

The Curse of Conservatism (Part Two)

A true story. A number of years ago I was at a dinner party. The hostess had everything carefully planned so that her guests who didn't know each other might become acquainted. At the table I was seated next to an attractive woman whom I had just met. The evening was going along quite well, the food was delicious and the conversation pleasant. Talk had quieted as we focused on eating, when suddenly my dinner partner let out a horrific SHRIEK. Jerking back she stared at me as though I had just spit in her food. Now any male who has been married longer than 20 minutes knows that when a woman stares at you and shrieks you'd better come up with a serious apology for *something*. But for the life of me, I couldn't think of anything that I had done. Was she offended to the point of madness because I had used the wrong fork? All I could do was stare helplessly at her.

Here is what had happened: Unseen by any of us the family's large cat had slithered under the table. Then like the demon-possessed creature it was it had decided to destroy my reputation. Squatting in front of my dinner partner it had reached up and grabbed her nylon-covered leg on both sides just above the knee. When the claws dug in she thought it was my hand. Let me tell you before that cat crawled out there were a few tense moments while I tried to prove that both my hands had been occupied eating and my nails were really short. Only when she saw the monster slink away was she convinced.

The truth is, pitiful creatures that we are, like Pavlov's dogs most of our lives are spent responding thoughtlessly to psychological conditioning. The unpleasant sensation on my dinner partner's leg triggered a set of memories, which in turn triggered an intense emotional response. If that cat had managed to escape without being seen I would have been the main course for dinner. We don't like to think about psychological conditioning. We like to believe that all of our choices are made deliberately with the full weight of logic and experience behind them. Unfortunately, it just isn't so. Within each of us resides a universe of knee-jerk emotional reactions conditioned by the general nastiness of human life. Even more troubling is the reality that we swim in a sea of carefully planned media conditioning designed to influence us. How powerful is that influence?

When I was a kid I loathed cottage cheese. But every day at lunch I would watch a TV show hosted by a Chicago celebrity called Uncle Johnny Coons. Every single day Uncle Johnny would open up a carton of his sponsor's cottage cheese and start shoveling it into his mouth as though it were ice cream. Every day I watched him groan with pleasure at the first bite. Well I wanted to groan with pleasure so after watching him do this for a year I started eating the stuff. Do you know I actually began liking it? I mean it took awhile. The first few bites made me gag. But I was sure Uncle Johnny wouldn't steer me wrong so I worked at it. My mother was staggered. She couldn't get anything down my throat that wasn't made of chocolate. Unfortunately, a lot of media conditioning isn't quite as harmless as getting kids to eat slimy curds and whey.

For decades, Americans have been conditioned by what might be called the “Politics of Panic.” I remember crawling under my desk at school during the nuclear attack drills of the 1950’s. I was a big kid and I knew that any part of me not protected by that desk would be burned to ashes. It was a fearful choice for a child. What was I going to lose this time my legs or my butt? Usually, I opted for the legs. I mean you can live without legs. But I’d never seen anybody live without a butt. It was during those drills that I lost all faith in government. I was only ten but I could see right through this foolishness. If they really wanted to protect kids from a nuclear holocaust they would have given us bigger desks. Just like that a little conservative was born. If my butt was going to be saved government wasn’t going to do it for me. Also just like that I developed a whole set of odd little quirks and foibles. All these years later I have a tendency to believe that disaster is looming just over the horizon and I need to be near a very large desk.

Wherever we are on the political spectrum the “Politics of Panic” continue to condition us. Over many years we have been groomed to respond in a particular way to a set of code words such as “abortion,” “homosexual rights,” “illegal aliens,” “liberal judges,” “the ACLU,” etc. Like Pavlov’s dogs, when these code words are “rung” we “salivate” with fear, fury, and frustration. For evangelical Christians the blistering blather of talk radio and so-called 24-hour television “news” urges us to remain at a high level of reactionary emotion. Here is an unpleasant truth: For the political and media elites negative emotion is a positive response.

