

The Impact of Liberalism and Conservatism on Christianity

The Institute for Christianity

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I. Christianity in the Crossfire

Liberalism and Conservatism are social and behavioral ideologies that have influenced Christian beliefs and practices over the past several hundred years. Today, these ideologies have become so solidified through scholarly justifications, political support, and civil polarization that they threaten the unity, maturity, and stability of all Christian churches. Liberalism and conservatism each reveals different aspects of spiritual and intellectual immaturity in our societies. Neither is completely aligned with true Christian beliefs. However, Christians are compelled to adopt their positions through peer pressure, secular rewards, and special interpretation that intermix with Christian teachings. These interpretations continuously exploit Christian desires to build a better world and / or Christian fears of change and making mistakes in belief.

II. Origins of Conflicting and Mutually Re-enforcing Ideologies

The roots of conservatism are traceable back to the innate desire of people to preserve the normal behaviors of society, learn from the mistakes of the past, change only in a slow stable manner, and to live within one's meanings. Thus, the ideas that would become modern conservatism are as old as when people first started to have more influence on laws, institutions, and social practices. Over the years, those who wished to concentrate on enforcing societal stability by

constraining the rates and magnitudes of change have advocated under the banner of *classical conservatism*. Those who wished to protect traditional values have solidified into the strong community of *social conservatives*. As traditional values have changed, being socially conservative can be many things depending on the time and place the ideology is embraced.

The term *fiscal conservatism* has become a rally cry in later 20th Century for opposing the growth of government spending under neoliberal economic policies. With the threats of the 21st Century, many conservatives have further embraced a very traditional / realist view of using force along with social conservatism. These so called *neo-conservatives* have achieved significant political results in the United States by building on strong nationalistic attitudes and religious traditions. The simplicity of an unchanging God, unwaivering nation, and unfaltering society clearly has strong appeal to those who fear and worry about the rising evils in the world.

The roots of liberalism are traceable directly back to the Age of Enlightenment with the ideology of life's inherent preciousness, human rights to freedom, and equality among man. Thus, liberalism is inherently against tyranny and the constraints of traditions from whichever source they may emerge. As a result, liberals are only guided

by their rationality and sense of compassion. The success of this ideology has reshaped the modern world through revolution and the rise of democracies, such as the United States. However, people under freedom often had a preference for strong traditions and people suffering poverty remain vulnerable to rising tyranny. The rise of fascism in Germany and socialism in Russia after World War I highlights this latter concern.

Those who continue to believe in the absolute importance of freedom now rallies behind the banner of *libertarianism*. But, most liberals today accept a compromise of freedoms to preserve other liberal values. *Social liberals* vary greatly in their views of how freedom could be constrained, traditions should be opposed, and social management for the good of the people should be conducted. As liberals inherently reject the idea of innate authority, any compromise of freedom means that the liberal society must be led by a self-justified intellectual / rationality driven elite.

Within the liberal intellectual elite, *neoliberals* tend to favor strong interventionist policies particularly in economics and social programs. Yet, many liberals today are also advocating more hands-off strategies. This diversity in liberalism stemming from the product of individual rationality stretches across the world. Liberals in South America and Southern Europe are very anti-clergy. Liberals in Europe further find themselves seeking unique political postures between conservative and socialistic forces. And, some liberals in places like Russia are actually quite conservative in activities. Everywhere, however, liberals are debating social, political, and environmental issues. Then, they challenge the corporate, religious, and governmental institutions that they view as being responsible.

III. The Conservative Fallacy

The immaturity of the conservative ideology from a Christian perspective is that Christianity is a religion of understanding over traditions, embracing changes resulting from spiritual growth, and cherishing freedom from God's laws through discipleship in Christ. While conservatism can be a strong force in controlling the behavior of people in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, the continued reliance on this force betrays our mission to help people understand. People can only learn to fight against evil, resist the manifestation of evil as sin in themselves, and embrace God's gift of salvation through understanding and not through traditions. Thus, traditions should only be considered in matters where understanding is far out of reach or when understanding is being blindly rejected.

