

Conservatism and Christianity

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Personal Introduction:

During my second year of teaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, I was seated with several colleagues in the cafeteria one day when David Wells joined us and said about me: “T. David is simultaneously the most conservative and the most liberal man I know,” to the delight of our mutual colleagues. When I’ve occasionally recounted the anecdote over the years, I tend to get three responses: Those who are well acquainted with me often chuckle knowingly; some others appear intrigued; and yet others give me the stereotypical deer-in-the-headlight stare. The deer-in-the-headlight-ers not only reveal that they are not close acquaintances, they also reveal that they are unaware of how flexible the terms “liberal” and “conservative” can be. David Wells may have been observing a paradox, but he was not observing a contradiction or an irony. He was simply aware of the differing nuances of each term and enjoying a *bon mot* (and *mot juste*, I suspect) at the mild expense of a junior colleague.

In less than two years, David and our chuckling colleagues had already learned that I was a vigorously and thoroughly orthodox Christian. I had read avidly the various Protestant confessions, and had read equally avidly some of the more acclaimed authors and defenders thereof, including John Calvin and British Puritans. American Puritans include additionally: Jonathan Edwards; Princetonians such as Archibald Alexander, Samuel Miller, Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield; Southern Presbyterians such as Robert Lewis Dabney, John B. Adger, John L. Girardeau, Thomas Smyth, and James Henley Thornwell. At the same time, I was known to join any clever prankster in a worthy cause whether student or colleague: Mrs. Annette Nicole and I once threw snowballs at another colleague who, during a talent show, had sung entirely too many German *lieder* by that point in the program; it was not uncommon for my classes to be reduced to disorder at things that I said; I enjoyed an ale or a cigar as much as anyone; and some students and a few wary colleagues regarded me as the institution’s *enfant terrible*.

Temperamentally, then, David knew that I was far from the retiring, reserved, parochial, fearful, reserved, reclusive, cautious, anal-retentive “conservative”; while theologically, he knew that I would grill any candidate for a faculty position thoroughly. If there were fads or trends in the evangelical community that implicitly compromised Protestant Orthodoxy, I would be among the first to raise a concerned voice; but if a good Bordeaux were uncorked, I would be the first to raise an unconcerned glass. Further, David understood that my defense of orthodoxy did not rest upon any nostalgic romanticizing of some moment in Christian history when theologians were infallible, nor did it rest upon intellectual inflexibility. To the contrary, one of my first published scholarly essays argued that the history of Protestant interpretation of Galatians—beginning with Calvin and Luther—had misunderstood the problem there substantially.¹ David knew he would as likely find on my living room table the *Discussions* of Robert Lewis Dabney or the *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* of Gloria Steinem.

David Wells’s observation may render me the least qualified person to write on the topic of conservatism, or it may render me the most qualified; readers will have to judge for themselves. But the anecdote at least explains why a substantial portion of my paper deals with definitions, because David was having double fun that day: fun at a junior colleague’s expense, and fun with the possibilities of language. In what follows, then, my paper will unfold in three parts: Definitions, Theological Reflections, and Observations.

Definitions

If academics do anything, we define. As our hapless students will wearily attest, to learn any particular academic discipline consists in large measure of learning its particular vocabulary. A well educated person, in part, has an extensive *general* vocabulary as well as a well developed *particular* vocabulary in a given discipline. So I merely continue this aspect of the academy

¹ T. David Gordon, “The Problem at Galatia,” *Interpretation* 41 (January, 1987): 32-43. And see my forthcoming *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians*, where I substantiate that fundamental criticism of the dominant Protestant reading while also criticizing the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” approach to the same matter, demonstrating (if nothing else) intellectual independence from both the past and the present.

when I suggest that as we discuss “Conservatism,” we would do well to consider some definitions. When people use the term “conservative,” they can mean several different things. Among the things they mean are (at a minimum) the following seven.

1. Parochial conservatism

Parochial conservatism is simply that: a temperamental unwillingness to consider change. For a variety of reasons, many individuals are simply complacent about the way things are. Some are even anxious or fearful about what is new, strange, or different, and so they are “conservative” in the sense that they tend to conserve the present situation, and rarely examine the present situation critically. When our town (Grove City, PA) was considering applying for federal and state funds to revitalize the downtown area, for instance, one of the town’s employees (whose office would necessarily play an important role in the proposed revitalization) asked: “What’s wrong with Grove City?” Well, compared to many other American towns, there isn’t a whole lot unusually wrong with Grove City, but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t be improved. But parochial conservatives content themselves with the way things are, and tend to be resistant to all change.

