

Reclaiming Christianity

by: *Ronald L. Dart*

I recently came across an article titled "*Religious Left's Battle Cry: Reclaim Christianity.*" Now I thought for sure whoever was saying that was mis-characterizing what people are doing, so I decided that I'll look it up. I went up on the Internet and I searched on "Reclaim Christianity," and, sure enough, that is precisely what a lot of progressive religious figures are saying. They apparently got together and made this their talking points. It isn't too much at all to call it a battle cry. In fact, on the Internet there are over 500 sites that trumpet "reclaim Christianity." Now speaking as a Christian, that sounds a bit absurd to me. I don't consider myself a part of either the Religious Right or the Religious Left. I find on the political scene ideas that are either compatible with the Christian faith or anathema to the Christian faith, and some I can live with while I don't like them very much. And the difference doesn't track perfectly along Democrat or Republican party lines. To me, the arbiter of all my values is the Bible applied. By that I mean my external value system is informed by the Bible. That being the case, my choices in the voting both are mostly a matter of choosing between two unpleasant alternatives. Perhaps you could call it the lesser of two evils.

Now the term, the Religious Left, doesn't sound any better than the Religious Right. The fact is, some people think Christianity has corrupted politics – that's the big problem that the Religious left has got. They say that the Religious Right has corrupted politics. On the other hand, it could be that religion has been corrupted by politics. Whatever, the relationship is sour. But the idea of reclaiming Christianity still sounds odd to me. The article in question was in *Newsmax* magazine; the September 2006 edition. It was written by Peter Davidson. He said "After decades in the proverbial wilderness, the Religious Left is once again on the march, reaching out to Christian liberals in a crusade to regain its clout in the political arena." But the very idea of this, then, renders the phrase "reclaim Christianity" silly. The issue is plainly not Christianity; it's politics.

Davidson goes on to say "For most of American history, the Religious Left wielded enormous political clout. They were the dominant moral force behind causes like abolition, women's suffrage, labor reform, civil rights, and the anti-war and nuclear disarmament movements of the 1960s and early '70s. They even urged accommodation with godless communism." Now I think those making this claim, may be projecting their current beliefs back into the era. I'm not even sure that the great divide between the Religious left and the Religious Right existed in the days of the abolition movement. I have no doubt that Christians, broadly speaking, were involved in these issues. They are not Right or Left

issues; they are moral issues and all Christians speak to them. But in the last half of the 20th Century, the division between Left and Right did solidify. Davidson continues, "While the evangelical liberals were marching for social justice and world peace, their counterparts on the right were too busy saving souls to become politically involved." He quotes Jerry Falwell: "Preachers are not called upon to be politicians, but soul winners. Nowhere are we commissioned to be reform externals."

So what happened? According to Davidson, "In the mid-seventies the Religious Left, its liberal agenda, ascendent, if not totally triumphant, went into retreat. After all, it had won on civil rights and on abortion with *Roe v Wade*. It had won on school prayer with a banning of Bible reading in public schools." Now think about that. The Religious Left had won on school prayer with the banning of Bible reading in public schools – that's a win. What religious liberals didn't see coming, however, was the firestorm from the religious and the secular right. The U.S. Supreme Court's decisions that took prayer and Bible reading out of public schools infuriated them and *Roe v Wade* propelled them to action. In Virginia, Falwell launched the Moral Majority. While liberal Democrats treated their outrage with ridicule and contempt, the Moral Majority and its successor, the Christian Coalition, were fervent embraced by conservative Republicans like Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush. In the early 1980s the Religious Left was on the road to political irrelevance. You know, the way all this is characterized seems misleading to me. In her book, Total Truth, Nancy Pearcey has a chapter titled "When America Met Christianity Guess Who Won?" Her thesis is that the American political movement won. That the Christian faith in this country became Americanized.

