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Mark Neumann: Serving his Savior and his State

Summary:

What do you think of when you hear the term “Church History?” Most probably think of pastors or theologians that had tremendous influences upon their church or church body. Some of us may think of churches that had a lasting affect upon their community. Still others think about doctrinal controversies that helped shape the direction of the church for years to come. But “Church History” would be sorely lacking if it did not also remember the significant contributions of the church’s laypeople. This is a group that we should never forget about or discount. The laypeople make up the heart of the church. It is important for us to remember and reflect upon their contributions to their church, and also to society at large. For this reason, I chose former Congressman Mark Neumann as the subject of my Church History interview.

As one of the only WELS members to serve in the United States House of Representatives, his contributions to his Savior and to his State are definitely unique. In my interview, I was able to explore how his faith and his Savior influenced him during his time in office and for his entire life. Throughout the interview, you will see that he emphasizes again and again how important faith and family are to him. Those two things influence all that he does.

Mark Neumann had the privilege of being born and raised in the Wisconsin Synod. He became a baptized child of God as a newborn. The Wisconsin Synod has had a lasting influence on his spiritual life. He thanks God that he belongs to a church that teaches God’s Word in its truth and purity. The WELS also had an affect on him in another way. He met his wife as a 4th grader at Sunday school. Their solid religious background would become vital as Mark and

Sue's married life would not always be real easy. They would have years of financial struggles before the Lord would bless them with financial blessings.

Mr. Neumann decided to get involved in politics after a family visit to Washington DC. There were two things that really influenced his decision to run for Congress. Essentially those two things are same as the two previously mentioned influences in his life: faith and family. First, as he toured the national monuments and museums, he was struck by how many times our founding fathers used the word "god" in their quotes and writings. He looked at our government now, and saw that God had little to no influence on our government officials now. He compared our present government to a house with a sand foundation. It is not built on the rock (God). Secondly, he was bothered by the tremendous amount of debt our country had. He did not his children to have to deal with the consequences of a debt that would continue to increase.

Mr. Neumann lost two races for Congress before finally winning his third. During those two losses he never questioned God, but knew that he had a plan for him. The third race, God blessed him with a victory. As Mr. Neumann began his time in Congress, his political goal was to balance the national budget and get our country on course to get rid of its debt. An emphasis on numbers should be no surprise coming from a former math teacher. Along with this political goal, Mr. Neumann made sure that his Biblical values would be the basis for all he did and every vote he would make. He mentioned that there are a lot of different people and groups in Washington trying to influence your vote. Many give in to the pressure and vote against conscience for political or financial gain. To help him fight those pitfalls, Mr. Neumann had a checklist he would use every time he voted. He called it his priority check and it gives great insight into his thought processes during voting. He would treat and answer each one in the order that they are listed. From greatest importance, in his mind, to least:

1. Is there a moral or ethical reason for voting a certain way?
2. What's best for the country as a whole?
3. What's best for my constituents?
4. Which way is my party voting?

Mr. Neumann admits that the majority of Congressmen in Washington for fame, ego, or power. He did find a group of about 25 Christians who had many of the same priorities and values that he did. This group became a valuable support system for him. There were also many times that he was able to witness to colleagues or comfort them with Scripture. After accomplishing his goal of balancing the budget, he was ready to end his time as a Congressman. But the support that Senator Russ Feingold gave to partial birth abortions weighed heavily upon his heart. He decided that this issue was important enough for him to run for Senate.

The Lord did not give him a victory in this closely contested race. While Neumann was disappointed, he knew that this was exactly what God had planned for him. His faith and family were still the two most important things in his life. And now, 5 years removed from that defeat, he realizes just how much the Lord has blessed him through that loss. He has had a lot more time to spend with his wife and three children. Those 4 years of Congressional experience have also allowed Mr. Neumann to become a very respected and influential man in our synod.

He takes great satisfaction from being able to share God's Word with WELS members in Bible studies, seminars, or speeches. He also has used his tremendous amount of experience in leadership and budgeting, to help our synod leaders in dealing with the budget crisis we are now in. He also is helping in a possible reconstruction of synod structure. These opportunities he counts as the greatest blessings he has received from his years in Congress. Politics has enabled him to share God's Word with people that he otherwise would never have had the chance to meet. I thank God that the Lord has given our church a Christian layperson like Mark Neumann. He gives of his time and money to help his synod and serve his Lord and Savior Jesus.

Insights:

1. I came away from this interview with an overwhelming amount of respect for Mr. Neumann. I admire his continual faith and dedication to his Savior in all that he did and does. Mr. Neumann is one of the most humble men that I know. You would never realize how much the Lord has blessed him materially and professionally. He talked about how so many in DC get wrapped up in power and fame. It is amazing to see a man who did not let that happen. The importance of faith and family was repeated over and over. And even during the difficult times in his life, that faith in Christ is what got them through. They realized that God always had a plan for them.
2. He talked about the mentioning of “god” by our founding fathers. Neumann had a great interest in strengthening the moral fabric of our country. I would certainly agree that our country has a long way to go when it comes to morality. Whatever we can do to improve that is a worthy task. But I do think that we know more about the faith lives of our founding fathers than Mr. Neumann may realize. Thomas Jefferson for instance deleted any reference to supernatural occurrences in his New Testament. What he had left was a bunch of moral teachings from Jesus. Most of our founding fathers were deists. They believed in a creator and a higher power, but didn’t necessarily believe in Jesus as their Savior.
3. It was interesting to see that Washington DC really had no negative affect on Mr. Neumann’s faith life. He made a very interesting comment to me, “Faith and family had always been the most important parts of my life. Why would DC change that?” That’s easy to say, but not always easy to put into practice. I thank the Lord that he allowed Mr. Neumann to live up to those words.

4. His time away from family was not a huge hindrance on his family life. He called his kids every night. They were forced to talk on the phone. Sometimes parents in the same house don't take time to really talk their kids.
5. The priority check that Mr. Neumann made for himself was a great way for him to think through his vote and decisions. Each one of us should apply a priority check every time we make major decisions in our lives. It would help to stay focused on what is truly important. Mr. Neumann then had the integrity and confidence to vote the way he felt even if it wasn't always according to party lines.
6. I admire the fact the Mr. Neumann decided to change his future life plans and run for Senate. Even though it was not what he had planned, he ran because there was an issue that he could not ignore. It again showed me again the type of person that he is. So many of us are selfish in our lives. We do what we want and what is best for us. Mr. Neumann showed a good amount of unselfishness in going where he felt he was most needed by God and his country.
7. I came away from this interview with the realization that being a Christian in politics is not easy. But it is not impossible either. It is important to have a strong faith and to continue growing in that faith while you are in office. If you are built on the strong foundation of Christ, it will be much easier to withstand the storms that will come your way.

Additional comments about the video:

1. We were unable to get rid of the soft background noise heard during the interview. The sound began when we edited the tape and added the B-role.
2. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked Mr. Neumann to turn the ringer off of his phone. Unfortunately, he said that they have had major problems with the new phone system installed into his home office. They have been unable to turn down or turn off the ringer. Instead, he had his secretary ready in the other room to pick up the phone if it should ring. That is why only one ring is heard.
3. I acquired the assistance of a friend to tape the video and help me edit it. During filming she coughed and told me that she could edit the noise out. Unfortunately, she was unable to get rid of it.