As I frequently tell my students, the real enemy of education is not ignorance; it is parochialism. Except for God himself, we are all ignorant of some things. I do not know the fundamental theorem of the Calculus; some of our Calculus professors cannot sight-read the Greek New Testament. So even people who might be regarded as “well educated” are ignorant of many matters. Parochialism—not ignorance—is the real enemy of education, because what we call “education” is actually *learning*; and would be better called that, because the participial ending suggests that it continues. A person who learns does not merely accumulate data; books and hard-drives can contain data perfectly well. A person who truly learns is a lifelong “*un-learner*.” Throughout life, a true learner is willing to *question* the values, insights, practices and ideas that his culture has handed to him; and to consider whether they are true and right or merely conventional. The parochial individual rarely, if ever, does this: If his parents ate

conventional American food, he eats conventional American food. If his parents attended the Lutheran church, he attends the Lutheran church. If his parents vacationed at the beach, he vacations at the beach. If his parents expended their leisure time passively watching electronic things like televisions, videos, or computers, he does the same. And even those young people who never recover from adolescent rebellion (and therefore, do the opposite of what their parents did) rarely or ever question this rebellion; they are parochial by rebelling just as every *other* adolescent has rebelled, without questioning whether adolescent rebellion is a good and helpful thing or not. My generation, with our constant harping about how we desired to be “non-conformists,” all wore the identical jeans and T-shirts; we were perhaps the most uniform dressers the world has ever known, because we were even parochial about our rebellion.

Education, for those of us who embrace the Socratic tradition, consists not merely of learning in the *additive* sense of tacking on a few more pieces of data to our current data bank. Learning in the Socratic sense is often *subtractive*; we examine the received tradition and determine to jettison parts thereof that do not withstand scrutiny, while, of course, retaining those things that do survive such scrutiny.² This, of course, is the real reason that compulsory education has never worked well and never will work well, despite the massive amounts of money and labor that have been thrown at it and will be thrown at it. We simply cannot *compel* a person to think, to question, to re-consider everything (or, in some cases, *anything*) he or she has ever known. To question one’s ideas, values or behaviors is both difficult and frightening, though ultimately rewarding. It is difficult because it is often time-consuming and complex; many of the values we inherit from our culture are partly wise and partly unwise, for instance, and it requires real mental effort to determine, for example, what is both helpful and unhelpful about democracy, about populism, about egalitarianism, about capitalism, about pluralism, etc. And it is frightening because once an individual discovers or is about to discover one area where

² This is the thesis of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell, 1969); later augmented by Postman’s non-retracting *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Laurel, 1987).

his inherited views are erroneous, it opens Pandora's Box to the possibility that *every* view he has inherited is erroneous. And many/most people just won't go there.

We who are academics constantly struggle with the question of whether we should assign paper topics to our students or permit them to select their own. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. On the one hand, all true learning is enhanced by an eager *desire* to understand; and having such motivation can often lead to hard work and well written papers. On the other hand, if a student desires to study capital punishment, for instance, and if this student has already come to believe that he dislikes the practice, the student will ordinarily write a terrible paper in which he never considers dispassionately the alternative view and the arguments of its proponents. That is, the non-parochial student does *well* if she selects her own topic, but the parochial student does *poorly* when she selects her own topic; and as educators, we cannot infallibly tell beforehand which student is which (though we can often tell after reading the paper, but, alas, it's too late then).

Our years of academic experience have taught us educators that compulsory education has driven the joy of discovery out of most of our students; yet the same years of experience have acquainted us with the small percentage that have miraculously survived the system intact, with the same joy of discovery they had when they were three years old and turned over a rock in the back yard to see what was beneath it. It is *for* these that we actually labor, and *only* these that we can genuinely help; but the parochial majority pay their bills and keep the institution afloat financially, so we treat them kindly also.

Parochial conservatives, like the poor, will be with us always. The amount of effort, patience, intellectual diligence, and humility that it takes to be otherwise is simply more than many people are willing to undertake.

