

A Political Odyssey

My Long and Winding Road from Conservatism To Christian Socialism... and Back Around Again

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I was raised in a politically conservative family. My father claimed to be an independent, but I never knew him to vote for anyone who wasn't a Republican. One of my most vivid childhood memories was when I was six. President Eisenhower was running for a second term against Adlai Stevenson, and my father, who was a part-time inventor, built a wooden box out of quarter-inch plywood that measured about a foot long, six inches high, and about six inches deep. On the front face of the box, he printed LIKE in block letters, then carefully cut out each one with a fine-blade reciprocal saw, sanding each cut perfectly smooth. My father was an accomplished calligrapher, and his creation looked very precise and professional. I watched as he glued translucent cellophane paper to the back side of the front panel, and then proceeded to divide the inside of the box into four compartments, each corresponding to the letters in LIKE. Over the next couple of days he rigged up a series of four light bulbs that he mounted inside each compartment, and he completed the project by painting the box black. Then he set it on the ledge of our big picture window, and as I and the rest of the family looked on from outside, he plugged it in and the light show began. With precision, the lights flashed sequentially "I ... LIKE ... IKE ... I ... LIKE ... IKE ... I ... LIKE ... IKE ... I ... LIKE ... IKE ..." It was, to say the least, the major attraction in our neighborhood in the weeks leading up to the election.



A few days later my father and I were leaving a store, and as we strolled through the parking lot I was suddenly inspired to exclaim, "I'm glad you're my dad. I'd rather have you for a dad than President Eisenhower." I meant it as the supreme compliment, and he chuckled and said something like, "Well, thanks; I appreciate that!" He put his arm around me and gave me a tender squeeze. It was one of those wonderfully spontaneous moments when a young boy and his father bond, and I recall the incident with great fondness.

I don't know whatever became of the Ike box (and he never followed up with a "NIX... ON... NIXON" box or anything similar), but I often wish that my father had preserved it for posterity. If nothing else, it was one of the more original (if not eccentric) contributions to presidential election memorabilia. But it symbolized my father's passionate devotion to politics. He was proud to be an American, and he was never shy about expressing his sentiments or setting people straight who disagreed.

PART 1

My Red Scare

My father had a very dominant and expressive personality, and he was one of the most principled and disciplined people I've ever known. When he set his mind to something, he would not be deterred. He was a dogmatic moralist who was rarely puzzled by the kind of vagaries or ambiguities that confound most people. As a biographer once wrote of Theodore Roosevelt, Dad seemed to be born with his mind already made up. At least outwardly, he was always confident, always certain, always right (at least in his own mind), and he lived by firmly held convictions that he seldom if ever questioned. For him, life was black and white, and he never doubted his judgment in distinguishing between the two. Regardless of the odds, he stood up for what he fervently believed to be right. Whether or not I agreed with his opinions, I always admired him for having the courage of his convictions.



My parents, Edd and Lucille Breshears, in later years

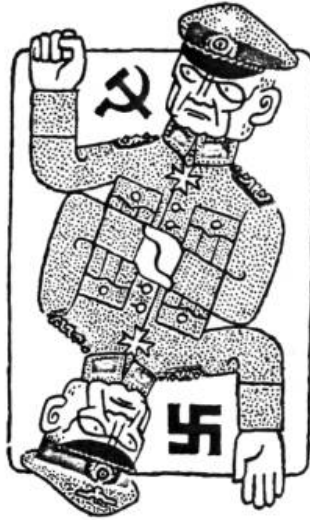
My father had three passions in life: his Christian faith, his family, and the war against Communism. He loved America – or at least his *concept* of America – and he was the most genuinely and fervently patriotic person I've ever known. While other households displayed lights at Christmas that were red, white or green, ours were red, white and blue. My father considered this not only patriotic but eminently practical and versatile since he could turn them on every Fourth of July. Furthermore, any time he heard “The Star-Spangled Banner” being played – whether in public or at home on TV – he insisted that we all stand at attention and place our right hand over our heart. I didn't mind this pious display of patriotism so much if it were just our family, but when we had friends over it was wiltingly

embarrassing. Over time I learned to take a prolonged bathroom break before the start of any sporting event on TV, and I regularly missed the kick-off or the tip-off or the first pitch of a game. Similarly, the older I got the more uncomfortable it became to ride around town in a car pasted with bumper stickers that loudly proclaimed slogans such as “Impeach Earl Warren,” “Get US Out of the UN” and “The Only *'ism'* for Me Is *Americanism.*” I remember once asking him, “But what about *baptism?*” but I don't recall his response.

My father had been a child during World War I, and by the time the United States entered the Second World War he was thirty-three with a wife and two children. He tried to enlist early in 1942 but was rejected due to his age, his marital status, and most importantly because he was working in the defense industry designing airplanes at Curtis-Wright in St. Louis. He certainly did his part to help win the war: as an aeronautical engineer he helped design the B-17 “Flying Fortress.” But knowing his personality, I've always suspected he was somewhat envious of all those military and Naval veterans who received so much attention and acclaim for defeating the Germans and Japanese. He never expressed much interest in the history of the war, perhaps because he felt that he missed out on the real action. When the war was over and the combat veterans returned as heroes amid much fanfare, he probably felt relatively unappreciated by comparison.

In the aftermath of World War II, anti-Communism became my father's Cause. He had always been very conservative (he never voted for FDR, even in the midst of the Great Depression), but in the late 1950s his political sentiments were pulled farther to the right when he became involved in the John Birch Society. In previous years he had been content to vote for mainstream Republicans like Eisenhower, but now he became a zealot. He might have missed out on the action in the war against Fascism, but he was determined to be a front-line soldier in the war against Communism, and in the process he bought into all the right-wing dogmas of the day:

- An international monolithic Communist conspiracy, directed by the evil geniuses in the Kremlin, was plotting to take over the world. This conspiracy dated back to the formation of the Comintern in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and operated through a network of spies and sympathizers in the West.
- Popular left-wing liberation movements throughout the world were either wittingly or unwittingly connected to this Communist master plan to dominate the world, regardless of their own unique and indigenous cultural circumstances.
- International Communism had to be aggressively defeated around the world lest it spread from one country and region to another – i.e., the “Domino Theory.”
- Liberals and socialists in our own country were, knowingly or not, pawns of the Kremlin (or in Lenin’s term, “useful idiots”) who advanced the Communist agenda by undermining and subverting traditional American values and freedom. Communist influence in the government began with the socialistic programs of FDR’s New Deal, and groups like the ACLU, the Ban-the-Bomb peace movement, the civil rights movement, the National Education Association (NEA), the National Council of Churches, the Council on Foreign Relations, and other liberal activist causes and organizations promoted the goals of international Communism – intentionally or not.
- Hollywood and most of the entertainment industry were full of Communists and Communist sympathizers. Furthermore, the mainstream news media, including the Big Three TV networks, were also sympathetic to the Communist agenda, so very little of what the media reported could be believed.
- Anyone or any group who opposed the Communist takeover of America was regularly smeared and discredited by liberals, from Sen. Joseph McCarthy and Gen. Douglas MacArthur to Sen. Robert Taft, Rep. Martin Dies and the House



Un-American Activities Committee, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, and fundamentalist Christians such as Rev. Carl McIntyre and Rev. Billy James Hargis of the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade.

My father sometimes took me along when he visited the Birch Society’s American Opinion Bookstore, where he picked up literature like the monthly *Dan Smoot Report*, J. Edgar Hoover’s *Masters of Deceit*, and *The Politician*, a book by JBS founder Robert Welch which implicated everybody from actors such as Gregory Peck and Lucille Ball to President Eisenhower in the international Communist conspiracy. (Yes – according to Welch, even Eisenhower was a dupe of the Communists!) On one occasion we even had the parents of John Birch as dinner guests. (Birch was from Macon, Georgia and served as a missionary in China at the close of World War II. Captured by Red Chinese forces and suspected of being

an American spy, he was brutally murdered – thereby becoming the first “casualty” of the Cold War.)

Groups such as the John Birch Society were a continuation of Senator Joe McCarthy’s Red-hunting crusade of the early 1950s, and much of their ideology was based on paranoia and simplistic conspiracy theories. Their view of history was a witch’s brew of indisputable facts mixed with misinformation, misinterpretation, exaggeration, xenophobia, racism, classism, and outright ignorance. Naturally, the liberal establishment in academia and the media and their allies in popular culture delighted in mocking the far right, and there were some clever satires such as Stanley Kubrick’s dark comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*, along with satirical folk/protest songs such as Bob Dylan’s “With God on Our Side” and “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” the Chad Mitchell Trio’s “The John Birch Society” and “Barry’s Boys,” and Tom Paxton’s “Daily News” and “What Did You Learn in School Today?”

In some respects groups like the JBS were the right-wing equivalent of the insufferable Politically Correct liberals of recent years: rigidly dogmatic, self-righteous and generally humorless, with an aversion to healthy introspection. But of

course some of what they believed and stood for was indisputably correct: Communist governments *were* in fact brutal and oppressive regimes that suppressed basic human rights, espoused militant atheism, and devalued human life in deplorable and unconscionable ways. And furthermore, there is no question that American liberals wittingly or unwittingly promoted a socialist agenda that undermined traditional American values and institutions, just as the PC crowd actively promotes a cultural Marxist agenda today.