I spent too many years in Hollywood as a writer and executive producer in television not to understand the importance of “locking in” your audience. First, you draw them in with fiery “teasers,” then pull every trick in the book to keep them from changing the channel. Fearful, furious, and frustrated people don’t change channels. They use the commercial breaks to rant about what they’ve just heard. I know because it’s one of my favorite pastimes. The bell rings and I start a good long salivating rant that carries me right on through to the next program segment. Because these negative emotions are contagious they build big audiences and big audiences mean big money for big corporations. Political parties love fear, fury, and frustration because they energize constituencies to give money and get out the vote.

Have you noticed that fear, fury and frustration seem to be essential for both liberal and conservative existence? Have you ever met a dedicated liberal or conservative who appeared to be joyful and filled with peace? I haven’t. In fact, if you are joyful and filled with peace, good conservatives and liberals are apt to think that you are a mindless airhead hopelessly out of touch with the desperate issues of life. Yet according to my reading of the Bible, in spite of all the darkness around us, joy and peace are to be the attributes of a truly Christian life. This much I know: I can’t be fearful, furious, and frustrated and live like a Christian. When I fall into that pattern of conditioning I start to believe the lie that the crises of my world are political in their origins and political in their solutions. When I think like a conservative instead of a Christian the Republican Party guided by a conservative political agenda appears to be the only hope for the salvation of society.

Now I'm no scholar, but I've done quite a bit of reading and thinking about the history of Western culture and why it has been so successful in the liberation of humanity compared to other cultures of the world. The primary difference has been the influence of Christianity. Western culture was transformed by the message of Jesus Christ proclaimed fearlessly through His Church. The Church failed in those periods when it stopped being a servant and tried to be the ruler. It failed when it cast off the "cross of culture" and tried to wear culture's crown. During those periods when it functioned in the full power of Servanthood the Church proved itself to be the *only* agent for long-term positive change in the human condition. To most liberals and many conservatives such a statement sounds like fundamentalist claptrap. But there is a huge weight of evidence that proves it to be true. (Some of that evidence we will examine in the next essay.) The distressing fact is that most evangelical Christians don't even believe it to be true. If we did believe it we would think and act quite differently.

Here is what I think most Christians of my persuasion really believe: If we want to save American culture we must vote Republican, sign petitions, and give money to conservative causes. In return, the Republican Party offers us the opportunity to "Reshape America." As a reward for our support, they promise to take our concerns seriously on a whole litany of "moral issues" such as ending abortion on demand, outlawing homosexual marriage, reestablishing God and prayer in schools, etc. While the Party does its part, it's anxious that we do ours. To them the job of the Church is to become an outlet for "Compassionate Conservatism," doing what they think we do best – hugging people, helping the down-and-out get a leg up in the world, and building good, strong families with solid "traditional values." The promise is that if all of us under the "big tent" of the GOP work together our culture will be renewed. But is the promise true or is it nothing more than a deadly distraction that is taking our eyes off the real work of transformation?

I appreciate the fact that the Republican Party values the Church as opposed to many Democrats who would prefer that churches be like good abortions – legal, safe, and rare. But I fear the loving embrace of the Republican Party because I don't believe for a moment that most Republican leaders want the Church to be who we really are. Truthfully, neither party yearns to face large numbers of independent clear-thinking Christians. Both the left and the right would like to enlist the support of a safely neutered Church easily turned by the bit and bridle of manipulated emotions.

But Christianity that is real can't be controlled by any force within this world. It was born in blood and agony in the screaming nightmare of a Roman execution and the blazing Light from an empty grave. It was born from a shattering Love that knows no equal, a Love that is an all-consuming Fire, untamable in its majesty, erupting with Power, transforming catastrophe into the Joy of an Eternal Song. That's the Christianity that the Republican Party and many evangelical leaders invite us to syncretize with a conservative political agenda in order to transform society. If our Christianity is real it will be like trying to syncretize a volcano with the sputtering methane vent from a garbage dump. But, maybe it isn't real. Maybe, for most of us, our form of "Christianity" syncretizes well.