Now there's a huge difference between the church tending to impose its values on a civil society and a church adopting the values of civil society as a model upon which it is organized and upon which it operates. No one seems to realize how thoroughly this process has corrupted the Christian faith. They don't realize it on the Left and they don't realize it on the Right. It should be clear to any thoughtful soul that right and wrong are defined somewhere and that there are issues that can be defined as social justice that work with the Bible and other ideas of social justice that don't. What happened was that the political left, accompanied by a cohort of Christians – mind you; understand what I'm saying – the Political Left...Political Left accompanied by a cohort of Christians went abridge too far. The Religious Left was on the road to political irrelevance mainly because they had aligned themselves with a losing cause. They thought they had claimed the moral high ground on behalf of the Christian faith. They hadn't. Leftists of a very different sort had carried them with them, not to a moral high ground, but to a moral morass that would suck them all down. What they were claiming was a Leftist view of social justice which was not entirely informed by Christian principles or biblical law. And so a large number of Christians abandoned their agenda as unchristian. Now the article goes on to cite a grass roots organization called Christian Alliance for Progress (CAP), the movement to reclaim Christianity and transform American politics – that's what they call themselves and call the

movement that they are involved in. A movement to reclaim Christianity and transform American politics.

Now that is really a curious goal for a religious, a Christian, organization. But there it is. It seems to fit the broad theme of liberal Christianity so I went to their website to see what in the world they had to say. Now I might add, this is not off-the-wall, out-of-the-way stuff. The themes are reflected across the liberal Christian landscape. You'll find it all over the place. They are oddly consonant with what you hear from many secular talking heads on television. One of the things, for example, they call for is this: equality of gays and lesbians. They go on to make this point. "Jesus taught equality, justice and obligation. We accept Jesus call to love one another and to welcome all God's children at the table. As Christians, we are all called to follow Jesus' commandment to *Love one another as I have loved you.*' Jesus welcomed women, tax collectors, Pharisees, and lepers at his table. His behavior indicted those who inflicted hurt on others as they piously honored the purity of his day. Following Jesus' example, we declare that using the popular 'purity codes' of today, such as sexual orientation, to ostracize and marginalize people is immoral." Now, [that's the end of that quotation] I find much to agree with here, but I see an odd combination. He put together this group called women, tax collectors, Pharisees, and lepers. Lepers were sick, tax collectors...well, they were thieves, Pharisees were self-righteous prigs and women...well, women. Now here is the point; it's from the Bible; Luke: 15, "*Then drew near to him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receives sinners, and eats with them.*" That Jesus had people of all stripes at his table says nothing about the morality of these people, whether what they were doing was right or whether it was wrong. Would Jesus have included homosexuals? No doubt he would, but he would have accepted them as sinners who needed repentance and who needed his help. He would have accepted a woman who had been taken in adultery, but when everybody had judged her but wouldn't condemn her, Jesus said "*Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" Jesus' refusal to condemn was combined with a call to repentance. I think those people who actual ban homosexuals from their company are fringe element. A larger number of Christians would consider homosexuals as sinners who need the grace of Jesus and they need to repent of their conduct. Now is this a concept of the Religious Right? Or are we dealing with a concept of the Religious Left that sin doesn't matter?

Here's another item from the Christian Alliance for Progress: "Honoring the Sanctity of Childbearing Decisions." I always get a little edgy when I see the word 'sanctity' start cropping up in these things because it obviously comes from the biblical idea of sanctification or holiness. The problem is, how can you possibly declare something as sacred or sanctified that the Bible doesn't discuss? And I don't recall anything in the Bible about "Childbearing Decisions." People got married, they had children, they wanted children, the more children the better. Anyway, they go on to say "Jesus taught compassion, responsibility, and equality. Following his call, we support responsible, compassionate programs that are genuinely effective in helping prevent unintended pregnancy, an outcome

no woman wants. We affirm that each woman's body belongs to herself. No woman should be forced either to bear a child or to terminate a pregnancy.”

