

Born to Win

Christian Socialism

by Ronald L. Dart

I have been fascinated for a long time about the efforts many Christians have made to sort out who they are politically. For the longest time, they were nobody. Then came Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, and politics hasn't recovered from that yet. Now we have a Christian Right and a Christian Left in this country...and I don't know about that.

Nancy Pearcey [in her book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*] made a very strong case that Christians should not allow themselves to be marginalized. And *that* disturbs some people who would rather keep Christianity separated into the *private* sphere of life and *out* of the public eye.

But now that Christians have awakened from their long sleep and considered that perhaps their faith ought to inform the way they vote, there are counter-voices being raised. For one thing, most churches and ministries are recognized as non-profit organizations by the Internal Revenue Service. Therefore, churches are not supposed to support this or that candidate—nor any ballot issue, for that matter. And that raises the interesting question: Well, is it okay for us to preach that abortion is wrong?

These are the rules we run into, and we have to play by them, but we also have every right to discuss *principles*—in church, in print, or on the air. It remains to be seen how long it will be allowed for churches to condemn immoral behavior.

“Hate speech”. That expression is the *shibboleth* of the political left these days. The Constitution, of course, protects speech. Logically, it should even protect *hate* speech. It's bad, it shouldn't take place; but do we have freedom of speech or not? The First Amendment to the Constitution says:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press[...]

Constitution of the United States - Amendment I

Now, what are we supposed to make of this? Because what we are starting to run into is that it isn't *Congress* that's passing these laws, but *the Courts* who are making the laws that somehow abridge our constitutional rights to say whatever we please.

Of course, I understand that whenever you're accepting 501(c)(3) status (which means you're a non-profit with a tax deduction for contributions) that you accept certain limitations, because the public should not be supporting this or that candidate (at least, in theory, but I don't know *how in the world* anybody's ever going to make that work).

So, in spite of all this, where do Christians fit in the political spectrum? Are they more conservative than liberal, or more liberal than conservative? Are they more socialist than nationalist?

Richard Neuhaus wrote a column not so long ago in the journal *First Things*, and it clarified, for me, at least one issue. He cited Eugene Carson Blake who was, in his day, a major spokesman for the “oldline Protestant establishment”. Blake, he said:

[...] was complaining one day about the lack of compassion among conservatives who whined about high taxes. “I love to pay taxes,” he said. “Taxes are the way we help government to help people. I wish I could pay twice as much in income tax as I do.”

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

When I read that, I gaped at it. I thought, Is Neuhaus quoting him correctly? (And I have too much respect for him to think he wasn't.) Well, Neuhaus, being very much the junior of this gentleman:

[...] hesitantly suggested that the Treasury Department would gladly accept his check for the extra money he wanted to give the government. “That,” he dismissively responded, “would be quixotic. In a just society, I would be *required* to pay higher taxes.”

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

Now, I'll confess, I'm still trying to work that out. But when I read this, I suddenly came to understand something that had escaped me before: There is a marked difference between a *just* society and a *compassionate* one. Blake seemed fine with giving more money as long as *everyone* is required to do so. But, of course, ours is not a just society, because some are *required* to give more than others. Certainly the rich are required to give more money into the system than the poor are. So does that make us an *unjust* society?

Now, you hear a lot of talk in some circles about what's called “social justice”. It is, in effect, another *shibboleth* of the left. Neuhaus went on to say:

The notion that liberals are caring and compassionate while conservatives are selfish and hard-hearted is still being peddled long after its sell-by date. For instance, a day hardly passes that one does not read an article about the need for evangelical Protestants or Catholics to close the gap between the conservative pro-life cause and the liberal “social justice agenda.”

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

Now, I hadn't really got clear before this the distinction between compassion and social justice. Do you remember when George Bush first ran for president? He ran on a ticket labeled “Compassionate Conservatism”. The Left *hated* him for that (*before* they hated him on the Iraq War). Justice (including social justice, by the way) is blind. Compassion is not. Justice wants to treat everyone the same. Now, that's the meaning behind justice being blind. And you've probably seen these great statues of Madame Justice, with scales in her hand and a blindfold on, so she's not taking into consideration who this person is who is coming for justice. Compassion looks at people. Justice wants to treat everybody the same. Compassion does not. Compassion recognizes the difference between need and no need. Social justice treats people as members of a class. Compassion treats them as persons.

