



Jesus: Liberal or Conservative?

by Ronald L. Dart

Was Jesus a liberal or a conservative? Looking around the political landscape today, you would sort of think that he must have been one or the other, because there are people out there who are Christians who are take very strong right or very strong left positions. And since they're Christians, and they're supposed to be following Jesus, then *one* of those groups must be wrong about *something*. Because Jesus can't be both places, can he?

Now, I feel fairly sure that the words "liberal" and "conservative" did not mean the same things when Jesus was carrying out his earthly ministry as it does today. In fact, today, both terms are basically kind of pejorative. I mean, if you say somebody is "a *liberal*" you're insulting him. If you say, "he's a *conservative*", well, that's putting him down. Well, what do they mean, even today, in the political climate? If you go the dictionary and look them up, you'll get one definition. If you listen in on the talk shows and the talking heads on Sunday morning or on weekday nights, you might get something else.

A conservative, defined, to supposed to be someone who is "disposed to preserve existing conditions and institutions, or to restore traditional ones, or to limit change." Now, when you look at the political landscape, I'm surprised anyone wants to accept the label of conservative—*especially* Christians. Oh sure, we want to preserve and restore traditional values and institutions. We think traditional morality is a good thing. We think the family is a wonderful thing. And we want to preserve and restore those things. But, surely we don't want to preserve the status quo. Nor do we wish to limit change. Surely, not Christians.

"Conservative" is a *useless* label, frankly, unless we understand what it is we're trying to conserve. You don't understand what I'm saying? Well, how long has abortion been the law of the land—that it's quite all right for a woman to have an abortion; it's a matter of her choice and her doctors whether she has an abortion? It has been that way for a long time now—way over 20 years. Now, since that is the status quo, then aren't the people who are fighting to preserve abortion conservative? Because they are trying to conserve *what is*; they're trying to conserve this institution of abortion, which is now the status quo—the law of the land; what's expected.

You know, there are a lot of good people in this country who are Democrats and a lot of good people who are Republicans. And Christians, in *my* opinion, are making a big mistake by staking out a "Christian political position"—a position on the political right or the political left. Dedicated Christians are, by nature or in the nature of things, ideologues and, consequently, we just don't have the pragmatism to work effectively in the political arena because there's a lot of lying that goes on in there. And people who go into the political arena and try to tell the truth are very likely to turn themselves into victims. Now, Christians can turn up at the meetings of both political parties. And if they did turn up in both places, they might be able to heal some of the terrible political divisions in the country. But the problem is: If you take a look at us Christians in the world, we have to be about the worst peacemakers around. We can't make peace among one another; why in the world should anyone think that we could ever make peace among political parties? We've all got hopes of peace in Northern Ireland and between the Protestants and Catholics over there. It's easy to forget, though, that that long, long battle has been a battle between Christians. But, nevertheless, Jesus said:

Matthew 5

AKJV

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

And, you know, if you're really serious about abortion, the place to deal with it is at the intellectual level in *both* parties. You will never get anything done about abortion—one way or the other—by making it a *party* issue. I would think that would be clear by now, but I don't see any signs of it starting to dawn on anyone. Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican; I am *independent* politically. As a disciple of Jesus—as an evangelist, as it were—as a preacher of Christian values, I don't feel it's my job to be in one political party or the other. Now liberals and conservatives in this world are defined by political values. If you're a Republican, you're a conservative, and if you're a Democrat, you're a liberal...supposedly. But that brings me back to my original question (and this is why I'm not a Republican or a Democrat): What about Jesus? Was Jesus a liberal or was Jesus a conservative?

In the Sermon on the Mount—which has to be the most fundamental of Jesus' teachings—he had this to say:

Matthew 5

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¹⁷ Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

¹⁸ For truly I say to you, Till heaven and earth pass, [...]

Now, they have passed yet, right? Check out the window and see if they are still there.