2. Reactionary conservatism

Reactionary conservatism prefers what is twenty or fifty years old to what is recently proposed. When a given proposal is made for doing something new or different, some people

react almost immediately in a negative manner. Reactionary conservatives are similar to parochial conservatives, but tend to be more alarmist, both in their views and in their rhetoric. Reactionary conservatives tend to regard the outcomes of proposed changes as being dire and ordinarily irreversible.

If a parochial conservative hosts a television or radio show, he frequently becomes a reactionary conservative. Neither radio nor television has much patience for precision or nuance;³ each prefers the emotional jolt, and so extremism and alarmism suit those media better. Further, neither radio nor television treat history very well; they are much more at home with the present. One cannot televise dead people, nor conduct radio interviews with them. So alarmist conservatives prefer a medium that is content with looking at the present only in light of the immediate or recent past, to which they compare the present and determine that the present is in terrible shape.

3. Nostalgic conservatism

Nostalgic conservatism focuses on some earlier, perceived-to-have-been-ideal moment in cultural or personal history, and longs for “the good old days.” It is not merely resistant to future change; it tends to be resistant to the present also. Nostalgic conservatives long for a fantasy world where the unsettling dimensions of our present historical moment disappear, and their selective memory of the idealized past causes them to overlook its less-than-ideal realities.⁴ Stuck in a traffic jam on the commute home, a nostalgic conservative may long for the days of horse-and-buggy; but then, he has never washed manure-dust from his living room wallpaper as did city-dwellers in the nineteenth century. Christian nostalgics often long for “the good old days” of “Christian America” before the 1960s; African-Americans and I regard those days—

³ Ordinarily, the late William F. Buckley brought plenty of nuance to his *Firing Line*; but then, how many people watched it?

⁴ For a survey of the idea of historical decline, cf. Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997). Herman’s book is especially helpful if read in juxtaposition with Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). Each is a fine intellectual history of two very different (and, in my estimation, equally erroneous) ideas.

when African-Americans could not sit in the front of a public bus—less cheerily and less longingly.

Well-thinking Theists are only nostalgic for one moment in history—that season in the garden before Adam rebelled and was cursed. Since then, every historical moment has been marred by the twin realities of human rebellion and God’s curse, each appearing in varying form but consisting of the same reality. And while I may not be happy about the possibility of some terrorist getting nukes, I doubt Eisenhower was happy about the Soviets getting them, I doubt the Irish were very happy with the potato famine, and I doubt European Jews were very happy about Chancellor Hitler. If H. G. Wells’s time machine could take me to another moment in post-Fall history, I would discover the same realities there that mar my present reality: rebellion and mortality around me and rebellion and mortality within me.

4. Status quo conservatism

Status quo conservatism defends and promotes the interests of those who, at any particular moment in any particular place, enjoy advantages—whether political, economic, or social—over others. For roughly the last half-century in the United States, for instance, the Republican Party has ordinarily been associated with the status quo. How Mr. Lincoln’s abolitionist Republican party became the party of the status quo that resisted the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s is a riddle that might defy historical explanation; and it is well beyond my pay grade, as they say, to attempt to do so. But the perception that the Republican party in the last half-century has been the party of the status quo is not without merit.

Many professing Christians are status quo conservatives; they send money to James Dobson to promote “family values,” while divorcing at the same rate as the rest of the country. They object to extramarital sex but haven’t succeeded well in practicing marital sex. They want to “put prayer back in schools” but often do not attend church, where it is already perfectly legal to pray. Many of the reactionary conservatives of the Gingrich/Falwell era appear to outsiders as

being status quo conservatives who were simply unwilling to see their cultural hegemony continue to decline in the post-1960s era.

5. Sociological conservatism

Sociological conservatism proceeds on the premise that human societies do not easily sustain rapid change. The observation is true enough in itself, but it has little prescriptive value. (Rapid change when the Soviet Union fell was probably difficult, but perhaps better than the alternative.) This was Robert Bork's approach in *The Tempting of America*, that the founders had given primary power to the legislative branch, a branch that would introduce change slowly in response to its constituencies; whereas judicial activism promotes rapid social change. Sociological conservatism recognizes that cultures are not mere conglomerates of individuals; cultures convey shame, honor, and other values, and each develops its own means of communicating such in more than merely linguistic ways. A westerner may nod his head while passing another pedestrian, where an easterner might bow slightly; in some cultures, making eye contact with strangers is approved, whereas in others it is disapproved. Culturally relative though they be, such expressions of courtesy are useful, and without them it is difficult for cultures to function. As an illustration, consider the once-common American convention of opening a door for another if one arrived at it first; many of us were taught from childhood to do this as an expression of courtesy, only to find in early adulthood that feminists regarded the gesture as an insult. Well, it is difficult for a culture to function smoothly when a gesture *intended* to express courtesy and honor is *regarded* as expressing discourtesy or dis-honor. What fun would it be to give the uni-digital salute to road-hogging truckers on Interstate 80 if they did not understand the gesture as intended?