Anti-communist groups such as the John Birch Society correctly identified certain fifth column forces within the U.S. that masqueraded as liberal or progressive while promoting a hidden agenda that was considerably more sinister. But there were two problems with the anti-Communist crusade. The first was tactical: popular culture and most major institutions – including the media and the education establishment – were already dominated by secularists and liberals, so the conservative critique rarely got a fair hearing and was regularly dismissed as mere crackpot paranoia. Before the age of talk radio, FOX TV and the internet, there simply was no means for getting the right-wing message out other than through books or small-subscription periodicals such as *National Review* or *Human Events*. The second problem – and perhaps just as important – was stylistic: like today, right-wingers tended to be out of touch with the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the times. Often lacking cultural sophistication, media savvy, and academic or scholarly credentials, many of their charges came across as shrill, simplistic, paranoid, reactionary and unrealistic.

Furthermore, the right was wrong about as often as not. Contemporary conservatives should keep in mind that for most of the 20th century conservative ideology was intellectually bankrupt. Devoid of any positive ideas, conservatism was reduced to reactionary obstructionism. It was progressives and liberals who conceived and implemented not only all of the *bad* social and political reforms of the 20th century (i.e., welfare entitlements, judicial activism, abortion “rights,” etc.) but the *good* ones as well (i.e., consumer protection legislation, government regulation of unscrupulous business practices, unemployment insurance, environmental protection legislation, equal pay for equal work for women, etc.). Conservatives should also remember that it was mainly liberals who promoted civil rights and

equal protection under the law for racial and ethnic minorities and women over the objections of (mostly) conservatives and libertarians.

By the late 1980s more scholarly assessments of American Communism validated some of the charges that groups like the JBS made in the sixties. One such work was Peter Collier and David Horowitz’s *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts on the Sixties*. The authors, “Red diaper babies” who published the revolutionary rag *Ramparts* in the ‘60s before converting to neo-conservatism in the late seventies, wrote passionately and incisively based on years of involvement in the vanguard of the New Left movement. Although mostly personal and anecdotal, their account was nonetheless revealing and convincing.

Meanwhile, on the scholarly front, *The Secret World of American Communism* by Harvey Klehr was based on declassified documents from the former Central Party Archive in Moscow. The authors contend that the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) did indeed engage in espionage and was not merely “liberalism’s strident cousin,” as apologists for the left were prone to argue. The authors also supported Whitaker Chambers’ allegations that a powerful Communist network operated in Washington in the 1930s and ‘40s, but are quick to criticize Joe McCarthy as an opportunistic fraud.

Many of my parents’ conservative friends were reasonably intelligent middle- and upper-middle-class people, and most attended very conservative or fundamentalist churches. They were decent and sincere people, but also the kind who tend to fear modern life. Like my father, they had only a superficial understanding of history, the social sciences and the humanities, and this is always problematical when it comes to making sense of a world that is perplexingly complex. Grandiose conspiracy theories appeal mostly to people who haven’t quite figured out how the world works – especially the complicated mega-systems that comprise modern geopolitics and macro-economics. Such people have the tendency to attribute common ordinary human failings and misunderstandings to some vast and sinister conspiracy. Like old Hollywood movies, they tend to reduce humanity to good guys versus bad guys and reality to stark black-and-white options, and they flounder when faced with the ironies and paradoxes of modern life. (Of course, simplistic thinking and paranoia aren’t confined to the right.

Many of the most irrational ideas today are generated by radical leftwing zealots. Recall all the wacky Nine-Eleven and Hurricane Katrina conspiracy theories, or Hillary Clinton's complaint about a "vast right-wing conspiracy" that she imagined was undermining her husband's presidency.)

In the mind of conspiracy buffs, there is a certain sinister harmony in the world. According to groups like the John Birch Society, the United Nations was nothing more than a Communist front organization, which explained why the U.S. couldn't win the Korean War fighting under the UN flag. Similarly, liberal groups such as the National Council of Churches, the National Education Association and the ACLU were full of Communist dupes and sympathizers. Again – to reiterate – there is no doubt that such organizations were promoting a left-wing agenda that Soviet Communists were eager to exploit, but the problem with the radical right was that *any* challenges to the status quo were automatically attributed to a vast and global Communist conspiracy. Therefore, they saw nothing but sinister motives behind everything from the civil rights movement to Ralph Nader's consumer advocacy efforts and equal rights for women.

(Incidentally, my father was neither a racist nor a segregationist, although he was firmly committed to states' rights. In retrospect, of course, I wish he had valued human rights over political philosophy, but at the time the issues appeared complex and confusing. For many years he taught Bible studies in local jails, and he often remarked that he preferred to teach black inmates because they usually showed more respect for the Bible than most whites did. He enjoyed interacting with blacks individually, but he was suspicious of the civil rights movement and the work of Martin Luther King Jr. because he feared that it was infiltrated and exploited by Communists. This was, of course, factually true but also ultimately irrelevant.)

Both of my parents were conscientious and took their parental responsibilities seriously. In particular, my father often used our family supper time as a teaching opportunity. Like most families, we often chatted about our day at school or work, and much of our conversation was trivial. But my father also used the dinner time to talk about current events, politics, church, and the Bible – including his fascination with Bible prophecy. Although in later years I often

disagreed with his points-of-view, I've always admired and respected his dedication, his passion, and his efforts to expand my knowledge of the world and stimulate me to think above and beyond what I learned at school and church.

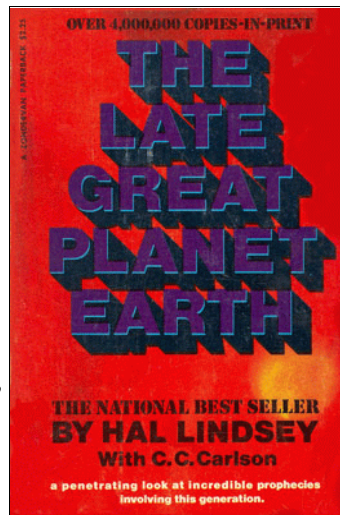
Under my father's tutelage, I went to John Birch Society meetings and watched documentary films such as "Communism on the Map," in which the narrator scanned the globe in dramatic fashion to show how international Communism was engulfing most of the real estate and enslaving most of the people worldwide. It was truly harrowing as I saw the blood red of Communism ooze out from the USSR into Eastern Europe, then flood across China and North Korea and down into Southeast Asia. In central Africa the former Belgian Congo was on the verge of being taken over, in which case all the rest of the region was imperiled, *a la* the Domino Theory. Just 90 miles from our own shores Cuba was bathed in crimson, the advance outpost of Communism in the Western Hemisphere. The United Kingdom and Western Europe were pink, as were India and Mexico. Even the U.S. and Canada were *outlined* in red. The message was clear: We were ripe for the picking, and as Lenin predicted, America would drop "like an overripe fruit" into their hands.

An Unholy Trinity

As an impressionable child with a limited understanding of the world, I found this all very intriguing but also quite frightening. I was taught that America was on the verge of a Communist takeover, in which case we would probably experience the same fate as Christians in other countries where Communists had seized power – i.e., rounded up, imprisoned, tortured and murdered, just as Rev. Richard Wurmbrand described in graphic detail in his book, *Tortured for Christ*. I learned to keep up with current events, which I filtered through the interpretive grid of the radical right, and I was taught to detect sinister motives behind everything from the civil rights movement and fluoridated water to encoded leftwing messages in popular songs such as "If I Had a Hammer" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" In junior high school I joined the local chapter of Young Americans for Freedom and dutifully followed the script my father set before me. He was, after all, a man of great integrity, faith, and commitment, and I trusted him implicitly.

The more I learned, however, the more pessimistic I became. I was convinced America was engaged in a losing battle against ever-encroaching forces of evil. One week my father took me to a series of meetings at a local fundamentalist Baptist Church where I heard about the Knights of Columbus, the shock troops of the Roman Catholic Church, and their master plan to take over America. I concluded that if the Communists didn't get us then the Catholics would, and that the main difference between the two was that the USSR had nukes while the Vatican did not (yet).

But that wasn't the full extent of my ever-expanding paranoia, and in fact there was a third component that contributed to my worldview. In addition to the political and theological indoctrination I received from rightwing extremists and fundamentalist Christians, I was also exposed to the strange esoterica of Dispensationalism. This was the distinctive eschatological doctrine of the Scofield Reference Bible, and it was taught dogmatically at places such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Talbot Seminary. Later, in the early '70s Dispensational eschatology was popularized in books like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and songs such as Larry Norman's "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." Although its genesis only dated back less than a hundred years to the late 1800s with the speculative teachings of John Nelson Darby, Dispensationalism became particularly popular after the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948, which



Hal Lindsey's best-seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*

Dispensationalists believed marked the final count-down to Jesus' Second Coming. Like many other Christians throughout history who were convinced they were living in the Last Days, Dispensationalists were certain that we were the last generation based on several considerations:

- We were approaching the end of humanity's sixth and final millennium here on earth. Based on a literalistic interpretation of the Book of Genesis, most Dispensationalists believed that God created humanity about 4000 BC. Therefore, the generation that witnessed the rebirth of Israel in 1948 would live to see the consummation of the ages with the reappearance of Jesus Christ.
- According to the Book of Daniel and Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, we were entering the Seventieth (and last) Week of Daniel.
- Prior to Christ's Second Coming, however, there would be a glorious Rapture of all true believers before the dreadful seven years of the Great Tribulation, the climax of which would be the horrific Battle of Armageddon.