Matthew 5

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¹⁸ [...] Till heaven and earth pass, one stroke or one pronounciation mark shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

¹⁹ Whoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Okay, we've got the picture, right? What Jesus is taking here is a *strong, conservative* position. "No, the law hasn't been done away with. I'm not come for that purpose. I have come to actually *strengthen* the law. I'm come to fulfill it—to make it stronger." And if you read through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, you come to a very strong conclusion he did exactly that. Jesus' approach to the law was really pretty strict. And he said not only did he not come to do away with parts of it, he came to do away with *none* of it—not one jot, not one tittle. Now, I would say that is a very strong, conservative position. In the same speech, Jesus went on to say:

Matthew 5

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²⁷ You have heard that it was said by them of old time, You shall not commit adultery:

²⁸ But I say to you, That whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

The way some people talk about these things nowadays, you would think the more liberal position would be to, sort of, *relax* the rules on adultery and say, "Well, adultery is wrong. But if you're in love, maybe it's not that big a deal." But Jesus didn't take that approach. He didn't relax it. If anything, he

tightened the screws down a little bit further on it. Now, this is a reaffirmation of traditional moral values. And not only that, but the argument is for the *internalization* of these values. Now, would you agree with me that that's a pretty strong conservative position? It's especially true when you look at the definition of "liberal". There's a whole line of things in the dictionary under liberal. One of them says, "free of or not bound by traditional or conventional ideas, values, etc.; open minded." Now, that's a definition of a liberal. And if you would go apply this to what Jesus said about adultery and what he said about the law, you would never conclude from that Jesus is really a liberal, would you? Well, there's more to know about this man—and this is where the problem begins to arise. In Mark, the seventh chapter:

Matthew 5

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¹ Then came together to him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem.

² And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashed, hands, they found fault.

³ For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders.

Okay, so we would say the Pharisees, then, were conservative, wouldn't we? They were holding fast to the tradition of the elders and they were very critical of some of Jesus' disciples because, well, they were liberals. They weren't washing their hands before they eat, according to the tradition of the elders.

Matthew 5

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⁴ And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brazen vessels, and of tables.

⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not your disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?

Now, here is a traditional belief. Jesus' disciples paid no attention to it. Jesus cared nothing for it. For Jesus, what was important was the heart, not the hands. He said:

Matthew 5

AKJV

¹⁸ [...] Do you not perceive, that whatever thing from without enters into the man, it cannot defile him;

¹⁹ Because it enters not into his heart, but into the belly, and goes out into the draught, purging all meats?

²⁰ And he said, That which comes out of the man, that defiles the man.

²¹ For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,

²² Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness:

²³ All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

Here we are. Remember the definition of a liberal? "Free of or not bound by traditional or conventional ideas, values, etc.; open minded." On this occasion, Jesus was liberal—at least, he was liberal in relation to the scribes, the Pharisees, and their definitions of tradition, liberality, and and so forth. They

looked upon Jesus and upon his disciples as liberals. They themselves were, obviously, conservative. But look at the *values* that Jesus was advancing here. He said those things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness (or lying), and blasphemies.

All these *immoral* behaviors, Jesus said, defile a man. So he was liberal and he was conservative. How do you reconcile these things? Well, if you look around our political scene today, the assumption is that you can't. You're either a liberal or you are a conservative. It doesn't occur to people that you can *be* liberal and *be* conservative at same time. In Matthew, chapter five and verse 31, Jesus said:

Matthew 5

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³¹ It has been said, Whoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorce:

³² But I say to you, That whoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery: and whoever shall marry her that is divorced commits adultery.

Now, here's a major social issue that we face today. You know, divorce is rampant across our land. I think, maybe, more marriages are ending in divorce now than aren't, the way things are going. Now, is it liberal or conservative to restrict divorce? Is it a liberal attitude to allow more divorces—make divorce easier? Well, Jesus' approach is that divorce, for any reason except where there has been sexual uncleanness in a marriage, is *wrong*. And if you marry someone who is put away for any other reason, you commit adultery. I consider that very strict—not at all liberal. Remember the definition: “not strict or rigorous; free.” So Jesus was not a liberal. On the other hand, though, he said this:

Matthew 11

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²⁸ Come to me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke on you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest to your souls.