6. Historical conservatism

Historical conservatism recognizes some values in previous cultures worth retaining. Sometimes it merely recognizes the value of remembering things that have been culturally influential, even if it does not regard those things as honorable. We Americans preserve memory

of the African slave trade not because it was honorable, but because it helps explain where we are at this moment in history. Similarly, our German friends preserve memory of the Holocaust for the same reason. The so-called “canon wars” in the 1980s in the academic world revolved around whether it was proper to continue to propagate memory of those works of art (especially literature) that had been influential in the West, for better or for worse, for many centuries, and historic conservatives such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Allan Bloom suggested that it was indeed worth doing so.⁵

Historical conservatism is the mirror opposite of what I call “contemporaneity”; and, in contrast to all dialectic thought, it proposes a more evolutionary than revolutionary interpretation of history, and it promotes historical *memory* even of its revolutionary moments. In the many interesting studies of the founding of our Republic in the last twenty years, one cannot but observe how many authors suggest that while the French Revolution was a real revolution, ours was more of an “evolution,” noting that even the language of the founding documents suggested that “in the course of human events” certain moments naturally followed others, and noting that many of the basic structures of our Republic were borrowed from England, e.g. division of powers, a bi-cameral legislature, British Common Law, etc.⁶ Insofar as these analysts are correct, our new Republic was not entirely new, nor did it intend to cut itself off from all of its cultural antecedents, especially those that were regarded as valuable. Several of the former colonies, for instance, still established the Anglican church for some time after the Revolution ended; and in none was the antipathy towards Christianity anything like it was in France’s bloody Revolution.

Historical conservatives, in fact, often call attention to these two great 18th-century revolutions, comparing and contrasting them on precisely this revolution/evolution score. The

⁵ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Should Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Bloom, with Saul Bellow, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). And cf. the interesting narrative by *New Yorker* film reviewer, David Denby, who returned in middle age to his *alma mater* Columbia, to take its humanities core again, narrated in his *Great Books* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

⁶ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies in the Founding of the Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2008), and, to a lesser degree, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000); but especially Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe’s Poorest Nation Created Our World and Everything in It* (New York: Crown, 2001).

American Revolution was much less radical; but then, also much less bloody. Further, perhaps precisely because it was less radical, it has lasted much longer. Robespierre's bloody revolution not only guillotined the royalists, it also then guillotined the more moderate *girondists*, and others as well, roughly 1,400 people in about 50 days, almost none being accorded a proper trial.⁷ Slightly over 25 years later, a Bourbon king (Louis XVIII) was back on the throne. And while France has had eleven constitutions since their revolution, we Americans continue to employ the same original one. Few things troubled the strained relationship between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams more than their differing assessments of France's Revolution. Ten constitutions (and countless beheadings, burnings of Paris, etc.) later, it is comparatively easy to judge that Adams' historical conservatism was, at least in this instance, more correct.

7. Anthropological conservatism

Anthropological conservatism recognizes that humans have not changed; that while times or circumstances change, those who inhabit those changing times are essentially the same. What has largely disappeared from public discourse has been the expression "human nature." Such language was common earlier, and the documents produced by the American founders were replete with the understanding of "natural" rights and even "nature's God." Consider how the Declaration begins:

"When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of *nature* and of *nature's* God entitle them..." (emphases mine).

Nor was such language distinctive to North America or the British Isles. On August 26, 1789, the National Assembly of France approved *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, indicating in its preference that because they believed "that the ignorance, neglect, or

⁷ During the infamous Reign of Terror from 1793 until 1794 between 16,000 and 40,000 people were killed. Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

contempt of the *rights* of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the *natural*, unalienable, and sacred rights of man” (emphases mine). Article 2 declared: “The aim of all political association is *the preservation of the natural* and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.” Article 4 similarly affirmed: “Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the *natural rights of each man has no limits* except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights (emphases mine).” Note the relationship between the language of “nature/natural,” on the one hand, and the language of “rights” on the other.