According to Dispensationalist eschatology, things were going to get progressively worse here on earth, but this was not cause for despair but celebration because it was all predetermined according to God's timetable. So forget about social and political reforms and futile efforts by misguided humanitarians to try to make this world a better place. Furthermore, don't waste time working for social justice, peace and harmony – that's nothing but liberal utopian idealism. Our sole agenda was to get our own lives in order and get as many people "saved" as possible before these climactic events unfolded. It was an incredibly bleak and defeatist view of life, except that all of us who were "saved" would make a grand exit before the situation turned completely hopeless and hellacious.

Taken together, Dispensationalism, Fundamentalism and anti-Communism can have a paralyzing effect on how one relates to mainstream society and culture. To use the terminology of Richard Niebuhr in his famous work, *Christ and Culture*, my father's worldview, which I inherited from a young age, was based on a "Christ Against Culture" paradigm that left little room for any meaningful engagement with the culture and even less motivation to transform it. Highly individualistic, it over-emphasized one side of the Gospel paradox – i.e., the understanding that "we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (I John 5:19), while it under-emphasized the larger social implications of our calling to be the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13, 14).

Still, there were positive aspects to all of this. For one thing, my father and his friends *cared*. Most of them were well-intentioned, conscientious, honest, dedicated and sincere people who were devoted to something beyond just their own narcissistic self-gratification. My father was neither a mindless hedonist nor a greedy materialist, and he and my mother lived a simple and responsible lifestyle in constant gratitude to God for the blessings of life that they enjoyed. In all of this both he and my mother served as ideal role-models, and it was largely due to the quality of their lives that I trusted his judgements and accepted his social, political and religious views so unquestioningly.

There was one other value that my parents instilled in me that is noteworthy because it is becoming increasingly problematical in our celebrity-crazed contemporary culture. Being Biblically-centered Christians with a clear understanding of morality and human nature, my parents were largely unaffected and unimpressed by the media-generated celebrities of their day – whether prominent politicians, Hollywood actors, TV stars, athletes, or pop music recording artists. Unlike so many who idolize celebrities and live vicariously through their exaggerated accomplishments (and oftentimes scandalous personal lives), my parents held everyone to the same standards of personal conduct. They were clear-thinking, common sense moralists who valued substance over style and character over celebrity, which immunized them from the kind of media hype and manipulation such as surrounded Kennedy’s campaign in 1960. As a result, I grew up with my share of cultural icons (first Elvis, then Mickey Mantle and later the Beatles, etc.), but not to the point that I lost my perspective on reality... or morality. (This has been brought to mind recently by the post-mortem glorification, and near deification, of the pop music star Michael Jackson – mostly generated by a profit- and ratings-driven media frenzy.)

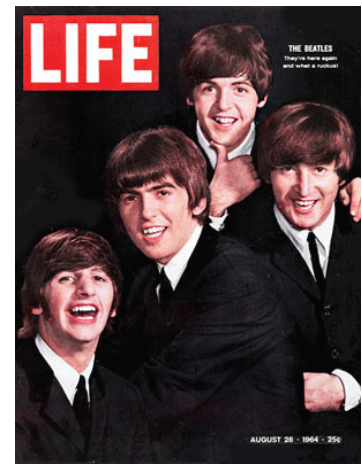
A Time for Change

I was in my early teens when the Beatles arrived in America, and being an impressionable adolescent, my perspective on the world began to change. Coming on the scene at an opportune time, the Beatles tapped into a groundswell of youthful energy (and rebellion) that was previously dormant in American society and in my own life. Although there had been a Baby

Boomer youth culture for several years dating back to the advent of rock ‘n’ roll in the mid-fifties, the Beatles unleashed a torrent of youthful self-expression that was unprecedented. Their music was vibrant, they seemed so charismatic and sophisticated, and they quickly became the driving force behind the emerging youth culture.

I didn’t see the Beatles when they debuted on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in February of ‘64 because we always went to church on Sunday evenings. Furthermore, I would never have had the audacity to even ask to see them. From the outset, my father had abject contempt for the Beatles and all they represented. In his opinion, they were nothing but “English low-brows” who were exploiting America and corrupting the youth. This was a typical conservative reaction, perhaps expressed most eloquently by William F. Buckley Jr., who declared that “The music of the Beatles is so appallingly awful that it would be sacrilegious to call it anything other than ‘god-awful.’” A typically witty bit of writing – and I remember laughing when I read it. But of course I didn’t agree.

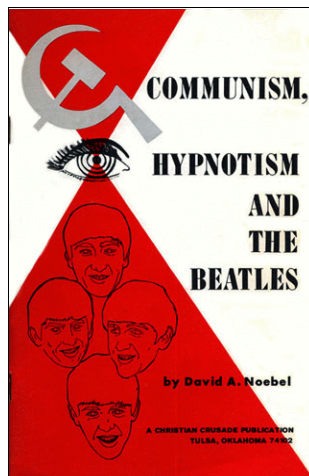
Perhaps I might have been more sympathetic to my father’s point of view if our home had been a more cultured environment, but like so many of their generation who had endured the deprivations of the Great Depression and World War II, my parents valued the practical, the functional and the conventional over the artistic and the aesthetic. In the mid-fifties we had left our old two-story house on a tree-lined street in an historical neighborhood in Springfield, Missouri, and moved into a new cookie-cutter stucco house in a sterile subdivision in Southern California. Psychologically, perhaps the drastic change from the idyllic beauty and stability of life in Springfield to the artificiality and the rat-race that characterized Southern California created the kind of angst-ridden disconnectedness within me that sixties’ pop culture exploited. Or maybe it was the sense that our home was so largely devoid of beauty, style, originality and culture that drew



me away from the values of my parents. Or maybe I was just growing up.

Once he noticed that I was letting my hair grow and listening to the Beatles and the Byrds and other “low-brows,” my father took preemptive action. He found a pamphlet at the American Opinion Bookstore entitled “Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles,” and insisted that I read it. The author, David Noebel, who was associated with the Fundamentalist evangelist Billy James Hargis’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, later achieved a measure of infamy in counterculture circles for a subsequent work, *Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution*, which I also read. But “Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles” was as intriguing as it was bizarre, crammed full of statements such as...

The communists, through their scientists, educators and entertainers, have contrived an elaborate, calculating and scientific technique directed at rendering a generation of American youth useless through nerve-jamming, mental deterioration and retardation. The plan involves conditioned reflexes, hypnotism, and certain kinds of music. [David A. Noebel, “Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles.” Christian Crusade Publications (1965), p. 1]



Noebel proceeded to link Pavlov’s experiments with salivating dogs to the effects that rock ‘n’ roll music has on young people, and his writing style was ridiculously shrill, sensationalistic, simplistic, conjectural, and devoid of any serious analysis. I was, to say the least, neither impressed nor convinced. Consciously or not, a values gap began to open up between me and my father, although it would be a few years before I would consciously reject many of his values and opinions.

Throughout my high school years popular music was a very influential force in my life. This was a time when there seemed to be “magic in the music” (to cite a popular song lyric) and “when the music mattered” (to cite the title of a later book on sixties’ pop music). Certainly, this was a unique time in which music was the dominant driving force in American popular culture, and I

eagerly devoured the latest releases by the Beatles, the Association, Simon & Garfunkel and others... although I don’t recall ever salivating. Although I professed to be a Christian and a conservative, my values were increasingly influenced by the cacophonous sounds and events swirling around me in the mid-to-late ‘60s. I even started listening to Bob Dylan, whom my father contended was a Communist, even though by the time I tuned in



and turned on to Dylan, he had already dropped out in terms of any active involvement in politics. Nonetheless, Dylan personified the spirit of the times, and albums such as *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde*

on *Blonde* brilliantly expressed the emerging cynicism, anarchism and dysfunctionality of a youth culture that was beginning to spin wildly out of control.

I went off to college as a conservative, and five years later I emerged politically conflicted and confused. My transformation actually had little to do with the leftwing propaganda I was subjected to. I was on a baseball scholarship, so I socialized mostly with other athletes, and I avoided campus politics as much as possible because I considered most of the student activists I knew to be angry, appallingly ignorant and insanely radical.

Due to my upbringing and experiences in high school, I was acutely sensitive to political propaganda in the classroom, and I was always resistant when professors crossed the line between fact and opinion. But I do recall being influenced by one political science professor in particular, although not in the way he would have intended. He was a typical doctrinaire liberal who expressed abject contempt for conservatives, and he struck me as someone who was utterly incapable of being fair and honest. At the time, of course, I had no idea that I would some day be a university professor, but perhaps subconsciously I looked to him as a kind of reverse role model – i.e., the very antithesis of what I would want to be if I were in his position. Years later, I occasionally thought about him as I strove so earnestly to teach history as fairly and honestly as possible. So as the saying

goes: No one is worthless; if nothing else, they can always serve as a bad example.