While conservatism can prevent Christians from being exposed to temptations, it can also block Christians from growing spiritually and learning how to better serve the will of God. No Christian has complete understanding of the truths in the Bible, and the varying interpretations of Biblical writings within the Christian realm should serve as a humbling testimony of our continuing spiritual struggles. We must overcome our fear of worldly knowledge, rationality, and change to grow in our understanding of God's truth. All these forces can easily lead the spiritually weak away from the will of God. At the same time, all these forces are also what have been allowed by God to help us understand His plan. The key lies in whether we can garner the power of the Holy Spirit to comprehend the world, the strength of faith to guide rationality, and the capabilities of spiritual maturity to control change.

Finally, while conservatism can give Christians great secular powers in a democratic

society, we Christians have no right to impose laws on others when God has freed us from His laws through discipleship in Christ. Secular laws are instruments of state to protect the life and well-being of its people. As citizen of democratic states, Christians have a responsibility for guiding this instrument of state but not for the promulgation of Christianity or the enforcement of Christian behaviors. Too many conservative Christians cannot separate their mission of evangelism and their powers within the state. Christians must allow people to freely struggle in a world of temptations so that God in His time and His way will lead all the right people to Christ. Our mission has always been to help people in their struggles through the teachings of Jesus that brings salvation. We will pull people back from wayward paths but we cannot trap them in states of spiritual stagnation for fear of spiritual digression. On select issues where Christian understanding converges with the secular responsibility to protect life, Christians must act within secular processes. But, we must constantly make sure that our participation is based on true Christian understanding and not traditions. The conservative desire to follow traditions is what leads Christians into the fight with liberal forces – a fight that is not meant for Christians.

IV. The Liberal Fallacy

The immaturity of the liberal ideology from a Christian perspective is that the life of the spirit is more important than the life of the body. We only have the guaranteed freedom to grow spiritually closer to God. And, true equality exists in our opportunity to receive the grace of God.

By relying only on human rationality, the liberal ideology has often fallen prey to the force of human arrogance. This arrogance clouds our understanding, separates rationality from spirit guidance, and leads Christians

away from the will of God. Clouded by arrogance, rationality cannot fathom how human physical life as a creation of God is for the maturation of the spirit. Our actions affirm our capacity for love. Our experiences educate us against the ways of evil. Our trials strengthen faith. And our joys nurture hope. Without this context, we do not have an inalienable right to life. God throughout the course of human existence has allowed life to end for the best interest of human spirits. Thus, it must be within this context and our deep desire to serve the spiritual well-being of others that we seek to protect life and help it achieve the freedoms and joys needed to grow. Since most of us are not close enough to God to understand how people are brought to Him, we must protect life at all times to support the unfolding of God's perfect plans.

In further opposition to liberal beliefs, the western concept of freedom extends from a sense of rugged individualism and need for tribal identity. Christians, however, are inherently free in spirit and mind. The freedom of the body to learn, play, rest, and act is a cherished gift from God for Christians to grow and non-Christian to find God. Such freedoms can become a source of great spiritual testing. Therefore, we should only fight for physical freedom if we can see through prayer that the fight is condoned by our Lord. When nations start to fight for freedom and not just for the safety of others, we must carefully question whether they are marching down a path of rational arrogance and hard testing. When societies decide to curtail the freedom of its citizens, they must carefully debate how such constraints effect the growth of the human spirit.

In modern day liberal societies, the curtailing of freedoms have often been directed against Christianity so that anti-Christian concepts of life and equality can flourish. To

enforce such liberal perspectives, the public declaration of Christian truths has often been labeled as prejudicial and socially not acceptable. With jobs, reputations, and social inclusion at stake, many Christians in liberal societies are compelled to compromise their beliefs and embrace social tolerance as well as relative moralities. It is thus ironic that in free societies, the Christians are often the ones placed into behavioral bondage.