In the political thought of the eighteenth century, political structures were proposed that would accord with human nature; any violation of such human nature was, therefore, a violation of a “right.” In their thinking, then, governments did not *confer* such rights; they *recognized* them as existing in nature. Their hope for a lasting political experiment was a reflex of their belief in human nature: Insofar as a constitution understood and respected human nature, it would be perpetually useful. Note the language of the Preamble to our Constitution:

“We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves *and our Posterity*, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” (emphasis mine)

How could the framers have confidence that their constitution would serve their “posterity”? Because while human *circumstances* would understandably change as they always had before, human *nature* would not change.

The framers were, in this sense, anthropological conservatives. They had a doctrine or at least an implicit idea of what constituted human *nature*, and they regarded that human nature to be *unchanging*. Fish will swim; and birds will fly; it is in their respective natures. Human nature also has some distinctive traits to it, and any well ordered government will adjust itself to such traits. Returning to the Declaration, consider these words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Note how easily they spoke of “all men” as sharing certain common traits, and therefore, certain common and unalienable rights; and note that governments are instituted “to *secure* these rights.” Note also, somewhat surprisingly, that in the very act of establishing a government, they provide grounds for its own demise: “That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the *right* of the people to alter or to abolish it...”

Today, even that small number of us who agree with the substance of this declaration would never dream of saying, “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” because few of our fellow citizens believe in an unchanging human nature. The various liberal or radical or progressive policies we routinely encounter are all a reflex of the basic premise that the human *condition* is constantly changing, and there is no unchanging human *nature* to which policy is conformable. But the Founders, unlike us, were, indeed, anthropological conservatives.⁸

Christianity and Conservatism

Christianity is both conservative and progressive in its essential nature; conservative because it is a very old religion and a tradition, with roots in Abraham, and progressive because both the original creation mandate and the redemption mandate demand progress.

⁸ Indeed, much of the discussion about “original intent” of the Constitution misses this more basic difference. Those who object to what they call a “strict” view of original intent just cannot imagine that any document can possibly be timeless, because they simply do not believe there is such a thing as unchanging human nature. They reject not merely the notion that we could discover the original intent of the framers; they reject the notion that, if we could, that intent could possibly be germane to people who live in another time.

The Abrahamic Tradition

Some readers are familiar with the hymn entitled “The God of Abraham praise.” Originally written by a Jewish judge around 1400, it was paraphrased by Thomas Olivers in 1765. The lyrics are based on the thirteen creeds of Moses Maimonides (12th century). The paraphrase by Thomas Olivers is more explicitly Christian, containing stanzas such as these:

The God of Abraham praise, whose all sufficient grace
Shall guide me all my happy days, in all my ways.
He calls a worm His friend, He calls Himself my God!
And He shall save me to the end, thro’ Jesus’ blood.

But most of the other stanzas are hardly changed from the Jewish original, and could be as well sung by a synagogue as a church, including such as the following:

The goodly land I see, with peace and plenty bless’d;
A land of sacred liberty, and endless rest.
There milk and honey flow, and oil and wine abound,
And trees of life forever grow with mercy crowned.

Why would Olivers compose/paraphrase such a hymn for Christian congregations? Well, in part because of the apostle Paul’s saying such things as these:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.... the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. (Gal. 3:7-9, 14, 16; cf. also Rom. 4:9-12)

Thomas Olivers followed the apostle Paul in understanding the Christian gospel itself, preached to all nations, to be the fulfillment of the pledge God had made to Abraham to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham’s “descendant.” Thus, the roots of the Christian faith go back not merely two millennia to the apostles, but four millennia to Abraham. Our faith is a religious tradition that is four millennia old, and we “conserve” by that faith memory of the

realities pledged to Abraham in letters such as Galatians and Romans. That faith, recorded in Holy Scriptures, teaches and conserves two great mandates.

Creation Mandate

The creation mandate, also called “cultural mandate,” is recorded in Genesis 1:27-28: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Here the human race in its corporate sense is commanded to exercise responsible rule over the entire created order. Implicit in this command will be a growing ability to do this well, and perhaps Moses recorded initial progress towards this several chapters later:

And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron (Gen. 4:19-22).