In fact, my political transformation had more to do with the events and the culture of those years than with anything I studied or heard in college. The nation was polarized politically and racially, and a lot happened that was hard to



process and reconcile with political conservatism. To me, conservatism seemed old and tired and out-of-synch with the times. It had opposed the civil rights movement, offered no critique of corporate capitalism, was

tone-deaf on environmental issues, and was utterly irrelevant to the arts. Their solution to the Vietnam War was to bomb more, kill more, and destroy more, but with no real exit strategy. I watched in horror the TV coverage of the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the ugly and violent ghetto riots, the massive anti-war protests, and the street battles in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic Convention. At the time, I thought a revolution was breaking out and the nation was literally coming apart. Then came the Kent State killings a couple of years later, which probably affected me more than by any other event during those turbulent years. By the time the Watergate Scandal broke and Nixon resigned from office, I was not only dazed and confused (to cite a popular song title of the time) but thoroughly cynical about America and its future. As I leafed through the pages of *Mother Earth News* and imagined escaping into nature, my wife and I talked of moving into a rural commune or leaving America for Australia or New Zealand. I had changed, America had changed from the country it was a few years earlier, and the kind of conservatism that I grew up on seemed irrelevant to the social and political realities of life.

Music, Aesthetics and Reality

My refuge from all the social and political chaos of the time was music, which (at least artistically) got more interesting year-by-year even as it added to the social and moral confusion of the time. My first job out of college was with Capitol Records, a major recording company at the time that included some of the most popular recording artists of the present and the past such as the Kingston Trio, the Beach Boys and the Beatles, including the solo recordings of former-Beatles John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison. This was a time in my life when I was drifting spiritually, so at least until I experienced a life-changing spiritual conversion a couple of years later, Capitol Records was as good a place as any to experience reality.

In my idealism, my philosophy of music was that it should function as a true art form to elevate the human soul, improve the aesthetic culture of a society, and inspire people to reflect on what really matters – i.e., God, as well as the moral, social and political realities of life. I despised what I considered to be insipid, commercialized, cheesy pop music, which I regarded as a sell-out and the antithesis of real art. I quickly became disillusioned, however, when it became apparent that that was exactly what Capitol Records was all about: selling-out. As a typical corporation masquerading behind a liberal and artistic facade, all that mattered was quantity, not quality. Much to my dismay, I discovered that the purpose of a record company is to sell records (or “product,” as the marketing department called it) – not to elevate the human soul, improve the level of culture in society, or inspire people to reflect on what really matters in life. As far as most of the sales force was concerned, they could have been selling stocks and bonds, office equipment, or ShamWows for all they cared.

In retrospect, I’ve always been thankful for the opportunity to work at Capitol for one additional reason (actually, two – counting all the free records I got): As a major company in the entertainment business, the corporate culture was exceedingly hedonistic. Drugs were everywhere, there was sex in the offices (whenever employees thought they could get away with it), and I often felt as though I’d stepped into the pages of *Playboy* magazine. To me, it was a vacuous, superficial, self-indulgent and unappealing world full of empty and shallow people. So after about a year-and-a-half I committed my life to Christ at a

weekend church retreat, and not long afterward I left Capitol Records.

This was the mid-seventies, and a remarkable revival called “the Jesus Movement” swept across the nation and impacted hundreds of thousands of young people. I had first experienced the Jesus Movement a couple of years earlier following my graduation from college when my wife and I visited my sister’s family in Southern California. One night we went to Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, the epicenter of the movement, and I witnessed the most liberating and spiritually-energized environment I’d ever experienced. Over the next few years the Jesus Movement was a positive spiritual influence in my life, and I began



Larry Norman’s classic Jesus Music LP, *Only Visiting This Planet* (1973)

listening to the music of some of the popular Christian recording artists such as Larry Norman, Love Song, the Second Chapter of Acts, Phil Keaggy and others.

Although much of the music that came out of the Jesus Movement was admittedly amateurish, some of it was quite creative and inspiring. A couple of years later, having left Capitol Records, I managed to get a job as a regional representative with Word Records, the largest Christian recording company and the leading producer of Jesus Music. (By the late ‘70s the music got more commercial and mainstream, and industry insiders began referring to it as Contemporary Christian Music.)

My first day on the job with Word was in conjunction with the Christian Booksellers Convention, an annual event in which all of the Christian book, music, and gift companies, along with Christian wholesalers and retailers, meet for several days to showcase, buy and sell the latest products. I hadn’t been there for more than a couple of hours before I got the very uneasy feeling that I’d known these people before – or at least, people like them. Although generally nicer and superficially more “spiritual,” their values and business philosophy were remarkably similar

to the people I’d left behind at Capitol. It was still a conventional corporate climate (except that they prayed before meals and sales meetings), and they had the same pragmatic profit-driven view of music (or “product,” as they often referred to it) as in the secular music business.

During the two years that I worked for Word, a former Word executive started a new company that specialized in Jesus Music called Sparrow Records. Sparrow was of course a smaller company, but it had an impressive roster of recording artists that included Keith Green, Barry McGuire, the Second Chapter of Act and John Michael Talbot. Sparrow was less corporatized and had a reputation as a more spiritual alternative to Word, so after a while I contacted the folks at Sparrow and wound up being offered a job with them as a regional representative covering five Southeastern states. Once again, however, I was confronted by the realities of the business world, and just because the company was newer and smaller didn’t mean it was any more aesthetically-motivated or any less profit-driven than any other company. I discussed my disenchantment with Keith Green and some other people whose opinions I valued, and after a couple of years with Sparrow I resigned and enrolled in graduate school to study history.

New Horizons

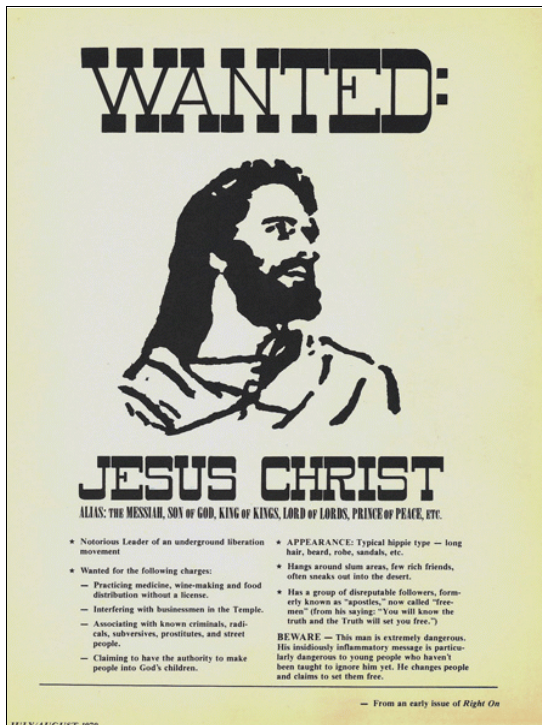
I’ve mentioned my involvement with these record companies only because it relates to my spiritual pilgrimage as well as my political odyssey. In the years I spent on the road, calling on a variety of Christian bookstores, record shops, radio stations, record distributors, recording studios, and other businesses, I had the opportunity to broaden and deepen not only my spiritual life but my view of the world. I met some interesting and eccentric characters, some deplorable hypocrites, and quite a few truly admirable people. This was the back-wash of the sixties era, and some of the most interesting Christians I met were involved in alternative churches and intentional Christian communities. Having experienced a very conventional Christian upbringing, I witnessed people living out their faith in fresh and creative ways that were truly inspiring.

Being away from home most week nights, I had plenty of free time to read and study, and in fact I became a voracious reader. Although most of what I read were Christian books, I also kept

up with current events and politics. Through the influence of the manager of the Logos Bookstore in Knoxville, Tennessee, I was introduced to radical leftwing Christianity. He had been a member of the Socialist Workers' Party and a student leader at the University of Tennessee in the early '70s, and he once organized a demonstration that disrupted a Billy Graham Crusade in which President Nixon attended as a guest of honor. Although he was now a committed Christian, he had lost none of his fervor for peace and social justice issues.

On his recommendation I subscribed to a couple of leftwing Christian publications, *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*, and I soon began reading books such as John Perkins' *Let Justice Roll Down*, E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*, *The Cotton Patch Gospels* by Clarence Jordan, Jeremy Rifkin's *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity*, Sen. Mark Hatfield's *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Adam Daniel Finnerty's *No More Plastic Jesus*, and the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Howard Yoder, William Stringfellow, Tony Campolo and others on the Christian left.

Later I discovered *Radix*, a publication that grew out of the Berkeley Christian Coalition in Berkeley, California, and *The New Oxford Review*, a Catholic socio/political magazine edited by

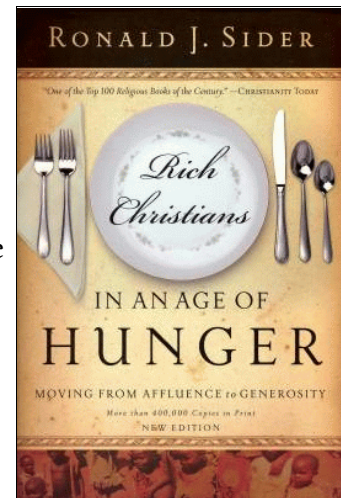


Jesus Christ, Revolutionary
— from an early issue of *Radix* magazine

Dale Vree that featured articles by some impressive Christian social thinkers such as Richard John Neuhaus, Christopher Lasch, Robert Coles, Jean Vanier, Sheldon Vanauken, Robert Bellah and others. Vree had an interesting life story. In the early '60s he was a Communist and a student leader in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement at the University of California, and a few years later he left America in order to live in a "pure Marxist" society and culture. He eventually wound up in East Berlin, and it was there that he first encountered true Christianity. Vree was so impressed by the quality of the lives of the Christians he met in East Berlin that he renounced Marxism and became a Christian himself. Then, returning to Berkeley, he founded *The New Oxford Review* in the late 1970s. Although no longer a Communist, he still retained his passion for social justice, and his magazine had a definite impact on my thinking at this time.