Is it my imagination or do I see the results of that easy syncretism all around us? When our faith is syncretized with a political agenda we fall quickly into the second temptation offered by the Curse of Conservatism: We give up personal responsibility to think and act “Christianly” with regard to the crises of our world. Instead, we let others think for us and tell us how to respond. On every practical level, we stop believing that any answers exist other than those offered by the syncretized agenda. When those fail, we wring our hands with even more fear, fury, and frustration. Eventually, when the whole agenda comes crashing down (as it will), we retreat into fully neutered isolation.

I don’t know about you but I’m tired of abdicating my personal responsibility for cultural transformation to a political machine. I’m tired of being manipulated in order for that a machine to gain and retain power. If I’m ever going to break free from my conditioning I need to figure out what it means to think and act “Christianly.” Thank God I am not left to dither about this. Micah 6:8 says it all: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And, what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Now, that is a truly radical agenda. How at odds is it with the political agendas that are being offered to us? If Republicans and Democrats were rewriting the Bible here’s the way that verse would read: “We have shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Party require of you? To vote selfishly, and to love victory and to walk fearfully under our control.”

But how can we “act justly” and “love mercy” with regard to the crises of our time? Isn’t the first step to be fearlessly openly honest? Doesn’t walking humbly with God mean believing that Jesus can and will share His radical thoughts with us as we face the issues of life? Over many years, I’ve discovered that His thoughts are never comfortable. They force me to examine my decisions in a way that is not natural to my selfish fearful, furious inclinations. Always He demands that radical transformation begin in the hearts of those who claim to follow Him. I’d like to try to apply that principle to a burning issue of our day...homosexual marriage.

All the political pundits on both the left and the right seem to agree that last November George W. Bush was elected in large part because evangelical Christians were energized to vote by the challenge of homosexual marriage. That was the issue that drove us to the polls. In a number of states it was a ballot initiative and across the country it was a burning topic in the minds of everyone. For months, the subject was roasted in the conservative media. Over and over it was pounded into us that if we lose on this issue the family will be destroyed and our country will go down with it. When November came we evangelicals rose up in righteous indignation. The line was drawn in the sand. We had to save marriage. Good evangelical that he is (and I believe that), George W. Bush was to be our standard-bearer. He would stand against the tide of the liberal judiciary. He would stop the activist judges who are destroying the moral fabric of America. We were assured that even if the ballot initiatives failed in the courts President Bush would push through a constitutional amendment, “The Defense of Marriage Act.”

Let's try for some fearless honesty, shall we? On the face of it, every one of those ballot initiatives and The Defense of Marriage Act are a sham. Having a few hundred thousand homosexuals get "married" means nothing as far as saving marriage and the family are concerned. If only evangelical Christians really wanted to save marriage and the family, but it's clear that we don't. If you're getting furious with me right now, may I suggest that it's because of media conditioning? Think with me for a moment. How can I say that we really don't want to save marriage? How can I say that all of those expensive initiatives were worthless? Am I in favor of homosexual marriage? Categorically I am not. But, let's pursue the truth wherever it leads. What effect will the legalization of homosexual "marriage" have on the disastrous state of marriage in this country? Absolutely none. Even our President is in favor of "civil unions." What's the difference between a homosexual marriage and a civil union? After reading all the arguments, I don't see any. These are meaningless categories created by Machiavellian hacks.

