

The Curse of Conservatism (Part Three)

Let me introduce a friend of mine from the past. I'll call him Arny. That's not his real name, but I haven't talked to him in years and I don't want to use his name without permission. I met Arny in 1979 just as I was beginning my professional career in Hollywood. I was a novice writer and Arny was a pro. A couple of years previously he had been on the writing staff of one of the most successful comedy series in the history of television a series that today is considered a cultural classic. But that wasn't all. He had also co-created another wildly popular series that had launched the career of a major Hollywood film star. Arny's success as a comedy writer was understandable. Half the things that came out of his mouth made you laugh. My friend was a gentle, funny man. I want to tell his story because few people remember him now and he shouldn't be forgotten.

At the pinnacle of Arny's career when he was achieving the kind of success that other writers only dream about he discovered that it wasn't enough. There was something missing. His soul was empty. It was then that an amazing thing happened. Arny met Jesus Christ and his life was transformed. Now it goes without saying that in those days there weren't many believers in Jesus in Hollywood and almost none at Arny's level. There are a few more today but the ones who have come in the decades since have learned how to camouflage their faith. They've learned how to "play the game" because unless you "play the game" there's no hope of having a long comfortable career. Well it wasn't that Arny didn't want a long comfortable career. The problem was he just couldn't conceal his joy.

When you're a writer on the staff of a television series you spend night and day with a small group of other writers. These people become like your family. While the series is in production you spend more time with them than you do with your real family. During those endless writer meetings gulping down piles of sandwiches and bottomless pots of coffee you talk about everything – problems with your kids, your marriage breaking up, politics, you name it. So it's natural if something wonderful happens to you that you would want to share it with the people who have become such close friends. And that's what Arny did. He told them about how Jesus was bringing joy into his life.

I think their first reaction must have been laughter. Arny was a funny guy and obviously this was a joke. When they realized it wasn't a joke they were shocked. Then came the coldness. Almost overnight old friends weren't friends anymore. It wasn't long before he was unemployed. With Arny's professional credentials he should have been able to land him another job almost instantly. But for some reason all the doors were closed. In Hollywood, that bastion of free speech where the First Amendment is worshipped like the Holy Grail, in Hollywood where they still wring their hands and moan over the blacklists of the McCarthy era, in Hollywood that center of pop culture and cutting edge technology that masks the bigotry of a 19th century village in eastern Europe, Arny found that he had some "employment problems." It was as though his career had contracted Ebola. As he

watched, it began to hemorrhage. I met him when it was in the final stages of bleeding to death but while he was still hoping for a miracle. The miracle never came.

To his eternal credit, Army never gave up his faith. If he had of course all would have been forgiven. Just a simple act of contrition a quiet renunciation of this Jesus foolishness and his former colleagues would have welcomed him back with open arms. After all the good liberal-minded folk of Hollywood are nothing if not forgiving. They understand that the best of us have nervous breakdowns, snort a little too much coke, get sued for sexual harassment, cheat on a spouse, run up a string of DUI's, embezzle a little money, in other words go slightly insane for a season. And after we're detoxed from our insanity, whether it's booze or babes or believing in Jesus, everything can be made right again. Just look at Bob Dylan. And I know others who have done it, others who walked away from their "Jesus addiction" and are now enjoying renewed careers. Army refused to do that because he knew that what he had gained was worth more than anything he could lose. And he lost a lot. Not only did his career bleed to death, his wife divorced him. Spouses often do that when the money stops. Sometime around 20 years ago, my friend quietly left Hollywood and moved back east. It's a hard thing to give up your dreams. It's a harder thing to lose the people you love. As I said I haven't talked to Army in a long time. I hope he's found joy and fulfillment in his new life. But whatever has happened to him I'm certain of this: The reward for his faithfulness is yet to come.