³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

“Liberal: not strict or rigorous, but free.” This certainly sounds liberal—a *freeing* of the heavy burdens; turning people loose from the burdens that other people have laid upon them. I suppose, in a way, the question of how heavy the burden is is a relative term; it's comparative. In Matthew 23, he spoke to a crowd around him and his disciples saying:

Matthew 23

AKJV

² [...] The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:

Just to take a moment to explain what that means: that Moses was the governor of Israel in the olden times; he was the chief judge. And as the chief judge, he had the responsibility for making decisions based upon how the law should be kept—whether or not this act was a violation of law, what about liabilities for actions that people do—so Moses' seat is, essentially, the judiciary. He said:

Matthew 23

AKJV

² [...] The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: [*They are the official judiciary of this community.*]

³ All therefore whatever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not you after their works: for they say, and do not.

⁴ For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

When you look at this as a question of liberal or conservative, one of the things that Jesus did even—though he was conservative—was to ease burdens, which is a liberal act. And his thoughts in these areas were liberal. Another definition of liberal is, “freely-given and abundantly generous.” Here’s a question: Can anything be more Christian than abundant giving and generosity? Well, of course not. The problem in our society is that *political* liberalism has the government as the giver of all good and perfect gifts, whereas the Bible tells us that the Father of lights—God the Father—is the giver of every good and every perfect gift [James 1:17]. But the government gives us welfare, and Social Security, and Medicaid, and aid for dependent children. And all this is the government giving us all these good things, and this is liberal. Of course, I call this “O.P.M. liberalism”—“O.P.M.” standing for “other people’s money”. It’s very easy to be liberal, to be generous, to be free with *other* people’s money.

Now, the Christian is at once liberal and conservative when it comes to the poor and the downtrodden. The Christian is led to give out of his own pocket. The Christian is led to go out there and find people who are sick and who are hurting and to help them find ways of straightening out their lives. The Christian is motivated to go out there and find families that are splitting up, or children that are being left alone, and do something about helping these people out. The Christian is led to give out of his own pocket. But what he’ll want to do is to put the poor on their feet, to put them to work, to make them self-sufficient—a liberal value on one hand, a conservative value on the other (at least the way people look at it in today’s world) and yet they can exist in same person. A Christian can be compassionate—which is a liberal virtue. But compassion is a *human* emotion and therefore government (which is a *system* and not human) cannot have compassion.

I hear politicians talk about “compassion” in government. I feel like putting my hand on my wallet, because what they’re talking about is using *your* money and *my* money to exercise compassion through a governmental system over which *they* have control. And they use your money and my money to *strengthen* their control over the system. As Christians, we have a deep and abiding interest in helping the poor and the downtrodden of the earth. But I’ll tell you: When we trust the government to do *for* us what we should do *for ourselves*, we have made a big mistake. And I really believe that it’s right here that Christians become confused about their political liberalism or conservatism. They are thinking in terms of *the government* showing compassion or *the government* exercising Christian virtues—and the government can’t. That’s something that can only be done by *people*. Listen to Jesus. In Matthew 25 and verse 31, he said this:

Matthew 25

AKJV

³¹ When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory:

³² And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats:

³³ And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

³⁴ Then shall the King say to them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

³⁵ For [...]

“For...” There’s a definite connection here. There’s a causal relationship between inheriting the kingdom and what follows. He said, “Come and inherit this...”:

Matthew 25

KJ2000

³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in:

³⁶ Naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came unto me.

Every one of the acts described here is a liberal act. It's a giving act. It's the kind of things that people tend to associate with liberal causes, isn't it?

Matthew 25

KJ2000

³⁷ Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we you hungry, and fed you? or thirsty, and gave you drink?

³⁸ When saw we you a stranger, and took you in? or naked, and clothed you?

³⁹ Or when saw we you sick, or in prison, and came unto you? [*I don't remember doing that, Lord.*]

⁴⁰ And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Since you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.

Now, all these things are the kind of things that liberals say they stand for. But you have to keep in mind that, at the *political* level, liberals want to do this with *your* money with *my* money—*our* money as opposed to doing it themselves. For the Christian, these values are face-to-face, belly-to-belly, hand-to-hand. We go out there, we see people, and we help people in person—up close and personal. Conservatives sometimes give the impression they don't want to do these things at all. The truth is, though, that Jesus was conservative *and* liberal. The truth is that Jesus was not *a* conservative or *a* liberal, because these labels we hang on people are descriptive of *political* positions. But Jesus was able to balance conservative and liberal values right inside his own person. He was a man who was able to balance these things—to choose *right* behavior instead of politically-correct behavior. He would support *intensely* basic moral values, while looking forward and thinking progressively at the same time. But then, Jesus was not a politician. Because his concern, at all times, was: What is the right thing to do? Even to the death.