Here we have an early record of agriculture, music, and industry.⁹ While the original order created by God was “very *good*” (Gen. 1:31), it was not yet very *developed*. God did not create the lyre or pipe, nor did He forge instruments of bronze and iron; creatures made in His image made these things. And this process continued; a contemporary symphony has more than lyres and pipes, and metallurgists in the twenty-first century develop many alloys of various metals (or forego metal altogether in favor of a polymer). This mandate to develop the created order,

⁹ It is not germane to this circumstance to develop the importance of Gen. 4 for appreciating music. Moses regarded it as being as significant as agriculture or industry, and in his brief record of the progress of the human race, he placed music right between the two. The musical relativism so common in our culture tends to regard music merely as a commercial activity or as a personal consumerist choice. Cf. my *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

therefore, has a progressive dimension, as the human race is expected to continue to find ways of discovering the potential of the rich created order God originally made.

On the other hand, this very progressive task of ruling the created order is also a conservative task; it is the result of a mandate that is as old as the human race itself. We “conserve” memory of this mandate even as we progressively fulfill it. Further, part of the fulfillment of this mandate requires conserving all of the earlier developed tools, skills, and understandings that are still useful to us. A “conservationist,” virtually by definition, “conserves” those things ordinarily in the created order that will continue to be helpful to the human race. In the last fifty years or so, there has been a fairly dramatic increase in the number of power tools available; my grandfather had none, but I have a half-dozen or more. I have not discarded, however, my manual tools, many of which are still very useful for various tasks. My laser-guided power mitre saw is fairly progressive, whereas my hammer is fairly conservative.

Redemption Mandate

After his resurrection and before his ascension, Christ delivered a comprehensive mandate to the eleven disciples:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

We observe that this mandate is progressive in two ways: First, the mandate extends geographically to comprehend “all nations.” While the original apostolic generation made substantial progress, it did not reach “all nations” in a single generation; and this mandate is to continue (make progress) until all nations are so comprehended. Second, we note that the

mandate extends chronologically until “the end of the age.” This disciple-making activity is to continue until history itself closes.

While this “great commission” is expressly progressive in geographic and chronological ways, it is implicitly progressive in other ways. Surely as modes of travel develop, the church will employ those modes of travel in reaching “all nations”; and if her message is to be intelligible, she will need to make progress in learning the various languages of the nations of the earth. She will also make progress in various communication technologies, publishing hymnals, Bibles, catechisms, and other instructional material. I study the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament (as well as the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Jewish Pseudepigrapha and the Hebrew version of the Dead Sea Scrolls) on my computer, and can run rapid grammatical or lexical searches that would have been the envy of any student of the Holy Scriptures prior to 1990. The ability to study the Scriptures and those literatures approximate to the Scriptures in time and language is surely “progress.”

This very commission, progressive as it is both explicitly and implicitly, is also conservative. It is now almost two thousand years old, and when the church pursues this task, she conserves and perpetuates a very old mission. Further, the mandate requires that we propagate the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, teaching that is nearly two millennia old. This mandate also requires that we conserve and perpetuate the ancient Christian rite of baptism; so every step of “progress” in fulfilling this mandate also “conserves” the doctrine and rites of the ancient Christian church.

Theologically, we may justly say that Christianity is a religious tradition that is four thousand years old, a tradition that conserves and perpetuates one mandate that derives from the beginning of human history and another that is two thousand years old. At the same time the fulfilling of these two mandates will not be completed until the conclusion of human history, and therefore, they are to be pursued progressively.

Observations

It will be evident from the manner of my descriptions that I carry no brief for the first four forms/definitions of conservatism that I described earlier; parochial, reactionary, nostalgic, and status quo conservatives receive no encouragement from me (And many of them have always regarded me with a certain amount of justifiable suspicion; all of them *should* do so.). On the other hand, I believe a good, though relative, case can be made for sociological and historical conservatism, and that a virtually airtight theological case can be made for anthropological conservatism.

The relative case for sociological and historical conservatism is relative in two ways: First, the particular social conventions and particular national/cultural histories differ from one another, and are, therefore, of a value that is relative to each culture rather than absolute. And second, not every social convention or historical memory need be preserved by every society. With these two qualifications, however, we can make the relative case for each.

Think of the efficiency alone of historical conservatism: One can make a particular point about a public policy matter simply by saying something like: "I believe that this is most consistent with the values expressed in the Gettysburg Address." In a single *apropos* sentence, one has spoken volumes. Without knowledge of one's cultural history, one can neither employ such an efficient statement nor understand the point another makes when she does so.