The book that most influenced me during this period was Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Sider, a professor of theology at Eastern (Baptist) Seminary, lived in an intentional Christian community in inner-city Philadelphia and was the founder and president of Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA). In 1980, after having left the music business, I became involved in ESA and was later offered an administrative position in their office in Philadelphia. Unlike some other high-profile "radical Christians" I met who struck me as considerably more radical than Christian, I respected Sider personally and considered him to be a genuinely decent and sincere Christian, and my wife and I seriously considered moving to Philadelphia and working with ESA. After much thought and prayer, however, we declined the offer, and a few months later I enrolled at Georgia State University to pursue a doctorate degree in history.

Although I never identified with modern political liberalism, which was transparently secularistic and often morally confused, for



Ronald Sider's
Rich Christians In an Age of Hunger (1978)

several years I considered myself a Christian socialist. Many conservative Christians are unaware of it, but in fact there was a vibrant Christian socialist movement in the United States for more than 30 years leading up to World War I that advocated many of the political and social reforms associated with the Populist and Progressive movements of the time. After World War I, however, American socialism came to be dominated almost exclusively by Marxists and secular humanists, with a few notable exceptions such as Dorothy Day, the founder of the *Catholic Worker* movement, and Clarence Jordan, a Baptist pastor who founded Koinonia Fellowship, a Christian community in Americus, Georgia. In retrospect, it was probably the Christian left's emphasis on community and simple living that most appealed to me. I was never attracted to libertarian-style individualism, and my wife and I have always sought to live a relatively simple lifestyle devoid of as much waste and extravagance as possible.



Dorothy Day

Interestingly, as late as the 1940s C. S. Lewis, who wrote little about politics during his prolific career, still believed that turn-of-the-century Christian socialism had offered the best alternative to the kingdom of darkness that he saw engulfing this world. As he noted in *The Screwtape Letters* (1941), the socialist ideal was unfortunately coopted and perverted by ambitious and evil geniuses such as Marx, Lenin, Stalin



C. S. Lewis

and Hitler, who transformed it into totalitarian Communism, Fascism and Nazism. A few years later, in his "Space Trilogy" novel, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), Lewis included more socio/political commentary than in any other single work. While he distrusted state socialism due to its totalitarian impulse, he also feared the modernistic cult of "progress," characterized by an unholy alliance between unrestricted and rapacious capitalism and unrestrained science and technology. Like many great Christian thinkers, including one of his major influences, G. K. Chesterton, Lewis defied simple political categorization. If one had to assign a label to him, he would probably best be described as a Distributist – an advocate of economic democracy whereby employees and workers own and manage the major means of production. In modern economics, Distributism has served as an alternative model between a state-controlled economy and a laissez-faire capitalistic system. But as a Third Way, it has also been the economic Road Less Traveled.

PART 2

The Left and Right

Shortly before leading the army of Israel in its assault on Jericho, Joshua went out to view the city:

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you on our side or that of our enemy?"

"Neither!" the man replied. "I have come as the commander of the army of the Lord!" Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." [Josh. 5:13ff]

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Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life....

Let your eyes look straight ahead, and fix your gaze directly before you...

Take care not swerve either to the left or the right, but keep your feet from evil. [Prov. 4:23ff]

Just as God cannot be reduced to a theology, it is foolish to think that God's civic agenda for humanity can be confined to a particular political ideology. Yet like Joshua in the passage above, many libertarians, conservatives, liberals and socialists tend to assume that God is on their side, when in fact he is "Neither!"—as the angel informed Joshua in no uncertain terms. The real question is if we are on God's side, and whether we are aligned with his will and purpose. In Micah 6:8, the prophet reminds us that our primary calling is "to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God," and as the Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer warned years ago, we risk trivializing and distorting the Gospel whenever we link it too closely to any particular political ideology or party. In that respect, although the passage quoted above from Proverbs 4:23 obviously isn't referring to politics, it's not unreasonable to take it as a warning against politicizing the Gospel by associating it too much with either the left or the right.

In retrospect, I've come to see that I probably needed to experience the radical Christian left subculture in order to liberate me from some of the dogmatic and doctrinaire ideas that I was raised on. Even during the period of my deepest involvement, however, I didn't my surrender my

mind. I maintained an alert and healthy skepticism, and I was as cognizant of the left's deficiencies as I had been of the aware of the problems on the right. I quickly observed that the right has no monopoly on either self-righteousness nor hypocrisy.

In its own way, the Christian left shares some common traits with the radical Christian right. In both camps there are many people who deeply care about our society and culture and are committed to making a difference. Unlike the vast majority of Americans, many are neither apathetic nor totally absorbed in self-gratification. Interestingly, the extreme left and right also share another, less admirable similarity: a conspiratorial view of the world that often obscures reality and impinges upon their capacity for objective, rational- and factual-based critical thinking.

On the radical Christian left there is an honest and legitimate concern for social justice and a revulsion toward traditional Christian complicity in the evils of racism, sexism and classism. I've always admired and appreciated their emphasis on living a simple and unpretentious lifestyle, and unlike many conservatives they recognize the danger and challenge the idolatry of addictive consumerism, mindless materialism and blind patriotism. They sincerely want to see a society that is based more on cooperation than competition, and on the common good rather than purely individualistic self-interest. Dissatisfied with passive conformity and an unquestioned acceptance of the status quo, they often expose some of the worst and most hypocritical tendencies in conventional mainstream Christianity. In addition, they show far greater concern for the care and protection of the environment than most conservatives I've known.

However, there are several fundamental problems with socialist theory in general that render it impractical and inadvisable.

(1) Socialism has a utopian and unrealistic view of human nature. For reasons that I find inexplicable (not to mention, unbiblical and counter-historical), the left likes to imagine that mankind is naturally good, generous, cooperative and civic-minded. If liberated from antiquated and oppressive social, economic, political and religious systems and institutions, all of that innate goodness within will manifest itself and

mankind will progress toward the next evolutionary stage in human history: a pure classless and harmonious society based on cooperation rather than competition in which the governing principle is, "From each according to his ability to each according to his need."

(2) Socialism has a simplistic view of social and economic history. Much of our socio/political worldview stems from our understanding of human nature, as mentioned above, but also from our view of social class. In American history, the Populist and Progressive reform movements of the late-19th and early-20th centuries were responses to governmental corruption and exploitative business practices. Many mainstream reformers were middle-class people who didn't challenge free enterprise and capitalism per se but sought to rectify the worst abuses in business and industry in order to make the condition of workers less harsh and more humane. Influenced by utopian idealism, they tended to idealize the poor as noble and innocent victims of an unjust social order, and they considered government benevolence to be the solution. As one reformer put it, "The real heart of the movement is to use the government as an agency of human welfare."

Further to the left, however, socialists had a more cynical view of the social order. They were generally convinced that free enterprise capitalism (particularly corporate capitalism) was immune to reform, and that the only solution to capitalistic exploitation was strict government regulation – and in some cases, ownership – of the economic system. Although most reformers at the time supported a graduated income tax, socialists were more radical in calling for a comprehensive redistribution of wealth. Most, however, were democratic (or "utopian") socialists rather than Marxists, and they advocated radical but peaceful change through the democratic process rather than a violent revolution.

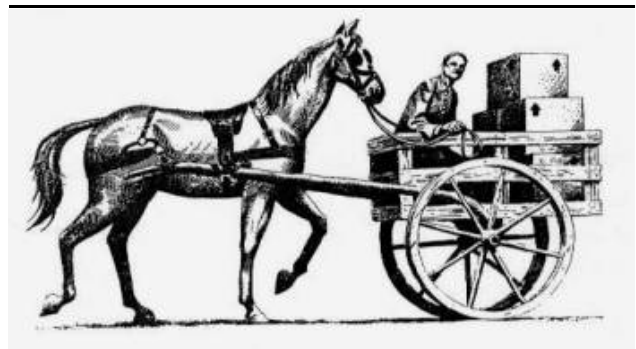
Historically, a fundamental difference between those on the left and the right derived from the issue of how one gets rich, and the personal and social responsibilities that accompany wealth and power. Conservatives generally believed that people prosper by living responsible lives, by hard work and exercising individual initiative, by being productive, and by providing a good product or service at a good price. Some argued that the rich have few if any social responsibilities, while others believed that the blessings of wealth, status, power

and influence should be used benevolently for the general welfare of society. Some believed that Christian churches should be the primary social institution for the care of the poor while others advocated private charities, but both approaches were essentially paternalistic in nature.

Socialists, like the more radical Marxists, contended that wealth is acquired either through unearned (and undeserved) inheritance or, more typically in the modern industrial age, through exploitative and devious means – usually by exploiting the working class by under-paying and over-working those who do the actual productive labor in society. If this view of wealth acquisition were true, then a case could be made for high confiscatory taxation, redistribution of wealth, and even government control of the means of production.