Now, when we begin to understand this, perhaps we can sit back, put our feet up, and think for a while about just what *kind* of a society do we want—and what kind of person am I? Do I really want to treat people as members of a class? Or would I not rather treat them as persons?

Social justice relies on government. Compassion relies on people. But, you see, the government is not a person; it is a *system*. It cannot feel, therefore it *cannot* have compassion. Compassion is *absolutely impossible* for a government or a state. It is a *human* emotion, and the government is not human—no matter how many humans are involved in the administration of it. In the absence of compassion, the government can only *coerce* behavior. And that’s what lies behind Blake’s incomprehensible statement: “I love to pay taxes. Taxes are the way we help government to help people. I wish I could pay twice as much in income tax as I do.” Good grief. You know, I wouldn’t mind him thinking that way if it wasn’t for the fact that he thinks *I should, too*. Neuhaus went on to say:

There is a growing literature demonstrating that conservatives are much more generous in helping people in need than are liberals.

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

Now, I know that is going to infuriate some people, but listen to what Neuhaus says.

The record of those further to the left than liberal is even clearer. In our little book of 1975, *To Empower People*, Peter Berger and I argued that effective help required a major role for “mediating institutions” [...]

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

(Now, I’ve heard that expression before, and I’m not sure where it originated. But I now do begin to understand what it means.)

[...] “mediating institutions”, meaning the nongovernmental and people-sized associations—for example, families, churches, voluntary groups of all kinds—through which people routinely care for one another and for others in distant lands.

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

Now I call to the stand as my witness Hurricane Katrina and FEMA. Where in the world would the refugees out of New Orleans have been without the mediating institutions: churches and charities? In Tyler, Texas (where I live) FEMA was not putting anybody up. But the churches were. The churches were opening their family life centers. They were putting cots in there. They were feeding people. There was *one* shelter...out of five shelters in Tyler after Hurricane Katrina, four of them were in churches, and the fifth one was at a university where the people were being *fed* by the churches. So it’s the mediating institutions...I don’t know why “mediating”; it’s the *charitable* institutions that actually were taking care of people—because they were human. They had compassion, and they looked at the people coming out of New Orleans as individuals—not as a *class* of people.

Richard Neuhaus went on to cite Arthur C. Brooks, who is a professor at Syracuse University. It turns out he supports Neuhaus’ contention with what is called “massive statistical data and the most detailed analysis.” The title of his new book is *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism: America’s Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn’t, and Why It Matters*.

Now, what was *really* interesting to me about this book is he started out with the opposite assumption. Neuhaus tell us that:

Prof. Brooks started his study some years ago with the conventional assumption that liberals cared and conservatives didn't. He wanted to find out why that should be. What he found out is that the assumption is dead wrong. Quite the opposite is the case, and very dramatically so. Measured by the giving of money, time, and practical help, those who by the usual criteria are defined as conservative are way, way ahead of their liberal cousins.

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

Now, what Neuhaus found (and I'm finding this true myself) is that:

For many on the left, charity is a dirty word. What we need, they say, is justice, not charity, which then excuses them from the tasks of charity.

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

And, you know, I guess that would be easier, wouldn't it? "I don't have to give money to a panhandler on the street. Tell him to go to a government-paid shelter where taxpayers take care of it." "I don't have to help me neighbor who is out of work down the road. Let him go get his unemployment insurance. Let the government take care of this issue." "There's not need for *compassion*. There's not need for *charity*. All we need is justice."

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not so sure that I *really* want to get what I deserve out of life at every turn in the road. There have been several turns in my road where what I *really* wanted was compassion, forgiveness, mercy—not justice. Well, Richard Neuhaus goes on to point out the obvious.

