

The Curse of Conservatism (Part One)

The first eleven slaves arrived in Virginia from Africa in 1619. The first of my Luck ancestors arrived in Virginia from England in 1633. I don't know the names of any of the African slaves, but my ancestor's name was Robert Luck. He sailed on H.M.S. Bonaventure and when he landed he was 24 years old. Robert was a courageous young man seeking his fortune and Virginia was a dangerous place in 1633. I'm proud of my ancestor's courage. I like to think that had I lived then I might have sailed with him. Robert Luck and his descendents did very well in Virginia. They seem to have been respected members of their communities. Most were Christians members of the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church with a scattering of Baptists and Quakers around the edges. The Luck ancestors did very well in Virginia because they were able to acquire significant amounts of land. And to work that land they bought slaves.

Now, slaves were a serious investment. The market value of a strong young male field hand was about that of a Mercedes Benz today. Obviously you had to be careful about what you were buying. After all in theory, it was a lifetime investment with no manufacturer's warranty in case your "equipment" broke down. Just like used cars the price for slaves was variable based upon a number of factors. Children were cheap, in today's money maybe only a couple of hundred dollars each. With a child you had a long wait before the equipment began to function at optimal performance levels. On the other end of the age spectrum you'd pay a couple of thousand dollars for a slave who was an excellent seamstress or cook, but who was getting rather close to the graveyard. Just as we must take care of our cars if we want them to keep running, slave owners had to take care of their slaves. It was only reasonable. You wanted to get as many "miles" out of them as you could. One of my ancestors owned a tobacco factory. To operate it he employed 100 slaves. I would imagine that working in a building was a lot better than chopping tobacco in a field under the hot sun. And slaves in his factory got two new changes of clothes each winter – hand sewn by my ancestor's wife and daughters. That's a lot of sewing. It sounds like my ancestor took pretty good care of his equipment.

Does this horrify you? It should. And, for very personal reasons it horrifies me. I would love to believe that had I lived in that day the clarity of my moral vision would have shown me the hellish inhumanity of slavery. I would love to believe that my moral courage would have given me the strength to do everything that I possibly could to end it. Unfortunately, most of us do not rise above the evils of our time. Had I lived in that day very likely I would have been deeply "disturbed" by the "necessity" of slavery. However, due to that "necessity," I would have owned slaves. It would have been a matter of economic survival. Without them how would I feed my family? Without them, how could I run the ancestral agri-business? After all, there were few machines to take their place and I was supplying the needs of a society for clothing, food and good smokes. Probably, I would argue that it wasn't my fault I was born on a plantation. It was God's will and I had to make the best of it.

Yes, and I'm sure that I would have made the best of it. I'd like to believe that because I was a Christian I would have been a "humane" slave owner, just and kind to my slaves as every Christian slave owner should be. By definition a truly Christian slave owner did "right" by his servants (a much nicer word than slaves), which meant that he didn't abuse them. He gave them adequate food and shelter. He didn't separate families. And of course, he maintained them when they got old and weren't able to work anymore. That was the ideal. Is that the way Christian slave owners always acted? If you think so you're a lot less cynical than I am. Power corrupts and when you have absolute power over the life of another human being no matter who you are you will be corrupted.

Thank God, I wasn't born in those days. Slave ownership was a curse not only on our nation but also on my family. My great-grandfather and other ancestors lost everything after the Civil War, and I say this with deep sorrow, the descendents of Robert Luck deserved to lose everything for having built their wealth on such a terrifying evil.

What's the point of all this? Well, here is an interesting fact: My southern ancestors were good solid conservative Christians. Utilizing the best conservative values of their culture they were dead wrong in the middle of the greatest moral crisis of their time. Why? Because over the centuries their conservative values such as honesty, patriotism, love of freedom, respect for tradition, loyalty to family, belief in capitalism, commitment to honor, etc., were not enough. Their conservative values failed them because in themselves such values are malleable easily warped by the selfishness and fears of any generation. Such values will always warp if they are not measured against an absolutely true and timeless standard. The only such standard is biblical Christianity. All others have proven to be insufficient because they attempt to transform actions while leaving the depths of the inner person unchanged. My ancestors were Christians. So, if Christianity is a true and timeless standard how could they have failed? Quite simply because they let their conservative values define their Christian faith instead of the other way around.