Finally in opposition to liberal beliefs, equality is not a natural part of the human state. The fostering of desires for it has led to much discontent and social conflict. The condition of each person (intellect, beauty, physical abilities, health, wealth, race and family support) has been established by the Lord for the best interest of that person's spiritual growth – people are inherently not equal and spirits do not enter the world as blank slates. Thus, societies cannot create equality without destroying freedom, and individuals cannot fight for equality without inducing jealousies and rivalries. No amount of taxes and social benefits can resolve the discontentment of the less wealthy. No amount of plastic surgery can resolve the insecurities of the less attractive. No scientific device can wipe away the challenges of the disabled. And, no amount of academic programs can resolve the disparity in accomplishments. With a more mature perspective, Christians should pursue opportunities for everyone in a free society – not an equality of opportunities but the right opportunities for each person to grow as willing servants of the Lord. To create these opportunities, the poor must be lifted from fears of harm and starvation. The less attractive, different, and disabled must be freed from the agonies of ridicule and social rejection. And, everyone should have the means to learn and work in ways that fulfill our spiritual needs. In the latter case, sometimes an entire free society could seem not so free after all.

V. Staying True to Christianity

The challenge for Christians in a liberal world opposed by resurgent conservatism is to understand how to resist the impact of ideological fallacies within our churches and when to push Christian awareness of truth into the secular world. In the latter case, the wrong level of Christian involvement can easily pull us into the maze of secularism. So, the convergence between Christianity and the world is on life and the separation between Christianity and the world is on the spirit. On the matter of protecting life so that the spirit can be allowed to find salvation and grow in God's grace, the issues are: 1.) when does life begin, 2.) when can life be taken, and 3.) how should life be supported. Unfortunately in all these issues, the ways of God are so complex that it can only be understood with individual prayer and faith. There are no Christian laws that we can instantly turn into secular laws.

On the issue of when life begins, Christians are concerned with the point where a new spirit endures on its own even after the death of the unborn body. At that point, an abortion of the fetus constitutes murder and must be dealt with as a secular crime. Since the Bible teaches us that life is in the blood, murder must be considered if a fetus' heart continues to beat after an abortion has separated its blood from the mother. Prior to that point all abortions are against the will of God, but when life exactly begins is based in individual Christian faith. Does the unique blood type of the fetus indicate that its spirit is immediately well formed? Yet, the Bible has never considered miscarriages and accidental terminations of the fetus as deaths. Maybe new spirits in many cases are permitted to recombine with the spirits of their mothers.

In the secular debate on when life can be taken in war, self-defense, and punishment, the Christian position must be that only God can guide us. Since the essence of Christianity is love, we must always pursue life especially for those of our enemies who have not been given the truth of Jesus. In cases where we are driven on our own to kill to protect life, we must always seek God's forgiveness. If we have taken the life of innocents in war, then God's forgiveness must be great indeed. In cases where we start to kill for ideological principles and sense of justice without God's direct guidance, we must question whether we have strayed far away from God in arrogance or ignorance. Killing to achieve freedom and better ways of life is a part of the liberal fallacy and killing to deal out justice as in the Old Testament is a part of the conservative fallacy. Without God's plan, the freedom of the whole world is not worth the salvation of a single soul. With mature Christian understanding, the denial of possible salvation to even the most horrible of criminals and the denial of life to the truly repentant criminals cannot be based on tradition.

The final area of convergence between Christianity and secularism is on how life should be supported. In love for all humanity, Christians should seek to help the poor, the weak, and the lonely. However, we cannot be so arrogant as to think that we have control over the fates of people and so blind that we act only out of obligations. Thus, Christians cannot demand laws to serve such purposes but we can steer the direction of laws so that the support of people really is for helping them toward spiritual salvation or growth. The support of people in liberal societies can often be over extended by the fallacy of equality. The support of people in conservative societies can often be under extended by the fallacy of personal accountability. In a Christian society the support of

the people is based on a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, and the actions of support is for the spirit. Without the salvation of the spirit, all the comforts of the body are for naught. For the salvation of the spirit, the Lord may allow life to go through many trials.