Now that last caught me for a moment because I'm completely unaware of any laws in the United States that mandate the termination of a pregnancy. Why is that in here? Well, it's because you've got to give both sides of this. They could have just said “no woman should be forced to bear a child” and they would have said everything, but they had to tack this other on in order to give the appearance of being equal. Now, I think most of us would agree with the sentiment that no woman should be forced to bear a child, but let me go on with their statement. “No one is ‘for’ abortions. Most abortions are attended by an enormous amount of emotional pain. But we think the issue is the effective prevention of unintended pregnancy, not criminalizing desperate pregnant women or the medical professions who help them.”

Now, there's just a huge ‘mud quotient’ in this particular statement. A lot of unnecessary words tossed in here to kind of pad things and make them feel a little more comfortable. But let me see if I can explain to you how I see this issue. I wrote an article years ago, (I seem to have lost it; I'm sorry) titled “Abortions and the Limits of Law.” The point I was making is that legislators who only have law as their tool – they can only make laws; that's all they have the power to do – sometimes they have to draw arbitrary lines that make enforcement possible. Some of you remember back when we had a 55-mile-an-hour speed limit on all our highways – interstates and everything else. There seemed to be a rationale behind it, but eventually legislators had to give it up. Nobody wanted it, nobody was obeying it to speak of, even some states refusing to enforce it. Now in long ago days some states had no speed limits at all. They had what they called “a reasonable and prudent rule.” I think it was that way in California for a long time. You could get out in the back roads of California and you could drive your car a hundred miles an hour if you weren't endangering anybody. Well, that standard turned out to be too subjective to enforce so California went along with everybody else. They drew an objective line – a speed limit. That gave them something they could take into court that no one could argue with, whether or not it was reasonable and prudent.

Now on this principle, supposing a congress – a state congress, or the United States Congress – agrees that abortion is wrong from the start, but it's unenforceable. Suppose a law was proposed that would make no attempt to control abortion until...say...the third trimester. A woman would have six months, then, in which to make a decision to terminate a pregnancy. Now, mind you, making that law that says you're not going to enforce it until the third trimester says nothing at all about the right or wrong of an abortion prior to that time. All it is saying is, we will not attempt to enforce it prior to this time. But, if the woman did not make the decision in that time period, the fetus was, then, declared a human being whose life deserved protection.

Now we may argue about where we draw that line. You know, at the fourth month, the fifth month, the sixth month or what have you. We don't want the police in your bedroom

or your bathroom, so we propose a reasonable solution to the problem that's raised by the CAP organization. No woman should be forced either to bear a child or to terminate a pregnancy. Would this be accepted by the religious or political left if we said six months you can abort the child in that time and there'll be no consequences; you abort it after that period of time and you're killing a human being? Would the Religious Left or the Political Left accept it? I doubt it. In fact, there are those on the political left who argue it should be legal for a woman and her doctor to kill a newborn in, say, the first twenty-four hours after the child is born. Yeah...really. It's been seriously suggested by one university professor who was a specialist in the field. He thinks that if you get a newborn that is out of the womb and lying on the table there and we see something terribly wrong with the child, that the doctor and the woman should have the right to kill that child right there. Well, they can't. It's against the law. Congress said you can't do that. Well, since it's the business of legislators to draw a line, why not make it 24 days? That gives a person a little more time to see what's going on, to see how the mom is handling it, to see what else is going on, so that a woman doesn't have to drown her children in a bathtub when they're four or five years old. You draw the line at, say, 24 days instead of 24 hours, or you can do it any number of ways; make it 24 months.