Other Americans, however, give more than a quarter trillion dollars a year to charity, not counting the gift of time and practical help. Not incidentally, the poor are, relative to their resources, more generous than the rich.

Richard John Neuhaus - Those Uncaring Conservatives

You know, I tumbled to that a long time ago. Being in a ministry that accepts donations large and small, I have long marveled at the way poor people give. And in our ministry we don't do any hard-sell fund-raising. We don't use fund-raising gimmicks. We don't beat the drum and try to squeeze people for the last dollar. We have people who just decide to give. We help them, they want to help other people, and so they feel like they should give to help. And one of the more astonishing things, to me, has been the way some *prisoners* give.

We provide a free transcript service to men in prison, because they usually aren't allowed to receive recorded media. For you, you can write or call us and we'll send you a free cassette tape of this program (or, rather, a CD). These guys can't get that; they need something in *print*. Now, we make it free to them, really, because these folks have a hard time scraping up money for a *postage stamp*. They may have a job inside, but they are only paid pennies per hour. And sometimes they need what they earn for just a little extra *food*. So imagine my surprise when a couple of these guys go to all the trouble to give us five dollars. It may not seem like a lot of money. But I promise you, it is a very large amount of money to a prisoner.

Now, Jesus made a major point one day of calling his disciples' attention to this same issue. They were watching people go by and throw large sums of money into the treasury at the Temple. And here comes

a poor widow who walks up there and throws two of the smallest coins into the treasury and goes on. And Jesus calls his disciples attention and says:

Mark 12

KJ2000

⁴³ [...] Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow has cast more in, than all they who have cast into the treasury:

⁴⁴ For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her poverty did cast in all that she had, even all her living.

He didn't call her back and give her her money back, for that would have been to belittle her contribution that she made—to *God* and not to men. Well, going on with what Brooks said. He said:

These statistics are impressive, and belie most of the claims about the selfishness of our nation. That said, an identifiable and sizeable minority of Americans are *not* charitable. While 225 million Americans give away money each year, the other 75 million *never* give away money to any causes, charities, or churches. Further, 130 million Americans never volunteer their time.

Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism: America's Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters

You see, the only way you get money or time from these people is to take it away in the form of taxation. Basically, Neuhaus says:

When one runs all the data and the all the variables through the various analytical grids, it turns out that there are four factors that drive generosity to others. First, the caring are more religiously committed than those who do not give of their time and money. Second, they believe that helping others is more a personal than governmental responsibility. Third, they come from strong families where they have learned the virtue of generosity. And fourth, they believe in helping people to help themselves.

Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism

And, you see, you *can do that* if you're doing it person-to-person—if you're working with *people* instead of *classes* of people. And also, Professor Brooks, towards the end of his book, sums up “the five major facts about charity and politics.”

First, there is a huge “charity gap” that follows religion: On average, religious people are far more charitable than secularists with their time and money. Religious people are more generous in informal ways as well, such as giving blood, giving money to family members, and behaving honestly. Religious people are far more likely than secularists to be politically conservative. Second, people who believe—as liberals often do—that the government should equalize income give and volunteer far less than people who do not believe this. Third, the American working poor are, relative to their income, very generous. The nonworking poor, however—those on public assistance instead of earning low wages—give at extremely low levels. The charitable working poor tend to be far more politically conservative than the nonworking poor.

Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism

We're beginning to understand, I think, where the idea of "compassionate conservatism" comes from.

Fourth, charitable giving is learned, reinforced, and practiced within intact families—especially religious families. Secularism and family breakdown are far less prevalent among conservatives than liberals. Fifth, Europeans are far less personally charitable than people in the U.S. Europeans are also, on average, far to the political left of Americans. The net result of these five facts is that conservatives generally behave more charitably than liberals, especially with respect to money donations.

Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism

So, if you're a Christian, what does your worldview say about all this? After all, we think we are supposed to *give*, not wait for the government to come and take it away from us. You know, according to one source:

Social justice refers to concept of a just society, where "justice" refers to more than just the administration of laws. It is based on the idea of a society which gives individuals and groups fair treatment and a just share of the benefits of society.

