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Time for Courting Teachers

Spring is upon us. Talk is turning toward summer vacations, outdoor cookouts, graduations, and, since we are also moving into robust Democrat Presidential primary elections next year, we are also sure to hear plenty of talk from candidates designed to appeal to the teacher vote.

It is easy to understand why candidates are doing this. The teacher unions represent a critical block of votes, and with over 20 candidates in the Democrat race, teacher union endorsements could make or break candidates. So far, the union leadership has not made any early moves toward endorsement of any candidate and are instead touting an open process for their endorsements. The AFT [feels particularly burned](#) by their leadership pressing for a very early endorsement of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. This upset many of their more liberal members, particularly Bernie Sanders supporters. The NEA for similar reasons is also [reluctant to push for an early endorsement](#). Without pressure from union leadership this leaves the teacher union endorsements up for grabs.

So I shouldn't have been surprised to hear candidate Kamala Harris, in a campaign swing through highly teacher-unionized Michigan, propose a hefty [federally funded average \\$13,500 salary increase for every teacher in the nation](#), at a cost of \$315 billion over ten years. The Harris proposal was stunning to me because it would upset the nation's strong belief in locally controlled public schools and significantly increase the Federal Government's size and influence over the public schools. Even Stanford University professor emeritus and recent California State Board of Education president [Michael Kirst](#) calls it a "major shift in conception of the federal role in education."

One would think that the recent difficult experience with the No Child Left Behind Act would be enough to warn politicians away from proposals to nationalize the public schools, but apparently not. While Kamala Harris may be sincere in her desire that teachers receive raises, her proposal goes beyond traditional grants that states are able to direct, consistent with the states' constitutional authority over education. It actually directly inserts the federal government into salary schedule negotiations, representing a historic expansion of federal power.

However, some teachers will take this bait and support Harris or other candidates with similar proposals that appeal to their self-interest. When we hear proposals that appeal strongly to our self-interest, we should approach them with caution, keeping in mind Paul's admonition to

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4, ESV)

When Christians publicly support a candidate, or their proposals, we are providing a witness about what we think is best for the common good, not just ourselves. Accordingly, we need to strive to keep our witness to the culture about such matters as well-reasoned and as clear as possible. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16, ESV)

We are blessed to live in a nation where each of us can speak freely about our religious and political convictions. And, since the Supreme Court ruling in the Janus case, no teacher can be compelled to join or support a teacher union that supports positions contrary to our beliefs.

Because these are such polarized political times, speaking about our convictions with grace is very difficult to do. Rather than engaging in divisive arguments with those who have many different views than us, we must learn that we are not required by scripture to speak out on every issue of the day. However, we do know that Christ did speak out on many social issues including poverty, wages, and how managers should treat their employees, so we may be called by the Lord to speak out on similar topics. If we do feel called to speak publicly about such

matters, we should pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we can do so in a manner that both promotes truth and draws people to Christ.

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to JMitchell@ceai.org . John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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