The reality of the situation, of course, is that people have acquired wealth historically through a variety of channels and by various means, some legitimate and some not. Even those who have acquired it through less-than-admirable means sometimes produce necessary goods and provide services that create jobs and ultimately benefit society in general. So even if it had the power to do so, government would be wise not to punish those who produce the wealth on which a nation's economy depends – which is the third basic problem with socialism:

(3) Socialism puts the economic cart before the horse. There are two major components to any economic system: the *production* of goods and services and the *distribution* of goods and services. Obviously, the priority has to be on the former or else there is little to distribute. Therefore, any government policies that punish or discourage productivity – and by extension, the creation of wealth – are counterproductive.



In modern history this has been a recurring problem, and a fatal flaw, in all leftwing ideologies. By shifting the primary focus from the production of goods and services to the redistribution of wealth, they discourage individual initiative, creativity and productivity, which severely cripples economic activity. This has a perpetual problem with socialism and is a serious error with far-reaching consequences.

(4) Socialism inevitably leads to dependency.

Regardless of any good intentions, socialist systems create an entitlement mentality in which people come to depend upon the government for things they ought to provide for themselves. Many of the Progressive and socialist reformers in the early 1900s sincerely intended to help the poor and equalize economic opportunities in America, but such policies are innately problematical. Rather than truly helping the poor, socialistic-style government welfare has often eliminated the strongest incentives that the poor need in order to take responsibility for their life and improve their situation. As the modern addiction recovery movement emphasizes, helping someone is not the same thing as enabling them. When we help, we provide the assistance, the resources, or the motivation that stimulates others to positive change; when we enable, we merely provide the means by which someone can continue to perpetuate their current condition.

All Christians should be sensitive to the struggles of the poor and eager to help in constructive ways. As the Christian left constantly preaches, this is a major Biblical theme. Furthermore, under our Constitution the federal government has the authority (and, some might add, the responsibility) to provide for “the general welfare” of the American people. Most Christians would probably agree that a publicly-financed “safety net” for victims of unusual misfortune is justifiable. But government assistance should be hand-up, not a hand-out, and in most cases welfare should be linked to workfare. Furthermore, public assistance at taxpayers’ expense should be a temporary condition, not a lifestyle.

There are two additional problems with the socio/political philosophy of the Christian left in particular that discredit it in my mind:

(1) A reliance on government as the solution to most of our social, economic and political problems. In their concept of social justice, the Christian left demands not just equality of

opportunity in American society but an unreasonable equality of results that denies individual differences – including the relevant personality and character factors that often determine our life situation. Like secular liberals, the Christian left tends to de-emphasize individual responsibility and instead attributes most social problems to poverty, inequality, racism, sexism and classism. There is no question that these have been major issues historically, but there also is no doubt that America made unprecedented progress in the second half of the 20th century in dealing with these problems that have plagued every civilization in human history. For example, I often think that racial conflicts would be relatively rare today were it not for certain individuals and groups that have a vested interest in manufacturing and exploiting racial tensions. Rather than honestly trying to solve racial problems, they often create them.

Poverty and racism and even injustice don’t *cause* social pathologies such as crime, violence, drug addiction, unemployment and illegitimate births, although they can contribute to them. The left has to understand that government can do relatively little to solve problems that are essentially moral- and character-based in nature. As Aleksander Solzhenitsyn once noted, the line between good and evil passes not through governments or institutions but directly through every human heart. A fundamental problem with the Christian left is that they tend to focus too much on corporate and institutional sin and not enough on private and individual sin. They sincerely want a more just and civil society, but they tend to ignore or excuse many of the anti-social attitudes and behaviors that corrupt and pollute our society.

(2) A misinterpretation and misapplication of the Bible. A second and equally confounding problem with the Christian left is their misuse of the Bible, particularly certain prophetic passages related to social injustice which they use to promote a utopian socialist agenda. One of the insights I gained from my involvement with the Christian left was their emphasis on God’s special concern for the poor, the powerless, and the most vulnerable among us, and his condemnation of the rich, the powerful and the privileged who take advantage of others. This was a recurring theme in the writings of the Old Testament prophets and a major reason why God allowed the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah to be

destroyed. It was also a prominent theme in the ministry and teachings of Jesus and throughout much of the New Testament.

But when the Christian left cites many of these passages, they do so out of context. The Bible is quite clear that the true children of God – i.e., those who have been spiritually born-again by grace through faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ – are called to live according to the highest standards of morality and ethics. In every way, Christians should be not only model citizens but model humanitarians. Old Testament Israel was called by God to be his “chosen people” – a uniquely theocratic nation, governed by the strict rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law, that would serve as God’s model community here on earth. Accordingly, they would be the primary means by which God would affect the salvation of humanity. But in virtually every respect they failed, so God established a New Covenant, this time not with an earthly nation but with a spiritual community of followers of Jesus Christ. And just as God set down specific moral and civic laws for the governance of Old Testament Israel, he established standards of morality and civic ethics for New Testament Christians.

The problem with the Christian left is that they fail to distinguish between God’s moral and ethical standards for his people (the church), and what we might reasonably expect from mainstream (secular) society. Or as Augustine would describe it, the highest Biblical principles related to social justice and equality apply to the City of God (the community of Christ), not the City of Man (mainstream secular society).

Obviously, all societies would be better off if they were governed by Biblical principles, in which case there would be no injustice. But mainstream society is not Christian, and as Christians we cannot impose specifically Christian values and practices on non-Christians. When the Christian left seeks to do this, it must rely upon the coercive power of the state to force compliance, which is just as counterproductive as when the radical right tries to use the state to enforce Christian standards of sexual morality.

Many Christians seem confused on this point. They wonder that if we cannot and should not force explicitly Christian values and practices on mainstream society, then how can society function at all? In other words, if a society doesn’t function according to Biblical principles, is there any moral basis for governing at all? There is, but

it is derived not from God’s special revelation (as in the Bible) but from God’s general revelation through nature. Remarkably, all civilizations throughout history have acknowledged (either explicitly or implicitly) a basic set of moral principles that philosophers refer to as Natural Law. The apostle Paul refers to it in Romans 1-2, and the principles of Natural Law surface repeatedly not only in the New Testament but throughout the history of moral philosophy.

What exactly is Natural Law? In effect, it is a kind of moral-based common sense – a set of moral and ethical principles that is universal and transcultural, and it comes to us via general revelation. It is also intuitive as a result of the *imago Dei* (the image of God) that is embedded within our soul. All humanity recognizes these fundamental principles of Natural Law – although they are often ignored and violated by those who choose to lie, cheat, steal, exploit and abuse others for their own benefit – and they include the following concepts:

Fundamental Principles of Natural Law

- There is a God (or gods, or some unifying order of the universe) to whom human beings are morally accountable.
- A sense of moral absolutes – i.e., certain beliefs and actions are objectively right and wrong.
- Respect for the sanctity of life.
- Respect for the rule of law (either a formal written code or informal customs).
- The principle of legal justice, and the right to equal protection under the law.
- Respect for private property rights.
- Protection from physical or emotional abuse by others.
- Protection from criminals.
- Protection from arbitrary government abuse or coercion.
- Protection from being cheated in commercial transactions.
- Standards of decency and propriety.
- Respect for the institution of marriage.
- Respect for one’s parents and elders.
- The principle of reciprocity, and a tacit acknowledgment of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Again – to reiterate – these are universal principles that all civilized societies generally acknowledge, although the *understanding* and *application* of these principles may vary from one society and culture to another. (Just like individuals, no two cultures are equal; some have higher standards or are more consistent in enforcing these principles than others.) Of course, due to human sin, these principles are regularly ignored and violated for various reasons by those who have the power and the will to do so. But the point is that this is the best we can expect from any secular society – i.e., a recognition of these basic Natural Law principles and the will to enforce them. Anything else – whether it relates to Christian sexual morality, Christian ethics related to social justice, or any other explicitly Christian values and practices – should be preached and practiced by the community of Christ, but it cannot and should not be forced on others. To attempt to do so only imposes standards that people who lack the internal guidance and power of the Holy Spirit cannot possibly meet, and furthermore it is counterproductive: it renders the Christian community in society a source of coercion and oppression rather than a source of liberation.

The Right and Wrong

As a graduate student in history, one of my areas of concentration was the history of modern political philosophy. Due to my background and experiences prior to grad school, I found that I was relatively well prepared to study the intricacies of political philosophy from a Christian perspective. I relished the opportunity to read and discuss the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Edmund Burke, De Tocqueville, Marx, John Stuart Mill, Lenin, Hitler and others, and in the process a synthesis began to form that avoided the extremes of both the left and the right. Later in my academic career I taught a course on the American Political System in which I sought to present a balanced, moral-based and realistic approach to the subject.

I once stopped for gas at a local QT when a car pulled in next to mine and a young man got out and exclaimed, “Professor Breshears – my conservative mentor! It’s nice to see you!” I must have looked at him quizzically because he proceeded to explain, “I was in your political theory class three or four years ago, and you’re

the one who turned me on to politics.” I exchanged a few pleasantries with him, told him I was glad he was doing well, and then left. Later, I ruminated on what he had said: “My conservative mentor?” What was he thinking? I certainly didn’t consider myself a conservative at the time, but then it dawned on me: I had always tried to teach history honestly, fairly and objectively, and I avoided using my position as a propaganda platform. That approach was probably so unusual in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which tend to be dominated by liberals and radical leftists, that this student just assumed I was a conservative. It was one of the more encouraging affirmations I ever received and a good reminder that integrity and a commitment to truth ultimately prevail.