Of course, if you have to draw the line, some two-year olds might get aborted. And you know what I mean by that. By the way, in case you're wondering why the Left is exorcized over privacy rights in so many areas, you might consider this. Roe versus Wade was declared on the premise of Right to Privacy. If the government can listen in on your phone call to an Al-Qaeda operative in Iraq, then the Right to Privacy has been breached. And if it can be breached in a phone call, then the Right to Privacy can also be breached in the area of the care of children. And I can't help but wonder, is it possible that the strongest motivation for fighting in, let's say, surveillance, is the Right to Privacy as applied in Roe v Wade? It's a strange thought, but there it is. So, we're going to have to give serious thought to this question, though – the Right to Privacy. And somewhere along the line we're going to have to decide do we really feel that a woman who has not cared enough to terminate her pregnancy in the first six months, can now kill this human being that is developing in her womb and who probably could survive outside of it right now. How far are we going to give a woman the authority, the privacy, to do what she will to her children? Let's think about that.

The Christian Alliance manifesto also calls for universal health care. And there's something important to be learned here. Here's what they said. "Jesus insisted on justice, equality, and care for 'the least of these.' Acting on his teachings, we claim every American must have access to excellent health care." Not just health care; excellent health care. Continuing: "Throughout the gospels, Jesus responded to all who asked him for healing - Roman centurion, blind beggar, anxious parent, hemorrhaging woman, outcast leper, and he asked for nothing in return. We believe that limiting the best medical care to those who can pay the most and burdening those who need healing with enormous indebtedness are completely contrary to the gospels. Jesus the healer calls us to make health and healing available to every citizen." That being the case, every church needs to involve itself in the

health care of the community by doing what it can to provide it. You'd be surprised how many churches and associations are creating clinics where the poor can be cared for...free. Churches and Christians should be free and encouraged to provide the best that medicine can provide for their community, but where is the example in the New Testament of using someone else's money to provide charity for the poor? It is not true that Jesus responded to all who asked him for healing. Someone has not read his Bible. But it is true that he asked for nothing in return. It is also true that he did not refer to people to a government-run clinic. He did what he could for them.

Now, if you really want to see an example of what Jesus had in mind for all this, you could find no better example than the response to Hurricane Katrina. The conventional wisdom is that government failed. Now, that's not accurate, but never mind, nature can throw things at us that no government can handle. What is accurate is that the churches and the non-governmental charities came through like champions. There were five shelters in my home of Tyler, Texas, for Katrina victims. Four of them were in churches and the fifth was in a college and serviced by churches. The truth is when you get right down to it, all Christianity is liberal in the classic sense. You can go all over this country and look to see what churches are doing for their communities, both directly or in cooperation with civic responsibilities, and you will find they are stepping up everywhere, in every community. But in our generation a new class of liberal has emerged. I called them OPM liberals. "OPM" stands for Other People's Money. One wag called it Robin Hood economics. Now contrast OPM liberalism with the teachings of Jesus. Consider people who want to use the government to extract money from all of us to do what those of us who are Christians ought to be doing with what Jesus said in Matthew 25. He said *"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: 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: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. 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: For I was an hungered, and you gave me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in: Naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came to me."*

Wow! That's a real record there of charitable goods, of helping people. *"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, [we don't know what you're talking about], And the King shall answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me."* This is a constant work of Christians and Christian churches. But where in the Bible is the instruction to tax the unwilling and use their money to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, house the stranger, and visit the prisoner? You know, something is dreadfully wrong with this picture. Christians are suppose to give of themselves; not try to force other people to give. Finally, there is this from the CAP, and I quote "Moderate and liberal Christians unite, reclaim Jesus, reclaim God, reclaim Christianity from the evangelical Christian Right."

With all respect, this is totally disrespectfully of all their Christian brothers who may be out there doing just as much, maybe even more than they are doing to help the poor. They aren't talking about reclaiming Christianity. That would imply they lost their faith somewhere along the way and they're trying to get it back. What they're talking about is reclaiming political power for the Leftist agenda and cloaking it in Christianity. I would offer this suggestion to my brothers on the Christian Left. Spend a little more time in your Bible, and a little less in politics. That statement about reclaiming Christianity from the evangelical Christian Right is nothing short of insulting. Christians need to take care that their faith informs their politics and not the other way around.

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