In the case of sociological conservatism, the case is even stronger. All cultures develop ways of communicating shame and honor. Sometimes these ways become very complex, as in those Oriental cultures that have four or five different ways of bowing, or in Indian culture in which each of the castes conveys honor differently to superior and inferior castes. So the particular means by which cultures convey honor or shame are, of course, relative to those cultures, but conveying honor is *not* relative; it is a mandate required by Holy Scripture. Moses commanded the Israelites: "Honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12), a command repeated by Jesus (Mat. 15:4; 19:19; Mark 7:10; 10:19; Luke 18:20) and his apostle (Eph. 6:2) in the New Testament, who also commanded us: "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10).

Now, let me ask a question: How do we honor our parents, and how do we outdo one another in showing honor? Our *cultures* teach us how to do this: In one culture, it may be a simple bow; in another it might mean standing when another enters a room or holding a door for another. But without some social convention, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to convey honor towards someone else. So when a culture jettisons all cultural conventions, on the mere ground that they are man-made or relative, such a culture jettisons at the same time the very possibility of fulfilling this mandate to convey honor. So, while there might be *some* cultural conventions that can be safely jettisoned (I'm not sure many women wear white gloves to church as my mother did in the early 1960s, nor need they.), if we jettison all such conventions, we lose the capacity to convey honor, on appropriate occasions and in appropriate ways, to others who are made in God's image. And this brings us to the strong, absolute case for anthropological conservatism.

God created all that He created purposefully; and since His purposes do not fail, everything He has made has a *nature* that accords with its created purpose, none more so than creation's crown, the *Imago Dei*. On a creaturely scale, the human—and the human alone—bears and reflects the image of God. The first human did; the last human will, as will every human in between. This unchanging human nature provides a ground for thinking about ethics, political theory, and public policy in ways that can endure through time. All language of human “rights,” for instance, derives from an implicit understanding of human *nature*. No legislature can grant to a fish the “right” to fly or to a bird the “right” to swim; it is not in their respective natures. “Rights” only make sense if their absence would be “wrong,” and this can only be the case when ethics, public policy, and political constitutions are answerable to human *nature*. No legislature can grant Gordon the “right” to play basketball in the NBA, because it is not in Gordon's *nature* to do so; all a legislature can grant to Gordon is the “right” to *pursue* a career of his choice within the range of those that are lawful.

Most of the so-called “conservatives” I know are of the kind for which I carry no brief and utter no encouragement. I can think of no good defense for parochial, reactionary, nostalgic, and status quo conservatism. And I can think only of relative defenses of sociological and

historical conservatism, making the general observation that ordinarily societies cannot change rapidly and successfully, and that ordinarily it is useful to acknowledge the past that has created us. But anthropological conservatism is capable of an absolute argument, and therefore, David Wells was right about me: I am probably the most conservative man he knows or you know, because my conservatism is that anthropological conservatism grounded in the orthodox Christian belief that every human bears the image of God, though flawed in our fallen condition. *Some* of the wisdom, therefore, humans discovered in the past will still prove wise in the present and future (A soft answer still turns away wrath.); *some* of the art humans took pleasure from in the past will give pleasure in the present and the future (Michelangelo's *David* is not a fad; it will be here when "Fiddy" is gone, if he is not gone already.); *some* of the ideas previous humans regarded as true will be regarded as true in the future (The fundamental theorem of the Calculus is, I believe, secure.); and *some* of the public policies and political constitutions that conformed themselves to unchanging human nature will still serve individuals and societies well in the future, such as those that honor the reality that humans, by nature, are free to pursue happiness in a manner that accords with their respective consciences, provided that they do not harm others in the process.

A public policy in Poland that restricted Marie Curie's liberty by prohibiting her from studying in the university injured both *her* aspirations *and* the public welfare, because her great discoveries in radioactivity were retarded by her need to expatriate to France.¹⁰ One does not