What is the central truth of historic Christianity? Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came from Heaven to pay the price for our sins – to buy us all from the slave market of spiritual depravity. And He paid the price for us with His blood. Now if I have accepted His gift of salvation, if I have allowed Him to break the chains that bound my soul, if I know that before God all men and women are equal, shouldn't I as a Christian strive for freedom and equality for all men and women? How can I own a person when according to Jesus, that person is my neighbor and my brother or sister? How can I own a person when that person's deepest welfare should be my primary concern? Clearly, this was not the standard of truth that was applied by my good conservative slave-owning ancestors. It's interesting to note that the Christian abolitionists of their day were considered "radicals" and "liberals." Truthfully most people in both the north and the south hated them because they insisted on thinking and acting "Christianly" no matter the cost.

You and I live in a more "enlightened" age. Slavery is no longer the burning issue and a new "conservatism" is on the rise. That conservatism beckons to Christians. It offers us some serious choices. Should we allow the conservative Republican agenda to become our agenda? Should we allow the Republican Party to be our "agent for change" as we

enter the 21st Century? Most Christians agree with “moral” conservatives that our country is in a “moral crisis.” We agree that there is a desperate need for political, legislative and juridical transformation. Based upon that common ground, conservative Republicans invite us to come in and get warm under the tent of “traditional values” assuring us that they too believe in the “best” of Christianity. And, it seems both logical and practical that we should make common cause with them. Though they may not be “Christians” in the sense that Jesus Christ is their Savior and Lord, they revere our “philosophy” and “traditions.” They are the first to agree with us that our country was founded on “Christian values” and we need to return to those values. Isn’t it only practical that we join hands with them to reshape this country into what it ought to be?

For almost thirty years many evangelical leaders have done just that. They have made common cause with powerful groups that seemed to share our traditional “Christian” values. They have worked to establish coalitions. They have strategized. Endless hours have been spent raising funds and campaigning. And now we stand at the door to a brave, new world. Evangelical leaders have become power brokers fawned over by the conservative elite. They have delivered at the polls, which has culminated in a great victory the election of George W. Bush and a Republican majority in both the House and the Senate. And, the battle lines are drawn in colors of red and blue. Not only are evangelical leaders under the tent, they bought the tent. Not only do they demand a seat at the table, they want to cook the food and serve it. The Republican Party *is* the evangelical Christian party. The syncretism is almost complete. Is this a good thing? Many would say yes.

A true story: Several years ago, a Christian young person of my acquaintance was working in Washington, D.C. as a staff member for a Republican committee of the U. S. Senate. Constantly he faced well-educated people who thought they were Christians because they were Republicans. At one social event someone asked him if he were a Christian. Just to see their response he replied with all seriousness, “I’m a Republican.” They didn’t bat an eye. For them that was quite acceptable. No other statement of faith was necessary.

Does this horrify you? If you are a Christian it should. By making common cause under the tent of “traditional values” we are giving primacy to those values and allowing them to define what it means both to be a Christian and to act “Christianly” in the public square. Just as my slave-owning ancestors in the old south reshaped their faith and practice to match the “conservative agenda” of their culture, so we are reshaping our faith and practice to match the conservative agenda that is being presented to us.

Dream with me for a minute: Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could guarantee that every judge, legislator, governor and President was an evangelical Christian and a good conservative Republican? Don’t you agree with me that if that happened in less than a generation we could solve most of the problems of our society and reshape this country into what it was, taking back what we lost due to the narcissistic sloppiness and moral turpitude of so-called Liberals? If we got rid of Liberals from every level of government wouldn’t we be on the way to a truly moral and Christian society? Oh, of course, it

wouldn't be perfect, but just imagine wiping out abortion, taking care of the illegal alien problem, getting prayer back into our public schools, cleaning up the stinking mess in Hollywood and the porn industry. Just imagine wiping out the ACLU.

If you are a Christian and after reading those words, you sent up a resounding "AMEN" I have bad news for you. You have succumbed to the first temptation hidden in the Curse of Conservatism. You have allowed a political agenda to define the meaning of societal transformation and the methods for achieving it. You have come to believe that the moral transformation of a culture can be imposed successfully from the top down. It is clear from history that this is not so.