The brutal truth is this: We don't want homosexuals to destroy marriage because we heterosexuals want the freedom to do it ourselves. We enjoy our no consequences "serial monogamy." I would believe that all of those initiatives and the constitutional amendment meant something if they included a single change in the current law – the end of no-fault divorce. If we really want to save marriage shouldn't the first step be to make divorce difficult? It used to be. But, decades ago we heterosexuals decided that issues of morality should not be in question when a husband and wife want to burn their marriage vows. It was embarrassing and unnecessary to point a finger of guilt based on outmoded moral codes. It was embarrassing and unnecessary to let the world see the ugliness and immorality that had led two people to destroy their family. After all, when a marriage ends aren't both parties equally at fault? Why should we point a judgmental finger at one as opposed to another? That's the nauseating "wisdom" that prevailed.

Well, it's a lie. After being married almost 39 years and watching many friends go through divorce, I've discovered that in every case one person was much more at fault than the other. In the past, every divorce was a cautionary tale to those who were still married. Do you want to experience the opprobrium of society as you cast off your spouse? Well there is no more opprobrium and marriage means little. Do we want to make a serious legal statement that marriage between a man and a woman is vital to society? End no-fault divorce. But I assure you, it will be a cold day in Hell before a good conservative politician proposes that. After all many of them (like The Honorable Mr. Newt Gingrich) have already made use of no-fault divorce to toss away their spouses. And these are the people who propose to lead us in "Reshaping America."

So, we evangelical Christians stomped to the polls to "defend" marriage. With desperate prayers on our lips, we watched the tabulation of election results hoping against hope that our politicians would be elected so that marriage would be saved. Why did we bother when we aren't saving it in our own churches? Oh, yes, we sob about divorce, we counsel and cry and hug. And what good has it done? The divorce rate among evangelical Christians is the same as everywhere else in society if not a little higher. Do we really want to defend marriage? If the answer is yes, may I suggest that the first step is a period of agonizing repentance for our own sloth and hypocrisy? And then before we

set up rules to save marriage in society it might be a good idea to set up a few to save it in our own congregations. Here are four proposals to make a start:

1. To be a member of an evangelical church you must agree never to use pornography. Do we not all understand that pornography is a key component in the destruction of marriage? I have read hideous statistics about the use of pornography in evangelical churches that four out of ten men from pastors on down indulge regularly. Forget about saving marriage in society until we deal with such root diseases among ourselves. Forget about government controlling pornography if we tacitly sanction it through silence within our own congregations.
2. The only marriages performed in evangelical churches shall be “covenant marriages.” If you don’t know what those are do a web search. Simply stated, a covenant marriage is a contract that is much more difficult to dissolve than a typical set of marriage vows. The parties who agree to it know what they are doing and their commitment to making their marriage work is much deeper.
3. No marriage is performed for any couple who is living together until they have lived apart for at least six months, abstaining from sexual relations and undergoing in-depth *discipleship* counseling. The statistics are clear. People who live together before marriage have a much higher divorce rate and I have a sneaking suspicion that most of them are spiritual illiterates. If they knew what it meant to follow Jesus would it make a difference? I’m sure it would. So why do we shut our eyes to this destructive situation? Why don’t we do something about it?
4. For the party in a divorce who bears primary responsibility make his or her reprehensible actions mean something more than a big hug of welcome to the singles share group. Reinstigate church discipline for immorality. Stop being afraid to be called “judgmental.” Start judging righteously in dealing with sin.

If every evangelical church in the United States took such stands it would mean a true “defense of marriage.” From a foundation of righteousness we would regain our voice in calling society to repentance, which is the only hope for lasting cultural transformation. Will it happen? Not as long as we condemn others before we condemn ourselves. Not as long as we depend on a legislative agenda to save us from our sins. Forgive me for being cynical but I don’t think any of these proposals will be implemented. We aren’t quite that serious about saving marriage. So at least we should stop being hypocrites. Let’s forget defending “marriage” with constitutional amendments and ballot initiatives. Let’s welcome the Gay community into the civil unions that have replaced real marriage throughout our culture. At least we would be honest and there’s something to be said for that.

If you're still with me, read Part Three for the final installment in which we will examine the third temptation in the Curse of Conservatism – to let politics strangle our witness to the world.

© Coleman Luck 2005 All Rights Reserved