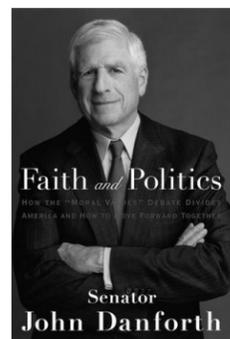


# What Can We Say About Polarized Politics?

By John C. Danforth



Government is broken, unable to deal with any subject deeper than politics itself. This is reflected in the 24-hour news channels where nearly all coverage is of the sport of elections with almost no attention to issues of substance.

Congress hasn't passed a budget in nearly three years, and no negotiations are taking place. Government's capacity to borrow will expire by the end of the year, and it is now borrowing 40 percent of the \$4 trillion a year it spends. House Speaker John Boehner has said there will be no extension of the debt ceiling without corresponding spending cuts. President Obama has said there will be no extension of the debt ceiling unless it's a clean bill. Also at the end of this year we reach the so-called fiscal cliff of draconian spending cuts and huge tax increases in a fragile economy.

Here are some more examples of governmental dysfunction. No immigration

reform. No energy legislation. No highway legislation. No transportation legislation. One senator recently told me, "We don't do anything."

Here is the problem. Politics is the art of compromise, and in today's climate, compromise isn't tolerated. Each side of an issue insists that it is guardian of absolute truth.

At a time of polarized politics and gridlocked government, our Church can offer an important message that would help heal America by reminding us what politics is and what it is not. Religion alone concerns the absolute. Politics does not.

The first political story in the Bible is when Moses encounters God in the burning bush and receives the political commission to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. God makes a point of keeping his political agent in his proper place. "Come no closer!" God thunders. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Moses is presumptuous. He asks God's name. Moses wants a handle on God, and God will not give him a handle. "I AM WHO I AM," is the response. The holiness of God.

The humanity of man. It's a consistent biblical theme, for example, in Isaiah, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," says the Lord.

There's nothing ultimate about politics. It's simply politics. To treat it as more than that, as immutable truths that can't be compromised, is worse than the sure way to political gridlock. It's idolatry.

Consider the Second Commandment, "You shall not make any idol." I don't know anyone who is making a golden calf or a god out of silver or wood. But turning any manmade thing, including a political position, into absolute truth is idolatry.

Religion divides us when it imports certainty into politics. Religion binds us together when it teaches us humility. Humility in politics should be the prophetic message of our time. It could be a special message from our Episcopal Church with our long history of bridging strongly held differences.

*John Danforth is a former U.S. senator from Missouri and an Episcopal priest.*

OPPORTUNITY continued from page 1

should be required prior to receiving Holy Communion. That issue is a definitive bottom line of sacramental theology.

The foundational nature of baptism has been eroding for years (ironically, under the use of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, which was intended to reassert the primacy of the sacrament of baptism). We are called to be true to the specific commission we have from Jesus for the Church: to baptize in the name of the Fa-

ther, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). It is baptism that is the truly transformational truth about Christian life, and we have an energizing opportunity at this convention for the breadth of our Church to witness to that fact.

Few General Conventions have afforded the Episcopal Church the opportunity to address such a range of essential issues. Convention 2012 is absolutely the stuff that promotes the faith and enlivens our witness. God be with us and bless us all.

### And Suddenly, There Was Susan ...

Three months ago, hardly anyone outside the Diocese of Arizona knew Susan Brown Snook. A church planter and the founding vicar of Episcopal Church of the Nativity in Phoenix, she focused her energy on her parish and her family.

Then the Executive Council's proposed budget for the next triennium was released.

And suddenly, Susan Brown Snook is one of the go-to people in the Church for those looking for analysis and answers.

Want to know more? Visit [centeraisle.net](http://centeraisle.net).

### Contact Center Aisle

We're interested in your opinions. Send your comments and reactions to [centeraisle@thediocese.net](mailto:centeraisle@thediocese.net).

Candor is welcome. So is brevity. Shoot for 80 words or less.

