

Why I Believe in Liberalism

One of the most confusing and ambiguous words in the English language is the word "liberal." It is seldom used with emotional detachment. However it may be used it is applied to all fields - religious, political, social, economic. It is used both as a term of acclaim and denunciation. Heated controversies make use of it with great abandon. Some ~~who~~ ^{ing} want to smear a man call him a "liberal." Yet you praise a man when you call him a "liberal giver."

Frequently the word is placed over against what seems to be its popular opposite - "conservative." A conservative is generally taken to be the opposite of a liberal. Yet a man may be known frequently as a liberal in religion and a conservative in politics, or a conservative in religion and a liberal in politics. It all adds up to quite a jumble and sometimes one feels that the words liberal and conservative ought to be discarded altogether.

In reading an article recently about the great Swiss Theologian, Karl Barth, I was greatly amused to learn that Barth, who is the leader of one of the strongest schools of theological thought, constantly smokes a pipe. The writer reported: "It is a saying among his followers that as a man believes, so he smokes: Barthians smoke pipes, liberals smoke cigarettes, the orthodox smoke cigars, pietists don't smoke at all." (C.C. March 17, 1954, p. 333, by Maria Fuerth-Sulzbach) I am not quite sure where this leaves me. I am more inclined to believe that a liberal, or any body else, for that matter, is to be more accurately known for what he does rather than what he smokes.

I would like today to bring some kind of definition and meaning to the idea of ~~xxxx~~ liberalism. In so doing I would like to take my stand and declare my faith as a liberal. I would like to indicate what I mean by liberalism. I must insist that the only kind of liberalism which I espouse ~~xxxx~~ is that which I shall presently describe. Perhaps I should say that I will describe the kind of liberal I would like to be.

It seems to me that a great deal of difficulty with this term could be dispensed with if we used it more accurately in according with its real meaning and connotations. The Latin root word is "liberalis" which pertains to a free man. I would like to call your attention to the fact that a family of words has been born from this beginning: "generous," "free", and "liberty." At the very beginning I can say that because I believe in

what those words stand for I take my stand as a liberal. They provide the basic meanings for my faith.

It is also my faith that the life of generosity, freedom, and liberty for all grows out of the Christian life which is pretty well signalized by these words from the New Testament Letter to the Ephesians: "I . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." With that as a spiritual background I want now to suggest three factors which have led me to believe in liberalism.

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I believe in ~~this kind of~~ liberalism in the first place because I believe in the validity and necessity of reason. Those who have championed causes regarded as liberal ~~have~~ been those who have insisted upon the rational processes of man as being essential to his welfare. Indeed the power of reason is thought to be a necessary ingredient of faith. On the other hand those who have inveighed against liberalism in the religious field, have been those who generally have under-rated the intellectual tools of man in his quest for faith.

It is my conviction that this element of liberalism is part and parcel of the philosophy of Protestantism. Protestants have always insisted upon the Right of Private Judgment. They have not always upheld reason, indeed they have under-emphasized ^{and attacked.} it. But I believe that the necessity of reason in our experience of faith is inextricably implied in the right of the private judgment.

I believe in liberalism because I believe that all ideas must at one stage be submitted to rational examination. Even the most cherished beliefs must come before the court of reason. They must be tried there and, if necessary found wanting. I do not think that reason is the final installment or level of faith, but I believe our minds must be critically employed as we arrive at truth, including spiritual truth.

One of the great philosopher's and rationalists, Immanuel Kant, set down a rule which I accept: "Act in conformity with that maxim and that maxim only which you can at the same time will to be universal law." (quoted by Niebuhr in MORAL MAN AND IMM. SOC. p.29)

This makes one think hard.

If we act only upon ideas which are submitted to such a court we are living lives of reason.

It takes intellectual courage for a person thus to examine his own concepts.

Somewhere recently I came upon this sentence: "The best measure of a man's mind is the importance of the things he is willing to argue about." You can pretty well ^{measure} obtain the intellectual acumen and depth of a man's mind by considering the ideas he will argue about. I should say that among the liberals I admire there is a largesse of intellect which permits them to argue only about great and expansive ideas. *They lack pettiness.*

We live in an anti-intellectual age which denounces and distrusts the intellect. Those who lead the intellectual life are deemed to be dangerous and they are denounced as "xxx egg-heads," "double-domes," and impractical dreamers. Our age has become so practical and so terribly afraid that we mistrust the mind which tampers with and tries out new ideas. Yet a true liberal is never afraid of ideas. - even new ideas. He rejoices in them because he rejoices in the truth.