The society of ancient Rome was decadent almost beyond description. It reeked of pedophilia. Male and female prostitution was rampant. Unwanted babies were left in open fields to die. Brutality and bloody violence were the order of the day. In one series of "games" 10,000 people were murdered for the pleasure of a screaming drunken crowd. Many governmental leaders were vile. Into that evil culture the Church of Jesus Christ was planted without the slightest power or prestige. For over two hundred years Christians suffered within that culture, hounded and in some cases murdered for their beliefs. The only power they had was the power of a Risen Savior who had transformed their lives. That power transformed the Roman world one person at a time. However at a certain moment in history everything changed. Christians gained political power. They took control of the government. Initially much good was done. Some of the most flagrant horrors were ended. But in the process of wielding power the Church was corrupted. Much of its moral authority was lost and we have suffered the consequences ever since.

The problem is this: when conservative moral standards are imposed on a society by political and/or military conquest an inevitable process begins. First there is a period of relief and apparent success. The most egregious wrongs are righted. For a while the vanquished (those who disagree with the new moral order) are intimidated into silence. But very soon they begin to regain power as society, never transformed from within, grows tired of restraint. Then one of two things happens. Either the "victors" and their laws are swept away leaving that society even more decadent than before, or the "victors" tighten control and enforce their laws through increasing oppression. If the witness of the Christian church has become enmeshed with the political and/or military power of the "victors" its mission has been compromised no matter which direction society turns.

In His greatest hour of crisis Jesus proclaimed that His Kingdom was not of this world. Christians have been trying to prove Him wrong ever since. Conservatism is a curse because in our desperation for societal change it tempts us to take power into our own hands. Precisely what Jesus refused to do all of His life especially during His temptation in the wilderness. What was at the heart of those three "temptings?" The Lord of Darkness tried to make Him agree that the "ends" could justify the "means," that misusing power and entering into a wrong alliance were permissible in order to accomplish the transformation of human society. Jesus was tempted to make common cause with the Power behind the thrones of this world in order to establish His Kingdom

in a different way and time than God had intended. Sad to say many times throughout history His Church has fallen to the temptation that He resisted.

In my direct lineage I have a strange little grandmother. I love the memory of her. What guts she had. There's a statue of her at the state house in Boston. Her name was Mary Barrett Dyer and she was hung by the Puritans on June 1, 1660. I'm proud to be one of her grandsons. Do you want to know why Mary was hung? She wouldn't stop teaching the Bible. Did they string her up because she was teaching heresy? No. She WAS a heresy. They hung her because women weren't supposed to teach the Bible and she just wouldn't stop. That was her gift and she felt called to use it. She felt called to confront the injustice of her society and that society was "Christian." Mary must have been a good teacher otherwise no one would have noticed. Three hundred years after her death the court that hung her ordered a statue erected in her honor. On it they placed a quote from some of her writings. "My life not availeth me in comparison to the liberty of truth." It's been my observation that far too often Christians who speak the truth to other Christians get hung and then later canonized.

If you think establishing morality in the United States is going to happen through the Christian church collectively exerting political power may I suggest that we take a brief journey through time? Let's start under the tree where my grandmother is slowly turning in the breeze. From there we could go to the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell in England and its aftermath. And while we're heading east let's jump to the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. From that point it's just a short hop north to medieval Rome and Europe in the age of Papal power. To end our first excursion (and there are many others in the tour brochure), let's stop off for lunch with the Spanish Inquisition. All examples of serious Christians in control of government. And, don't try to fudge out of it by saying that they weren't "true" Christians. Unfortunately many of them were.

I'm convinced that the men who hung my grandmother were devout believers in Jesus. It's just that their understanding of truth had been warped by an agenda of societal "needs." The syncretism of faith and political power was complete and righteous "ends" came to justify the most brutal means. The men who hung my grandmother were following the conservative agenda of their time and culture. They were trying to protect their society from the ravages of evil. When syncretism is complete it's a short journey from Plymouth Rock to the hanging tree, from the desire to worship freely to the murder of a sister in Christ who wants to do the same. After all these years have Christians changed?

(Part 2 – The second temptation for Christians in the Curse of Conservatism: The temptation to give up personal responsibility.)