¹⁰ Arguably, a public policy that requires compulsory education, often deceptively labeled "public education," violates human liberty, because it effectively robs parents of both the responsibility and privilege of determining how best to prepare their particular children, whom they brought into the world, for a productive and happy adulthood. Such a policy disrespects the *nature* of the parental role vis-à-vis the child; and is inherently flawed, therefore, even though many regard it as a necessary expedient of the welfare state, another unnatural institution. It also disrespects the liberty of the child to prepare for a legitimate calling (e.g. carpentry) that does not require twelve years of academic preparation. And where were the "conservatives" when this totalitarian measure swept the United States in the nineteenth century, beginning in Massachusetts in 1852 and finishing in Mississippi in 1918? Other than the Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-98), I can think of no notable public American opponent of the measure. Cf. Dabney's "The State Free School System Imposed Upon Virginia by the Underwood Constitution," *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 3 (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee on Education, 1892), 238-71, and "Secularized Education," Dabney, *Discussions*, 3: 272-294. Dabney was following in the footsteps of a somewhat better known Virginian, a Mr. Jefferson, who had earlier said, "It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible transportation and education of the infant against the will of the father." Saul K. Padover, *Jefferson* (New

need to be a feminist *per se* to argue that humans ought to be at liberty to pursue whatever honorable goals they desire. How many other women in Madame Curie's generation (or earlier generations) might have made similarly substantial breakthroughs in science, medicine, or other significant humane pursuits, but were prevented from doing so by policies that restricted their liberty? Nor is this question as inconsequential as it sounds. If we examined the fifty top discoveries or innovations in human history, and asked what might have been the consequences of each of them occurring, say, twenty-five years earlier, we would recognize that the delay of such can have enormous consequences. Consider this example: By the early 1870s, Britain had prototype steam-driven tractors. Had these been available in the late 1840s, slavery would have been economically obsolescent long before the American Civil War. Not only would the slaves have been emancipated earlier, 600,000 lives would have been saved.

Liberty, in this sense, is a much more enduring and important idea, in my judgment than democracy, because it is grounded, anthropologically, in what the human essentially is; whereas participating in governance is not inherent in our nature. As citizens of a republican democracy, we almost assume that such participation in the governmental process is natural to the human; but it has not universally been regarded as so. Plato, for instance, regarded governance as a rather degraded and degrading profession (as do I—it is like herding cats), and spent part of his *Republic* making a convincing case not merely for *why* philosophers should rule—which he regarded as almost self-evident—but for *how* we could reasonably expect them to stoop to such a degrading task. His well known parable of the cave was designed to answer just this question. Liberty, but not democracy, is a reflection of human nature; a conscientious being lives before God, answerable to God as Maker, and therefore, Judge; and restrictions on liberty always restrict this basic aspect of human nature. There is a kind of principled libertarianism, though not

York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 169. In England, of course, it was opposed by the philosopher and political theorist Herbert Spencer, in Chapter XXII, "The Limit of State Duty," *Social Statics: or, The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed*, (London: John Chapman, 1851), 274-295. Not surprisingly to friends of Grove City College, the entire idea was roundly criticized by Murray N. Rothbard of the Mises Institute in *Education: Free and Compulsory* (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute, 1999), originally published in *The Individualist* (April and July-August, 1971).

absolute, therefore, that ought to be an element of all discussions of public policy that regard human nature as unchangeably free.¹¹

Progressivism has ordinarily attracted a disproportionate number of secularists and atheists for this reason: Progressivism disregards unchanging human *nature*, and tends to think exclusively in terms of ever-changing human *conditions*. No individual who regards human nature as fixed—fixed by God and in the image of God—can be entirely comfortable with a worldview that functionally denies anything unchanging or permanent about human nature. Yes, individual progressivist policy recommendations may be just, right, and prudent; but the general orientation of progressivist thought is atheistic; to deny the image of God in the human is scarcely better than denying the existence of God *per se*.

My own conservatism, therefore, is fairly intractable. My sociological and historical conservatism are relative, and therefore, somewhat flexible; but my anthropological conservatism is a very basic tenet of my Christian faith and theism, and no more negotiable than that faith itself.

¹¹ The reason individual liberty cannot be absolute is because while the human is an individual, and therefore, individually accountable to God, the human is also a social creature, made in the image of an everlastingly Triune, and therefore, social God. The wellbeing of the human commonwealth, therefore, is always an appropriate consideration *also* in questions of public policy. These two concerns for individual liberty *and* the public wellbeing would always have been in some tension, even before the Fall; since then, we can only expect that they will perhaps be in even greater tension. My “principled libertarianism,” therefore, is not an absolute libertarianism. I am very content with the law that requires me to drive on the right side of the road; the public welfare demands that I not express my liberty by driving on the left side while everyone else pursues a contrary policy.