How does the story of my friend relate to what I've called the Curse of Conservatism? In 1981, the Writers Guild decided to strike. As a new member of that guild (all writers in Hollywood are required to be union members), I had never participated in a strike and participation was mandatory. I'll never forget that first strike meeting. It was held at the Hollywood Palladium. Twenty-two hundred writers were gathered in the grand ballroom, almost all the writers responsible for the creation of popular culture in television and film. With me was my friend Army. As we sat down, I remember asking him how many people in that room might be devout Christians. He laughed and said he was pretty sure that he knew them all. Not including us, maybe there were eight.

As I sat in that huge room I realized that around me was a microcosm of the new America. Whoever controls the creation of stories controls culture. And within my fellow writers the new stories of America were being born. I had grown up in Wheaton, Illinois, a small town that was a center of evangelical Christianity. But sitting in the Hollywood Palladium, Wheaton, Illinois felt as far away as a distant star. What lay before me was the reality of a post-Christian, post-modern world. I held no illusions about that world. Most of the people in it were hostile to what I believed. Not that all of them hated evangelical Christians although a significant percentage surely did. At a minimum I knew that I was going to face distrust and potential rejection. To be honest, I couldn't blame the people of Hollywood for their distrust. Many of them had never personally known an evangelical believer in Jesus. Their only contact with my world was flipping past tele-evangelists and getting hate mail. With far too much historical evidence to prove them correct they believed that anyone who called himself an evangelical Christian was probably a fool and a bigot. Not wanting to be either I faced a crisis. There at the beginning of my career how was I to live? What should I stand for?

What risks should I take? As I considered these questions, Arny's experience loomed huge before me. Did I want to relive my friend's disaster? Not if I could help it.

An immediate solution presented itself: I could split my life in half. There would be the "Christian Coleman" and the "Career Coleman." In my "Christian life" with my Christian friends I could be vocal about my faith. In my "Hollywood life" I would be silent and go into the closet for the next 20 years. To make the closet more comfortable I could upholster it with a series of convenient lies. The first one sounded reasonable and it stroked my ego: "You're talented but you have to earn the right to be heard and that's going to take a long time. So, say nothing about what you believe. Play the game shrewdly and someday you might be so successful that you'll have the power to speak and write whatever you want. To take the risk too soon would be foolish and self-destructive." What did this really mean – that at some point in the distant future when I was "bulletproof" I could fearlessly emerge from my cowardice? Even at the beginning, I knew this wouldn't work. In Hollywood no one ever becomes "bulletproof." The longer you're there the more you realize how hard it is to achieve anything and whatever you achieve you don't want to lose. To believe this lie would mean giving up the strength to speak a single courageous word.

If the first lie was inadequate there was a second to bolster it and this is what it whispered: "As a professional writer you're just an employee. You aren't being hired to "spread your faith." You're being hired to entertain, to capture the largest possible audience for your employers. If you accept a job you have an obligation to fulfill that purpose and nothing more." In Hollywood there is a hallowed axiom, "If you want to send a message buy a telegram." Well, it may be a hallowed axiom but no one in Hollywood really believes it. Every single story has a message. Excellent writing is always passionate writing and passionate writing always comes from firmly held beliefs. There are plenty of passionate writers in Hollywood, leftists, gays, feminists, environmentalists, for pity's sake even PETA members. Should a Christian writer be less passionate and courageous than someone defending stray cats? To believe this lie would mean that I would become a hack and the deeper rule of Hollywood is this: "If you let us make you into a hack we will hate you. After we've used you up we'll throw you away."

To do my best work as a professional demanded a commitment to excellence and passion. I owed excellence and passion to every employer. Most of all I owed it to Jesus Christ. And as far as commercial appeal was concerned the history of western literature was on my side. The most successful stories of our civilization have had redemption as their theme. The only way to fulfill every contractual obligation was to write what I knew. Though it could express itself in many forms what I knew was redemption.