Now to all you Christian conservatives and liberals out there: Once you allow yourself to be identified as a “Christian conservative” or a “Christian liberal”, you have lost your message, your witness, and your testimony. Why would I say that? Well, because you've become predictable, and people can dismiss your arguments because they say, “Oh, well, he's a conservative.” “Well, he's just another liberal.” They can hang a label on you and they don't have to listen to you anymore. Now, if you don't think I'm telling you the truth, just start watching some of the political programs on television. Watch the Sunday morning hour on *This Week* with David...it isn't David Brinkley anymore...but with *This Week* or with *Meet the Press* and listen to these people talk. And if you close your eyes and listen, even though you don't know what political party they are, they won't be three or four sentences into whatever they're being asked or talking about, before you can figure it out. You know there are a liberal, you know there are conservative, and they preach the party line. In fact, a lot of times you can sit and listen carefully and you can hear the sound bites that have been preprogrammed—the ones that they've gotten as talking points from whoever is organizing the work and the message for the day. They're not coming in there concerned about truth. What they're coming in there concerned about is how we *perceive them* and whether or not they can convince us that they're going to give us what we want so that, maybe, we will vote for them.

But the problem, see, is—as you listen to these programs and people are talking about whatever the issue may be (from presidential character to abortion to whatever the issue of the day is)—you don't

listen after a while. You hear a person's position, and once that resonates with you, you tend to turn them off. If you are of the same belief, you already know what they're going to say. Maybe you'll sit there and cheer them on. I find myself sometimes, when I hear somebody just spouting the party line on there, I take my little clicker up and hit the mute and I turn them off. Because I get tired, sometimes, of all the argument.

Politics in this country has become so polarized that, on any issue, you can identify a person's party politics within a few minutes at the beginning of any conversation. And having done so, the rest of what he or she says is largely *meaningless*. Let a Republican criticize a Republican president, or let a Democrat criticize a Democratic president, and they gain *instant credibility*. All of a sudden you think, "This person just might be telling us the truth, because he is not spouting the party line. He's swimming upstream." We think, "This person might be a thinker, not just a talker."

You know, there are times in watching the political process in this country that I just *yearn* for an objective commentator. They always go out and find ideologues on both sides of the issue and they stand there talking past one another all the time—never communicating. They fight for their side; they don't *think*. And it's a special shame that Christians have allowed their faith to be co-opted by the political process. Christians in our society should be conservative and liberal and should be the reconciling of these two great values as expressed in our faith. But as soon as we become *a* conservative or *a* liberal, we give up our message to political ideology. Because *now* we have to be *one or the other*. We can't balance the great values of conservative and liberal thought down through the generations—but particularly the liberalism and the conservatism of our master, Jesus Christ. And, as a result, we're no longer critical of the *stupid* ideas of our own party. We can always find the stupid ideas of the other one. But our best ideas get dismissed because they're seen as coming from a *partisan* point of view.

You know, if every Christian in this country were to declare himself or herself an independent voter, we might begin to have some influence in the direction this country is going. Right now, politicians don't have to worry of much about Christians except in the primaries. They will *pander* to us—on the religious right or on the religious left—all the way through the primaries and then they will ignore us in the general election campaign, and they *sure* ignore us once they get in office. They can do that because we've let ourselves be co-opted into this or that political party, this or that political ideology. So the politicians run to the right in the primaries and move to the center in the general elections. The Democratic politicians do exactly the opposite. So we might as well make up our minds that, as long as we fall for this nonsense, they will keep doing it and we will keep on electing *hypocrites*. The solution? Vote for the man who will tell you the truth—who shows some integrity, some character. He may not agree with you on some issues that you think are important, but *he won't lie to you*. They think we are so selfish that we are not willing to vote for the interests of others, but only for ourselves. And so far we have proven them right.

The losers will keep on voting for the liars—whether the liars be liberal or conservative—and the winners will vote for the truth. It's time Christian people started acting like *winners*.

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