One of the great philosophers in American history, James Harvey Robinson, once wrote:

Those who have studied the characteristics of savage life are always struck by its deadly conservatism, its needless restraints on the freedom of the individual, and its hopeless routine. Man, like plants and animals, in general, tends to go on from generation to generation, living as nearly as may be the life of his forbears. Changes have to be forced upon him by hard experiences, and he is ever prone to find excuses for slipping back into older habits, for these are likely to be simpler, less critical, more spontaneous - more closely akin, in short, to his animal and primitive xxx promptings. - MIND IN THE MAKING, p. 66

And yet, if that is true, there have been great champions of the intellect among the conservatives. There has been a golden era in the tradition of ~~xxx~~ conservatism which has produced brilliant minds. It is often lamented, however, that the present time has seen a serious decline in the intellectual fruits of those who defend conservatism. John Stuart Mill, the great English philosopher who was a giant among the liberal intellectuals of his day, repeatedly urged all liberals to become acquainted with the powerfully conservative mind of Coleridge. Mill and Coleridge differed ~~xxx~~ sharply all down the line, but Mill had great respect for Coleridge's brilliance ~~of mind~~. Once he said that the prayer of every true partisan of liberalism should be:

Lord, enlighten thou our enemies . . ;sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their reasoning powers. We are in danger from their folly, not from their wisdom.: their weakness is what fills us with apprehension, not their strength. (quoted in Lionel Trilling's THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION, p. 6)

Mill meant of course that the intellectual keenness of conservatives would force liberals to examine their own positions more closely for the detection of flaws and weaknesses.

This is what I believe distinguishes liberalism, ^{it} be~~it~~ religious or political or social. Liberals are never content with intellectual complacency or bigotry. They seek the truth passionately and unrelentingly. And the mark of liberalism is always the respect it has for another sentence from the Ephesian Letter: "Speaking the truth in love." (4:15)

-II-

In the second place I believe in liberalism because it has a fundamental concern for the welfare of on'es human brothers above the concern for oneself. There is in this kind of ~~xl~~liberalism a concern for others which "seeks not its own." To say that "whosoever would lose his life that he might find it" is to express the spirit of liberalism.

Rufus Jones has defined a liberal "Primarily as a person who wants to 'set at liberty' those who are bound.' He wants to 'enlarge the empire of man's spiritual estate.' In addition to that he stands for the method of free inquiry, the right to think boldly and honestly." (RUFUS JONES SPEAKS TO OUR TIME, ed. by Fosdick, p. 192)

This was true ^{of} ~~the~~ the great American patriot, Thomas Paine. One time he heard it said, "Where liberty is there is my home." Whereupon Paine rejoined, "Where liberty is not, there is my home." Paine stood, I believe, in the great tradition of liberalism for which I speak.

Our present President of the United State, Dwight Eisenhower, has said the same: "To be true to one's own freedom is to protect and defend the freedom of all." (quoted in Christ. Cent. Sept. 29, 1954, p. 1176)

This kind of a liberal cannot help being troubled by the sorrows and distresses of his human brothers. For example, it is a matter of deep anguish to him that

50% of the world's people at the present time, most of whom live in East Asia, are living on 9% of the world's goods; and that 12% of the world's peoples are living on 65% of the world's goods. Now quite apart and above the clashes of ideologies that concerns the man's whose heart is essentially generous and free. He carries that knowledge in his heart and it has the weight of a cross. In his own mind he knows that this concern has nothing to do with the espousal of the communist religion, but he must suffer being smeared as a communist for what he says he believes. *You can call him a communist, but you will have to say the same of Jesus who fed the 5000.*

I think the liberal concern for others was wonderfully expressed in a letter I received last fall from a young couple who had just returned to Africa as missionaries following their first furlough. Lawrence and Ruth Robinson had been friends of ours' in seminary and we greatly cherish their friendship and admire their devotion to Christ's service:

As we leave the United States, we are thankful for this year we have had "at home." We are glad for the wonderful friendships made or renewed, appreciative of all the help from you folks. It is a fortunate thing to be an American. There are those who fail, we think, to appreciate this, who do not realize how less fortunate most people in the world are, who do not see our wonderful opportunity to help others. Let us pray God to show us how to use our advantages for our own and our brother's welfare, throughout the world.

-Aboard the S. S. ~~Km~~ Ninkt, off Norfolk, Va., Sept. 27, 1954.

They are the kind of people I would call great liberals because they feel this deep concern ~~in~~ for those ~~whom~~ with whom they would share what they have.