Unfortunately, there was yet a third lie offering a reason to divide my world. And this one sounded downright pious. "If you just play the game and keep silent you can be well paid and enjoy the consolation that whatever situation you're in would be much worse if you weren't there. As a Christian, even if you're silent your presence can restrain evil and keep things from being as bad as they would have been otherwise." This would allow me to look at my hackhood as a kind of cross to bear. The end would justify the

means. My life could become a perfect storm of comfort and self-pity. While I enjoyed the financial fruits of my labors I could feel like a martyr. The logical fallacy was excruciatingly clear. If I believed this lie it would allow me to do anything from working in hardcore porn to being a guard in a Nazi concentration camp. All that was necessary to justify my involvement would be a few piddling acts of goodness. Holding back five drops of evil would allow me to swim in any rancid river. The best non-Christian writers would never play such pitiful mind games. They would have too much self-respect. Their philosophy would be “If you choose to swim in a sewer, swim hard, and do your best to enjoy it. Don’t lie to yourself about why you’re there. You’re there to make money.” Should a Christian be less honest about his motives? Money, security, and success couldn’t be my ultimate goals or I would betray everything I believed about the call of God. And I felt called by Him to Hollywood.

The choice was clear. I couldn’t bifurcate my world. Like Arny I had experienced a new life in Jesus. My whole life is based on one reality. Repentance leading to redemption is the only path to joy. That would be the theme that would guide the struggle of my career. It would mean walking for years on the brink of disaster, hoping for acceptance, ready for rejection, constantly praying for the strength, grace and mercy of God.

Having made my decision I didn’t want to be stupid. I knew that I had to pick my battles wisely. In the early 1980’s evangelical Christianity was deep into its decades long entanglement with Republican politics. The “Moral Majority” was on the rise. More and more people were equating being a Christian with being a Republican. I had to be able to have a discussion about Jesus apart from politics. I wanted people to see Him in my life and writing not the shadow of Ronald Reagan. I hadn’t come to Hollywood to spread the “Republican faith.” No Republican had died on a cross for me. To be an effective Christian in a hostile world means refusing to be distracted into conflicts that are not worth fighting. My challenge as a Christian was to be cautious in choosing a battle but when I entered one to fight it fearlessly. As a writer of drama I would be dealing with moral issues. I determined that my task was to think “Christianly” not to fall automatically into the lock-step opinions of either the left or the right.

But there was an even more vital task. The people around me were more far important than any creative work that I would ever do. My responsibility was to them. Being a Christian in a hostile world means being a loyal friend to those who do not agree with me, defending and caring for them the way Jesus would and speaking about Him whenever a door opens. Over the years I did a lot of stumbling and a lot of failing. But now at the end of my career I can tell you that the choice was right, the purpose held.

What is a “witness?” The simplest definition is that a witness is someone who tells what he knows. The whole life of a Christian should do that. In word and deed such a life should speak the truth of God’s love to a brokenhearted and dying world. The most awful temptation in the Curse of Conservatism is to let politics usurp and destroy our witness. So often the fire of political rhetoric burns relationships to ashes and it is within relationships that brokenhearted people meet Jesus. I have written that it is the role of the Church to carry the cross of culture not to wear culture’s crown. In choosing to vest our

hopes for societal transformation in the Republican Party and its conservative agenda, in choosing to syncretize our witness with political power, we have fallen into a trap. The true message of Jesus has been corrupted in the minds of millions who do not know Him. There could be no greater tragedy.

One of the most illuminating moments of my career occurred in the late 1980's. I was a writer/producer at Universal Studios working on the staff of the CBS television series, *The Equalizer*. One day another writer/producer on the show and I decided to go to lunch. My friend is not a Christian. As we drove out the front gate of the studio we were surrounded by a huge crowd carrying placards. It so happens that we had decided to go to lunch at the same moment when 25,000 of my fellow believers had arrived to protest the release of a film called "The Last Temptation of Christ." As far as that crowd was concerned we were coming from the wrong direction. We were the enemy. Placards bearing John 3:16 and a variety of Christian slogans were thrust at my windshield. As we drove through the singing chanting mass my friend turned to me and said, "Coleman, if I didn't know you I would hate these people."

Whenever the Church tries to use the power of the world to transform society we get exactly the opposite of what we desire. What did that display outside the studio gain for the Church? The film which was a pathetic piece of feces got a worldwide audience that it never would have gained without such notoriety. Hollywood hardened itself even more to the demands of Christians. Worst of all good people like my friend were confirmed in their belief that the only thing evangelical Christians cared about was taking away their freedom.