# At Convention, Some Baptisms More Equal Than Others

By Russ Randle, Virginia Lay Deputy

Some medieval theologians taught that apostolic succession was so important that a baptism from Judas Iscariot was "better," because closer to Jesus, than a baptism from someone farther removed from Jesus' ministry on earth. We laugh at this today because God makes baptism holy, not the person doing the baptizing. Yet we devalue baptism far more in some discussions about adapting our Church to the modern world.

As our presiding bishop has keenly described, our Church, like most main-line denominations, is poorly adapted to a world where information is no longer monopolized by big institutions, where costly infrastructure is often more burden than blessing, and where most people are "practical ecumenists," ignoring brand labels in search of a satisfying spiritual home, some with no denominational label at all. Our world has changed drastically compared to the world into which our average rector was born, over 50 years ago. Declining revenue and

membership – a membership which is predominantly older, whiter and more Anglo in a world which is increasingly young and multicultural – underline the diagnosis. We now have 22 dioceses with the same or fewer members than our Church's largest parish, roughly 6,000 communicants. Unless we act on the diagnosis soon, we risk becoming an irrelevant social club rather than God's church on earth.

Yet we have no consensus about solutions. Some would restructure General Convention, reduce the number of deputies, consolidate dioceses and reduce the frequency of convention.

Yet few proposals correct a big structural problem in convention's current makeup: A diocese with 2,000 people elects the same-size deputation – lay and clergy – as Haiti, a diocese with 86,000 people.

Why are some white Americans entitled to more than 40 times the church vote than a black Haitian receives? One person, one



vote has been U.S. constitutional law since 1964, when the Supreme Court declared that principle, both for state legislatures and for the House of Representatives.

If we claim that every person is equally valuable to God, shouldn't we start by fixing the current "rotten borough" system? If we believe in radical equality, we should start practicing what we preach by allocating elected lay and clergy deputies based far more on numbers of the baptized and far less on the historic accident of diocesan boundaries.

### Reflection

## Five Bucks a Day to Be Doers of the Word

By the Rev. John Ohmer

I plan to leave \$5 each day on my bedside stand as a tip for the housekeeping staff.

And I invite you to do the same.

It's a challenge I first issued to General Convention in Columbus in 2006, and have repeated ever since: Let's be good news to the working poor while we are in town.

If I leave \$5 a day, by the time General Convention is over next Thursday, I will have left \$50. Not a big deal to me; less than I'll spend on coffee, not to mention drinks.

But do the math: Organizers estimate that General Convention will draw about 10,000 people to Indianapolis over the next eight days. Not all stay the whole time, and not all spend the night in hotels.

But take a conservative estimate and say half that number spend at least five nights. If 5,000 people leaving \$5 a morning, we

inject \$25,000 directly into the hands of those making minimum wage each morning. Multiply that by five mornings, and we Episcopalians will put \$125,000 into the working poor's economy.

More importantly, look at it from the perspective of a housekeeper. At the hotel where I am staying, housekeepers clean 15 "departing rooms" in their eight-hour shift, or 36 "staying overs" (turndown service). If each hotel guest leaves \$5 on the nightstand, that housekeeper will take home between \$75 and \$180 in additional income each day.

Since those housekeepers make minimum wage (in Indiana, \$7.25 an hour) and an eight-hour shift brings in \$58 before taxes, that means he or she will be bringing home more – much more – in our tips than they

are making in wages.

And, as is likely with a long convention, if all the housekeeper's rooms are turndowns, we are more than tripling their wages each day.

"Be doers of the word," James urges. In other words, actions speak louder than words, and I suggest that this simple action – leaving five bucks on the nightstand each morning – is a lot more meaningful and powerful than any carefully worded resolution affirming the poor or claiming solidarity with them that we might pass during the rest of the day.

Five dollars a day is a small price to pay to be good news to the working poor. Will you join me?



Johnston Jones Cherry Ohmer Stanley Lukens