Over the years I’ve grown more conservative while liberalism has veered-off toward the radical secular left. Winston Churchill once remarked that if you met a young man who wasn’t a socialist, it meant that he had no heart; but if you met an old man who was still a socialist, it meant that he had no head. (Actually, Churchill said “communist,” not socialist. He was speaking in terms of the 1920s and early ‘30s when many idealistic young people identified with radical leftwing theories, including communism. At that time, the failures and horrors of Soviet Communism were not quite so undeniable as in later years.) Nonetheless, there are aspects of modern conservatism that have always troubled me.

A favorite conservative mantra since the time of Ronald Reagan has been the notion that “Government is not the *solution* to our problems; government *is* the problem.” Although bloated and intrusive government is undeniably a hindrance to a well-functioning society and economy, we should also keep in mind that old-style *laissez-faire* capitalism (especially *corporate* capitalism) can be ruthlessly exploitative and should be kept in check. Historically, of course, this was why labor unions were so necessary, but it was also a significant factor in the growth of government involvement in the economy for much of the 20th century. One can reasonably argue that today most labor unions have out-lived their usefulness and that government is far too large, too powerful, and too intrusive, but the solution is not to be found in some misplaced nostalgia for an idealized past that never existed

in the first place. *Laissez-faire* capitalism, like authoritarian government, denies the darker side of human nature. We need boundaries – checks and balances in government and regulations and controls in business – lest the strongest, the most ambitious, and the most ruthless among us wreak havoc on the rest of us.



There is no question that the original American system of government as structured under the Constitution was essentially libertarian in nature. The federal government was relatively weak, and the Bill of Rights maximized individual liberty and freedom. Although the Constitution granted Congress the power to enact legislation to provide for the “general welfare” [Article I, Section 8], this provision was interpreted very narrowly and rarely exercised in the first several decades of the nation’s history. But what libertarians and conservatives often overlook is that the Founding Fathers could only establish a system as they did because of the residual influence of our Judeo/Christian heritage which tempered the worst of our natural impulses. Although fraught with imperfections and inconsistencies, there was nevertheless a common consensus in America at the time that derived from two sources: our Christian heritage and Enlightenment political philosophy.

Still, libertarian-style government was a great risk. George Washington admitted early on that “We have, probably, had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation,” and James Madison acknowledged in *The Federalist Papers* that there is “a degree of depravity in mankind.” Nonetheless, he thought the experiment in self-government to be worth the risk – but based on a very important consideration. According to Madison...

We have staked the whole of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.

John Adams thought the same, and was quick to warn that “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to govern any other.” Washington added that “It is impossible to rightly govern without God and the Bible.” Some contemporary historians note this correlation, such as George Tindall and David Shi in their textbook, *America: A Narrative History*.

The new American republic would endure so long as the majority of the people were virtuous and willingly placed the good of society above the self-interest of individuals [or groups]. Herein lay the danger of the new American experiment in popular government; even as leaders enthusiastically fashioned new state constitutions, they feared that their experiments in republicanism would fail because of the lack of civic virtue. [George B. Tindall & David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. Fifth Edition (W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 273]

It is no coincidence, then, that as the common consensus gradually eroded over subsequent generations, as the influence of Biblically-based morality withered, as powerful individuals took advantage of freedom and a *laissez-faire* economy to exploit their fellow citizens, and as social injustice became more appallingly egregious, there was more need for government to step in and regulate business practices and the economy in the interest of the general welfare.

Libertarianism, like authoritarianism, fails to adequately account for the egoistic impulses of human nature. Libertarians have a minimalist view of government: they argue that government is by nature imperious, corrupt and untrustworthy, and therefore individual liberty should be maximized to keep government in check. Authoritarians take a maximalist view of government: they argue that the (common) people are by nature selfish, contentious and untrustworthy, and therefore government power should be maximized to keep the people in check. The Founding Fathers, although more sympathetic to libertarianism than authoritarianism, attempted to strike a realistic balance in keeping with the moral climate of their time. In doing so, they created a system that guaranteed basic civil liberties while they constantly emphasized the responsibilities of citizenship.

Two Basic Operating Principles

Christians are called to live by the highest ethical principles, and society would be far more just, more harmonious, and more prosperous if everyone accepted and practiced these principles. But human nature being what it is, there are reasonable limits to which we can expect non-Christians to live by Biblical standards of morality and ethics. Therefore, our calling as citizens is to work for a civil society that is as decent, fair and just as possible, and one that is based on the principles of Natural Law that apply to everyone. As for politics, I believe there are two basic operating principles that should guide our thinking:

(1)The enemy of the good is the best. Rarely do I vote enthusiastically *for* anyone, but I often vote passionately *against* people who I fear will do the most harm. When it comes to campaigns and elections, we must be pragmatic and realistic. If we hold out for perfection and refuse to support a candidate because he/she doesn't adequately meet our standards, we often forfeit the contest to someone even worse. (The 2008 Senatorial election in Minnesota is a prime example. The Democrat Al Franken won out over the Republican Norm Coleman only because libertarians refused to support Coleman, who they considered too moderate. As a result, they helped elect a radical liberal.) If we take our citizenship responsibilities seriously, the old adage about choosing the lesser of two evils becomes a moral imperative. In any election, one candidate is *always* better than another – if even incrementally – and we have a moral responsibility to support the one over the other.

(2)Politics is mostly about damage control. Government seldom does anything good, but it can certainly complicate our lives and hamper the efforts of those who are trying to do good. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect government to *solve* most of our problems (especially our moral and ethical problems), but we can hold our public officials responsible and demand that they not create new problems or add to the ones we already have.

Six Political Philosophical Propositions

There are six philosophical propositions related to government that I believe to be reasonable, realistic and compatible with Natural Law. Furthermore, I believe any political theory or government policies that fail to recognize these propositions or otherwise violate them are contrary to Natural Law and are therefore either unnecessary, counterproductive or dangerous.

(1)Government is a necessary institution. Any government is a potential threat to human freedom and morality. However, given the reality of the Edenic Fall and the tendency of human beings to cheat and abuse one another, government is necessary. The problem of course, is that governments are staffed with human beings. But as Augustine argued, government is a necessary evil because of human evil. Political systems are instituted to organize, direct, and control the human and natural resources within a particular geographical area, without which there would be unremitting chaos and strife. Jesus accepted the legitimacy of human governments as he taught us to “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars...” [Matt. 22:21].

(2)A good government provides for the safety and security of its people. The number one priority of government is to protect human life and property. Therefore, armies and navies legitimately exist to defend the nation from external aggressors just as police forces are established to protect law-abiding citizens from internal threats posed by criminals. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 13, “Submit to the governing authorities... For government officials are God's servants... They exist to punish criminals and wrongdoers.”

(3)A good government provides for legal and social justice. Although a necessary institution, governmental power should not be absolute, and it should be limited by a codified system based on natural moral law. The principle of justice allows for equal treatment under the law for all citizens, and derivative of this principle are the basic civil liberties that were incorporated into our Bill of Rights. These civil liberties are universal ethical values, derived from Natural Law, that are cross-culturally valid. For example, in Acts 16 Paul was beaten and thrown into prison at Philippi without due process of law, after which he demanded an apology from those who had violated his civil liberties as a Roman citizen.

(4) A good government regulates and manages the economic (fiscal and monetary) resources of the nation competently and justly for the benefit of all. Whether a nation's economy is more *laissez-faire* capitalistic or socialistic, a good government doesn't allow the nation's economic and natural resources to be squandered for short-term gain, nor does it implement policies that artificially restrict the nation's economic growth. In the Old Testament, Joseph's management of Egypt's resources during his tenure as prime minister serves as an appropriate example.

(5) A good government is concerned with the commonweal – the general welfare of its people. There are reasonable limitations to which government can assist people economically and socially, and no one should want to cede too much control over the private lives of individuals to politicians. Nonetheless, we can insist that government refrain from enacting policies and programs that actively promote or tacitly encourage self-destructive behavior and irresponsible lifestyles. A good government, for instance, sets reasonable limits on the production and distribution of pornography, dangerous drugs, and certain types of firearms and other weapons in the general interest of society. Even the corrupt and tyrannical Roman Empire provided for the general welfare of its people to some extent, and in I Tim. 2:2 the apostle Paul urges Christians to pray for government leaders "so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives."

(6) A good government is based on the realities of human nature. As cited in the section on socialist theory, all political philosophies start with certain assumptions about human nature, and certainly any Christian concept of government would need to start with a realistic and Biblical view of human nature.

Following the American Revolution, a revolt broke out that challenged the authority of the national government under the Articles of Confederation. This was Shay's Rebellion, and it was the event that prompted George Washington to comment, "We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation." Only a few months later the Founding Fathers met and drafted a new Constitution that granted significantly more power to the federal government. If a major problem in recent American history has been too much government intrusion in the economy and the lives of individuals, it is instructive to keep in

mind that the solution is not to be found in a libertarian overreaction.

In classical Greece, democracy was predicated on the assumption that men are basically good and rational and capable of self-government. Sophist philosophers taught that "man is the measure of all things" – in other words, everything should be evaluated according to the standard of human happiness – and classical democracy collapsed under the weight of human immorality, corruption and incompetence. By contrast, medieval society was based on a belief in the utter moral depravity of man and his need for a strict hierarchy of authority over him – both political and ecclesiastical – which resulted in the most repressive "Christian" governments the world has ever seen.