As much as you may hate the idea Hollywood is a microcosm of the world. After having spent many years there I can tell you that just like the rest of the world it is a frightened, broken-hearted place. Another writer/producer friend of mine (also not a Christian) once said to me, "The only reason any of us come to Hollywood is to be loved." For everyone in my former industry that desire for love leads to pain. Hollywood is a viciously abusive mother. The task of the Church is to live and speak the Love of God in every corner of our world and anything that stands in the way of that message is a curse.

How will we know if the Church is fulfilling her assigned task? It will be known for its peacemaking not for its belligerence. Somehow in the minds of many the idea of "peacemaking" has become synonymous with mediocrity and weakness. It has come to mean lukewarm moderation at best the expression of a neutered faith. For many evangelical Christians peacemaking means deal making, a cowardly brokered existence that does nothing more than put off the pain. But that isn't what Christian peacemaking is about at all.

Jesus bought our peace by dying on the cross. Following in His footsteps, the true peacemaking Church lives nailed to the cross of culture, carrying within itself the agony of a fallen world, constantly dying so that lost people might know Jesus and live. Christian peacemaking is dangerous because it is fearless and owes allegiance to no one but God. Christian peacemaking means walking in the no-man's land between the battle

lines. In a world filled with hate the peacemaking Church stands for the true justice and mercy of God's love. It thinks and acts under the power of the Holy Spirit not under the power of a political agenda. Such a Church will make bitter enemies on every side. Have we forgotten that in Jesus' day both the liberals (the Sadducees) and the conservatives (the Pharisees) wanted to kill him? Did He not say that the servant is no better than his master?

Here is the cold truth: We vest our hopes in a political agenda because we don't want the risk and discomfort that following Jesus will bring. We don't follow in His footsteps because we don't like the places where He insists on walking. We have vested our citizenship in an America that is gone and will never come again rather than in the costly Kingdom of Heaven. We want political change because we want to be left alone to live our lives in comfort without the incursion of any post-Christian post-modern nastiness. We like our churches big so our commitment can be small. We prefer boycotts, petitions, and protests over prayer. We fight to save the lives of unborn babies but don't give a damn if those babies grow up to die bloody deaths on our streets. We hate Hollywood but worship celebrities. We protest that there are not enough family films while we buy pornography. We want our borders closed to everything but cheap products. We want to save marriage while we divorce our wives and husbands. What we want is the fuzzy warmth of a bloodless "faith" that costs nothing more than the gasoline it takes to drive to church and go to the polls.

For these reasons and many more the syncretism of evangelical Christian "faith" and Republican politics is doomed to fail. In the near future evangelicals will feel betrayed by "their" party. The hints of that betrayal have already begun. Like political bosses the reaction of some evangelical leaders has been to rage and threaten retribution. Those threats will spiral as the realization of failure continues to grow. There will come a time when evangelical Christians realize that they have no party. The Big Tent has vanished. The circus has moved on without them and their dog and pony show is no longer needed. At that point, there will be a lot of talk about "disenfranchisement." Some will try to start a new party but that too will fail. When all of this happens in our ears should echo the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord."

In that time of disillusionment when we realize that America is not going to be reshaped in our image we will face a choice. How will we live in an increasingly hostile world? Will we go into the closet licking our wounds and trying to hide from reality? Or will we enter a new phase of wonderful, dangerous engagement? Will we start looking at America as a mission field instead a battlefield? Will we forgive our enemies or do what we can to take vengeance on them? Will we be willing to pay the price of a costly faith?

As I look back on the years I spent in Hollywood I'm filled with gratitude. I'm glad I made the choices that I did but they led where I knew they would. Like my friend Army, my time finally came. Like him I discovered that a career is a small price to pay for the joy of following Jesus. More than ever I believe that the same God who loved this brokenhearted world so much that He sent His Son to die, loves it still.

And He waits for His Church to awaken.

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