, water or shelter. The gospels, they said, compelled them to first fight against structural inequality.

In other words, in order to solve societal problems, one needs to start with society.

"It is about social justice," Thompson said. "You look at the world and you say: 'How do we create a society in which we care about all of us?'"

The spread of liberation theology launched an ongoing tussle within the Catholic Church. In 1984 Pope John Paul II — along with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the man who eventually would succeed him as Pope Benedict XVI — published a rebuttal of sorts to liberation theology. "Sin," the document read, "cannot be restricted to 'social sin' ... Nor can one localize evil principally or uniquely in bad social, political, or economic 'structures.'"

In contrast, Pope Francis has often spoken out about "social sin," and even hung out with one of liberation theology's founders.

Yet both approaches have led Parry and Thompson to similar conclusions about what the Boone County Commission's priorities should be. Parry listed expanding mental health services and affordable health care as two of his main priorities. Thompson highlighted the importance of hiring a mental health care worker at the Boone County Jail, and she reflected on a recent homelessness summit that discussed how best to offer more affordable housing.

Both also cautioned that their faith does not dictate their actions as public servants.

"I'm not a Christian who happens to be a magazine publisher or a county commissioner," Parry said. "It's important for me to be a county commissioner or a magazine publisher who happens to be a Christian."

"I don't have a Christian agenda. My agenda is to serve."

Thompson said there had not been a time when she did, or did not, do something as a county commissioner specifically because of her faith.

Miller and Atwill expanded on that sentiment.

"I don't think religion belongs in the government," Miller said. More important, she said, is having "a good set of core values that are based on how you were raised."

Atwill largely agreed.

"If everyone spun their decision-making based on their faith, Atwill said, "it would be chaos."

To make his point, Atwill brought up the pilgrims who arrived in North America in the 17th century.

"People came here to avoid being told what religion to practice. We can't forget that," he said.

Parry also brought up early Americans, but to make the opposite point.

The "country was founded on Christian principles by Christians," Parry said.

Parry doesn't think government should impose religion on anyone, but he also doesn't think the two must be kept at arms' length. This is partly why Parry spent much of his campaign criticizing how the commissioners handled their only major confrontation with religion in recent history: their decision to remove a Desert Storm soldier's memorial from the Boone County Courthouse grounds because it featured an ichthus, a fish symbol associated with early Christianity.

In Parry's view, removing the memorial disrespected soldiers' parents and whitewashed an important historical symbol from a public place. It wasn't a religious issue, Parry said. The memorial stood for history and respect, and removing it was an unnecessary response to the threat of a lawsuit.

The three current commissioners suffered enormous blowback after the vote to remove it. When the memory was brought up, Thompson made a face like she had just swallowed a mouthful of nail polish remover. Each, however, said they did not regret her or his decision.

Atwill and Miller also said their vote was influenced by Satanic groups throughout the country that have demanded their symbols be represented alongside Christian ones. A city council in Pensacola, Florida, allowed a man in a Voldemort cloak to perform a Satanic prayer at a public meeting. It did not go well. The Boone County Commission didn't relish the thought of a similar scene happening here.

Even if they avoid that religious confrontation, there may be others.

The 2016 election exposed fault lines within many churches about the proper role for Christians to play in regard to government. For example, Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University and a prominent evangelical, publicly argued that citizens had a moral obligation to vote for Donald Trump. Two other influential Christians, Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, came to the opposite conclusion after Trump's election and wrote an op-ed titled: "The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead."

It's worth noting that this debate is occurring about a quarter-century after the end of the Cold War. Liberation theology was born about a quarter-century after the end of World War II. In both cases, a major global event helped create a world order from which many people felt excluded, people who began to challenge established political and religious leaders.

This type of upheaval can also blur the line between a political message and a religious one.

Thompson believes the recent election took a central tenant of the Gospel and twisted its meaning.

Some politicians, she said, "have looked at the individual and said: 'You are downtrodden, you are being treated inequitably, the system is broken.'" That message could almost pass as Scripture in some Biblical paraphrases. But Thompson has a problem with stump speeches that then pivot to say: "You should get more, you should get a bigger slice of the apple."

That's not good theology, Thompson said. Good theology follows up the first message with: You are also selfish, and you need to fight to create a better world for others.

"It's easier to sell when you say: 'You're being screwed,'" she said. "But I don't think we're hearing the other part of it."

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.