With the coming of the Enlightenment in the late 17th century, a more optimistic view of human nature emerged. Political philosophers such as John Locke contended that "That government is best which governs least," and subsequent theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that the only viable form of government is a social compact that maximizes individual liberty. Again, to reiterate an earlier point, a system such as the Founding Fathers instituted, which was quite libertarian by today's standards, was feasible at the time only because of the residual effects of centuries of Western history that were influenced by Biblically-based moral and ethical principles. Without this rich religious and moral heritage, the system that the Founding Fathers established would have been, as John Adams declared, "inadequate" and unworkable.

Christians understand that the Edenic Fall has corrupted all aspects of human life: Intellectually, our thinking is often muddled and confused; morally, we need divine revelation to discern good and evil; socially, we take advantage of other people and use them for our own selfish ends; and as James Sire has noted, the Fall has also corrupted human creativity:

Our imagination became separated from reality; imagination became illusion, and artists who created gods in their own image led humanity further and further from its origin. [James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, p. 33]

In the first chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul writes eloquently of the consequences of the Fall:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be

known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...

[See Psalm 14:1 – “The Fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God;’” and Psalm 111:10 – “The reverential respect for God is the beginning of wisdom.”]

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity... Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

[Rom. 1:18f]

Human beings are neither inherently good nor totally depraved but a complex mix that varies from person-to-person. Because we are made in the image of God – the *imago Dei* – we are capable of extraordinary acts of kindness, compassion and self-sacrifice. Likewise, because of the Fall we are capable of gross brutality, insensitivity, and injustice. A good government considers the complexities of human nature, and it strives for a workable balance between safe-guarding individual civil liberties while at the same time encouraging and promoting civic responsibility. [NOTE: The Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity relates to mankind's moral condition relative to the perfect holiness of God, and man's inability to save himself spiritually. Calvin didn't question that human beings were capable of great acts of goodness.]

In Conclusion...

There is no question that government is a necessary and proper institution. The only real issue is what *kind* of government best regulates and serves society. All political philosophies have their limitations and all political systems are flawed, but like human beings, some are obviously worse than others. As Christians, our efforts should be directed toward creating and preserving as good and just and humane a government as possible, based on the universal principles of Natural Law, for the benefit of everyone in society.

In terms of political ideologies, there are only six basic options, five of which are either hopelessly idealistic and impractical, inadvisable and counterproductive, or dangerously tyrannical.

Authoritarianism is a maximalist approach to government that has led to some of the worst forms of totalitarianism in history. Secular authoritarian systems such as Communism, Nazism, and various types of Fascism (including military dictatorships, etc.) are innately ruthless, exploitative, and brutal. In such systems the rule of law is merely the expression of the ruling elite, and the civil liberties and civil rights of citizens are at best only arbitrary and tentative.

Historically, of course, not all authoritarian regimes have been explicitly secularistic and anti-religious. In fact, many have been sacralistic systems in which the political and the religious systems have co-ruled society, or theocracies in which the religious authorities exercised supreme control over the nation's political and social life. In either case, religious authoritarianism – whether medieval Christendom, Islamic fundamentalism or so-called “Christian Reconstructionism” – can be as exploitative and oppressive as any secular authoritarian regime when it becomes coercive and violates the freedom of conscience of its citizens.

Anarchism is the opposite extreme of authoritarianism, but it is merely an abstract theory and a temporary vacuum that will quickly be filled by some form of government. The Bible is consistent in its condemnation of



anarchism, implying that even an authoritarian government such as the Roman imperial state is preferable to no government at all.

Libertarianism is a minimalist political ideology based on the naive and dangerous notion that human beings are innately good, and therefore need little government to regulate their lives. In reality, human beings need a government with sufficient strength to curtail crime (both violent and “white-collar” crime) and protect against predatory neighboring states. There was a time in American history when libertarian government was a theoretical possibility, but the failure of the Articles of Confederation proved otherwise. Considering the great multi-cultural diversity in contemporary America and the total breakdown of a Natural Law-based moral consensus, libertarianism is simply not an option.

Contemporary liberalism (in contrast to classical liberalism) is a political philosophy derived from a secular humanistic worldview. Most of our current political policies and governmental programs that are corrupt, immoral, impractical or counter-productive are liberal initiatives – everything from judicial activism, bloated government and high taxes to abortion-on-demand, race- and sex-based identity politics, immigration chaos, election fraud, homosexual marriage, and the insane Politically-Correct speech and behavior codes that tyrannize corporate America, our educational institutions, and our governmental bureaucracies. Liberal activists and groups such as the ACLU show unremitting contempt for traditional American values and are particularly hostile toward the Christian faith and morality. Since the late 1960s liberalism has become virtually indistinguishable from secular socialism.

Socialism (i.e., traditional utopian or democratic socialism – not Marxism) is a particularly seductive political ideology. The Populist and Progressive reform movements of a century ago were mildly socialistic, and of course the New Deal expanded the size of government, its oversight and regulation of the economy, and its direct involvement in the lives of the American people. In the 1960s Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs further socialized key components of American life, and since then the extent of government regulation and control has steadily increased under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Due to its emphasis on egalitarianism, socialism appeals to many as a solution to the age-old problems of social injustice and economic inequality. Many Christians gravitate toward socialism because they equate it with the social and economic practices of the early church. But in reality, of course, socialism is not so benign. Even in democratic socialistic systems, there is an authoritarian impulse because socialism must rely upon the coercive power of the state to manage the economy and redistribute the wealth according to the preferences of the governing elite.

Contemporary conservatism (in contrast to classical conservatism) is the final option, and it is the only political ideology that offers any realistic basis for preserving public order while guaranteeing basic civil liberties. Conservatism is a hybrid ideology that integrates some Biblical social and moral principles with Enlightenment political philosophy and moderate forms of socialism. As a result, there is always a degree of internal tension within conservatism.

Nonetheless, it is the best and most practical option considering its respect for America’s political traditions, its adherence to the rule of law, its emphasis on personal responsibility and civic-mindedness, and its promotion of an equal opportunity society based on the principle of liberty and justice for all. Unlike liberalism, conservatism generally acknowledges America’s rich religious heritage and the positive influence of Christianity in our national life.

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My political odyssey has been a long and winding road that has taken me from far-right conservatism to Christian socialism and back again to a generally conservative orientation (with some qualifications). But I am not a political conservative so much by choice as by default. Contemporary liberalism, which is virtually indistinguishable from secular socialism, is a political ideology rooted in a secular humanistic worldview, and I believe it is innately and irredeemably flawed, both intellectually and morally. Although contemporary conservatism is far from perfect, I believe that conservatives are generally right on more issues more of the time. Liberals, on the other hand, are impressively consistent in terms of being on the wrong side of most issues most of the time – whether the issue is nationalized healthcare, abortion-on-demand, taxpayer-funded abortions, gay marriage, deficit spending, high taxation, race-based affirmative

action programs, immigration control, education vouchers, fair and honest political campaigns and elections, or foreign policy. So after years of experience, observation, study and reflection, it seems to me that conservatism is the most realistic, the most sensible, the most moral, and the most responsible option.

But I remain unsatisfied with any political philosophy, realizing full well that no manmade ideology can adequately encapsulate the full expression of the Gospel. Ultimately, our allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, not to any nation or socio/political ideology, and certainly not to any political party.

Through the ages, the true church – the spiritual fellowship of those who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (as distinct from the visible, institutional church) – has always been a countercultural presence in society. The true church is a voluntary society of individuals who have submitted their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and as such they strive to live by the highest standards of morality and ethics characterized by self-sacrificial love, mutual respect, self-control, charity, humility and compassion, while standing unequivocally for truth. But as Christians we must acknowledge that we cannot impose the values of the Kingdom of God on mainstream society.

Os Guinness's book, *The Case for Civility*, should be required reading for all Christians who take their faith and citizenship responsibilities seriously. As the title suggests, Guinness reminds us that we simply cannot reduce the Christian faith to a political ideology or associate the Gospel of Jesus Christ with any particular party. Furthermore, we cannot adopt the tactics of this world in promoting our social, political and moral agenda. There is no question that tactics such as slander, manipulation, distortion, exaggeration, concealment, intimidation and public ridicule can be quite successful in a political culture such as ours. As Christians, however, we are called to a higher standard, and in the current culture war we should fight boldly and determinedly, but relying only upon the weapons of the Spirit. In faith, we must believe that in the end, truth will prevail.

In 1978 Jean Francois Revel wrote an influential book on geopolitics, *The Totalitarian Temptation*, in which he argued that authoritarianism is the inevitable trend in global politics because regimes such as the USSR have all the advantages in the ongoing propaganda war. Unlike free and open societies such as the US in which there is so much ideological diversity and political dissent, the Soviet Union and other totalitarian governments have complete control over the media, education and culture, and can therefore speak with one voice. Ten years later, of course, Revel was proved wrong with the collapse of the Soviet empire. Although it had ruthlessly suppressed freedom and dissent for decades, in the end the Evil Empire was clearly exposed for what it was, and truth prevailed.

As Christians who are engaged in a culture war in which the minds and souls of millions of people are at stake, we must believe that the One who declared himself to be “the Way, the Truth and Life” will triumph over any and all forces of darkness. Even the political ones.

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