Christianity is about the salvation of spirit and therefore it is largely separated from the priorities of this world. In protecting the spirit for the salvation of Christ, the issues center on: 1.) the prevention of physical behaviors and relationships that can damage the spirit, 2.) guidance for people in response to different spiritual needs, and 3.) the treatment of spirits that have not joined the body of Christ. On all these issues, we must be extremely careful not to let liberal and conservative ideologies distort our understanding. Particularly in the last issue of spiritual salvation for the secular world, the Christian priority is on people receiving Christ. After receiving Christ, all the spiritual problems of the past are irrelevant. Before receiving Christ, all the controls on behavior might actually deny people the struggle to find Christ. So, Christians should not be repulsed by the spiritually harmful activities of non-Christians or be tempted by social acceptance of non-Christian behaviors. The repulsion of Christians has strengthened liberal concerns and the vulnerability of Christians has fan the fear of conservatism. We must rise above all this with understanding and great spiritual strength. As taught by Jesus, all things in the world are pure to those who are pure on the inside. So let us work on the purity of the Christian spirit and worry less about the impurities of the world.

The Bible taught us about physical behaviors and relationships within the community of God's people that are damaging to the spirit. These include:

Idolatry – which betrays our bond with God.
Adultery – which betrays a bond between two spirits.

Unjustified Divorce – which surrenders a bond between two spirits.

Homosexuality – which betrays the brotherhood between men.

Incest – which betrays the spiritual bond within families.

Deception & Lies – which betrays the trust between spirits.

Hate – which betrays the love between spirits.

Greed & Jealousy – which betrays one's own spirit.

While some of these behaviors may be more damaging than others, Christian churches should unrelentingly oppose all the sins against the spirit. This does not mean that Christians must be perfect or even judgmental, but Christians cannot lose their discernment of sins. Christians must help one another repent against their sins and forgive one another if we are truly repentant. When the secular world sees marriage as only a union for two people's physical happiness, Christians must continue to recognize marriage as an unbreakable bond to grow spirits through love and / or trials. When the secular world cannot understand why two consenting men or women cannot have same sex physical relationships, Christians must continue to see how the sense of spiritual fellowship within each sex is damaged when some of them start acting on physical desires. When the secular world encourages greed, Christians must continue to see the damage of worldly desires on the growth of their spirits toward God and others. Let the world of freedom tempt Christians however it may, but Christians will always know that freedom is worthless without the ways of the Lord.

Lastly, the most confusing spiritual issue in the age of liberalism is perhaps the acceptance of spiritual inequality. Nevertheless, that is exactly the truth about humanity and the inequality of spirits is the rational reason why God would give us different bodies, different minds, and different fates. If the secular world cannot see the spirit and the unique needs of each spirit, then it cannot see a God of love, plans, and goodness. Therefore, tending to the unique spiritual needs of people in society is a priority within a Christian community. The challenge and confusion in this endeavor is to determine how much the different spiritual needs of people have diversified, converged, and shifted over centuries of human development.

In the days of the Bible there were strong convergences for the spiritual needs of men, women, nationalities, and even localities. In today's world where all the people have struggled with a thousand temptations and all their spirits have developed highly unique vulnerabilities, we must continue to ask whether most men still have common spiritual needs for learning how to love, sacrifice, and serve the will of the Lord. We must also ask whether most women still have common spiritual needs for resisting the practical demands of this world that bind the spirit, the rise of jealousies that lead to rebellion, and the growth of fears that paralyze the soul. If such separate needs still remain true, then the responsibilities of men and women in the church, the guidance for relationships between men and women, and the preparation of men and women for the secular world must all answer to these needs. With Christianity spreading to all the lands, we must further ask whether the influence of cultures and the constraints of local traditions still distort Christian teachings, modify Christian processes, and hinder Christian spiritual growth. If such regional threats re-

main true, then the strategies for missionary efforts, guidance for local churches, and education of different groups of people must respond appropriately. All this recognition of people's needs cannot be considered prejudice because prejudice stems from hate. However, as the spirits of people have grown uniquely powerful and vulnerable over the past centuries, we have to address the needs of people more as individuals than as groups.

VI. Stand Firm

In these trying times of great ideologies, individual Christians and whole churches must stand firm. The world will say, "come live

our way and prosper." Other Christians who have surrendered to the world will say, "we can be Christians as a part of liberal or conservative communities." And, whole churches enslaved by the world will say, "why not work with the world as long as our congregations grow." Yet, we must stand firm and not give into the arrogance of rationality and the fears of growth. When we see Christians trapped by ideologies, let us reawake them to the path of the Lord. When we see churches lost in this world, let us expose the evils within. May the Lord lead us through these days of hard testing into His coming kingdom.