"Social Justice" - Wikipedia

Now, there's no explanation here about what constitutes a "just share" of the benefits of society. The whole idea of Communism was "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." And we all now what happened to Marxism; it has collapsed *spectacularly* within our own generation. From this same source (which, by the way, is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia):

Socialism refers to a broad array of doctrines or political movements that envisage a socio-economic system in which property and the distribution of wealth are subject to control by the community. This control may be either direct—exercised through popular collectives such as workers' councils—or indirect—exercised on behalf of the people by the state. As an economic system, socialism is often characterized by state or worker ownership of the means of production.

"Socialism" - Wikipedia

Now, it doesn't take very long to see what is wrong with this from a *Christian worldview*. In the first place, the Christian faith is *strong* in support of the weak. Is that liberal? Is that conservative? Is that socialistic?

There is this *marvelous* parable of Jesus, where he looks ahead into the future to the time of his coming in his glory with all the angels, and sitting on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations are gathered before him, and he separates the people from one another like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. This is in Matthew 25, verse 33:

Matthew 25

NIV '84

³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right [*the sheep*], "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Oh, wow! This is wonderful. This is when we actually get to see Jesus. It's when we come into his presence; when we inherit the Kingdom of God. What did we have to do to get that? Well, there are those who would say, "Nothing at all." And they're right up to a point, but then Jesus goes on to say this:

Matthew 25

NIV '84

³⁵ "For [*Which means it's because of this.*] I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,
³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."
³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?
³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?
³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"
⁴⁰ The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

So why is this not socialism? It addresses many of the *concerns* of socialism. It's not socialism because it is *personal*, not governmental. Why should we be blessed for paying our taxes? Taxes are *taken* from us; they are not *given* to somebody to help. And when you actually give clothes to somebody who doesn't have warm clothes to wear in the winter-time, that's a *personal* thing. *You* do that. And you have the option of *not* doing it. Therefore, what Christ describes is not socialism; it is personal compassion. You gain no cachet from Christ by being taxed, by having money taken from you and given to the poor. In the ideal world of the Bible, there were no taxes.

"But wait, wait. Wasn't there a tithe?" Yes, there was a tithe. But the tithe was voluntary. "But wait, wait. Wasn't the tithe a law?" Yes, it was, but the only enforcers of that law were God and nature. There was no Internal Revenue Service to collect the tithe. You could choose not to tithe and leave God's blessing off of your economic life. There's a marvelous statement in Malachi, the third chapter, about this [**Malachi 3:7–12**]*—*about why is all this stuff going wrong in your life. Why is it that you're sowing all these crops, you're doing all this stuff, and you don't have enough to eat? "It's because you're *stealing* from me", God said.

You know, every Christian voluntarily and personally enters covenant with Jesus Christ. Our fellowship—even with one another, which we call the church—depends *first* on covenant with Christ. Now, it isn't clear to me why a disciple of Jesus would want to omit *any portion of his life* from that covenant—be it family; be it career; be it economic, investments, money; you name it. Jesus said:

John 14

AKJV

¹⁵ If you love me, keep my commandments.

So, if you don't love him, don't bother. There is no gain from grudging obedience. There is no gain to you from coerced obedience. You make no points with Jesus Christ by paying your taxes so *the government* can help the poor. You know, the Old Testament Law had *many* obligations to the poor, but *everything* was voluntary. For example, in Leviticus, the 23rd chapter, he says:

Leviticus 23

AKJV

²² And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not make clean riddance of the

corners of your field when you reap, neither shall you gather any gleanings of your harvest: you shall leave them to the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

So if you were poor, or you were a sojourner coming through, and you were out of money and you had nothing to eat, you could actually go out into a man's field and collect gleanings from the corners of a man's field. They were yours to take. But there was no obligation to carry it to the poor. They had to come and get it.

I think that "Christian Socialism" is an oxymoron; because every sacrifice made by a Christian must be voluntary, not coerced. That's my worldview; what's yours?

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