Last summer as I was driving home from Michigan I came through a town called Liberty. Suddenly I was struck by the significance of a sign just outside the corporation limits, which reads: "Liberty - Reduce Speed." That has become for me a parable ~~of the meaning~~ lighting up the meaning of both liberty and liberalism. For a liberal is one who ~~xx~~ believes so passionately in liberty and welfare for all that he is willing to reduce his own speed of travel and consumption of pleasures and satisfactions that liberty might be extended to all. Real liberty, real welfare is achieved when those who have the greatest liberty are willing to reduce their own welfare for the sake of others. Only then are they truly free!

A recent book reviewer has written concerning the contrast between Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln during the days of their respective leadership in the Civil War.

His comment was this:

To a large extent the Southern government was the one-man show of Jefferson Davis. Davis excelled in intellect and integrity, but he often antagonized strong associates and he failed to infuse the masses with sustained enthusiasm. . . In Lincoln they (the North) had a superb statesman - one especially outstanding in sensing the public temper and in eliciting cooperation. In contrast to Davis, Lincoln had a consuming passion for his nation's cause - which to him meant extension of human freedom, vindication of democratic government and the building of a better world.

-book rev. by Bell I. Wiley of Allan Nevins' book THE STATESMAN-SHIP OF THE CIVIL WAR., N.Y. Times Book Rev. Sept. 27, '53, p.6

Because of his deep concern for the spiritual and material welfare of all mankind it is the liberal who usually champions the ~~more~~ oneness of ~~the whole~~ all mankind. It is he who ~~works~~ works for One World, who labors for the improvement of the United Nations. These things he does because of his generous concern for all men - their liberty, their welfare, their peace. Again the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of this: ". . . eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Likewise it is the liberal who feels the injustice heaped upon the colored races of the world. Sensing their plight and sharing their sorrow he works unrelentingly for the improvement of race relations and the brotherhood of all mankind.

I think the unusual young bishop of India, Lesslie Newbigin, has described the liberalism of the Christian aptly in these words: "The mark of the man in Christ will be that he is more eager to claim freedom for his brother than for himself, and more ready to submit himself to good order than to impose it on his brother. In any case the fundamental principle will always be the love which seeks not its own good, but the common good of the body." (THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD, p. 116)

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In the third place I believe in liberalism because I believe that the Christian is deeply motivated and made generous and loving toward his fellow men because he has perceived the gracious and generous nature of God who has poured out on him his grace and love. The Christian is liberal because he understands how liberal God has been toward him. His liberalism is embedded in God's grace and love.

Liberalism then, as I see it, is profoundly religious. It is tremulous before the presence of God. It bows down and worships the spirit of Him who gave His only begotten Son - an act of divine love which forever assures us of the liberal nature of God

And in this religiously motivated liberalism one feels his own unworthiness. He recognizes and confesses his sin and weakness. And it is ~~in~~ the recognizing and confessing of his sin that he comes to the enlightened understanding that he must love his neighbor as himself. Hence the flow of generous acts and thoughts.

He who has received an overwhelming share of God's grace and generosity, and recognizes his gifts as coming from God, can afford to be liberal. He can afford to share. Those whose lives are strangely pinched by poverty and burdened with sorrows cannot so easily share. Much shall be expected from him to whom much has been given, and therefore it is only right that he who has received so liberally shall be liberal in all of his deeds.

The great religious philosopher, Nicolas Berdyaev, once declared: "The question of bread for myself is a material question; but the question of bread for my neighbors, for everybody, is a spiritual and a religious question." This is the way true liberalism is born: in a sense of the religious, a sense of the presence of God.

Much criticism has been well directed at liberalism in general. It has been accused of a too optimistic view concerning the goodness and innocence of man. It has been charged with being humanistic and apart from God. It has been shown to be too heavily dependent upon the mind, refusing to travel beyond the reaches of the intellect. And all of these criticisms are justified when liberalism strays from its commitment to God. The only kind of liberalism ~~if~~ I wish to accept is that which loves God with all of its mind and heart and soul and the whole ~~xxxxx~~ neighborhood of God as much as its own soul.

Perhaps it has never occurred to you but it seems to me that the Church of Christ is, therefore, the great center of this liberalism. Longfellow once wrote these lines about a famous churchmen which contain this vision of the church:

He studied still with deep research

To build a universal church,

Lofty as the love of God

And ample as the needs of man.

(quoted in Christ. Gent. Feb. 19, 1947, p.235)

I believe, therefore, that the great and generous God who sent his beloved Son to be the liberal evidence of his abounding love, calls us too to be liberal in heart and mind and soul. It is the challenge in these words: "I ...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace."

I believe that one of the most ~~known~~ articulate statements of liberalism ever spoken is also among the most treasured possessions of the human race. They are the words of Lincoln following the the devastations of the Civil War: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." -Washington, D.C., March 4, 1865
