

Bipolar Considerations

or the Modest Newsletter giving you, as always, the good and the bad

Two-Tone Conservatives

by Ryan Martin

Recently, while enduring a bit of talk radio from both sides of the aisle, I have noticed a common accusation against conservatives. On each instance the remark was made disparagingly against political conservatism. Conservatives, they accuse, only see things in “black and white.” I assume they mean that conservatives normally consider abortion wrong, or gay marriage an abomination. It appears to me that these critics find this kind of moral judgment reprehensible. Liberalism, they argued, is filled with much more “complexity” than such moral naivety.

Now I make no pretense of being an official spokesman for political conservatives. Neither do I consider myself anywhere near the conservative thinker I should be. If someone pinned me down and asked, “what *is* a conservative?”, I would probably bluff my way through an answer, stuttering out a comment like, “well, most conservatives believe that man is not inherently virtuous.” I think I remember someone telling me that once.¹ Nevertheless, I would like to submit a rebuttal to these observations, if not for conservatives, at least for myself.

To begin with, they are absolutely right. I consider myself a conservative, and I see things in “black and white.” Yes, I have the audacity to believe that something greater than man ties all these shadows together. And I even believe that I can know the answers that are out there. As I recall hearing the arguments of liberals, it seems that there are two responses to this. Some hold that there are no such “absolutes.” Although others believe that there are moral absolutes, they approach it with a sort of agnosticism—we cannot really know these absolutes.

I disagree with both of these positions. And upon my contemplation of these comments, it seems to be a pretty good marker as to what distinguishes a liberal and a conservative. Conservatives want to hold on to the moral axioms passed down to them by their forefathers, and have great reservations about shedding any of these beliefs. Liberals seem to behave differently, for some reason wanting to shed these beliefs at any cost.² It is extremely convenient for liberals to throw doubt on absolutes in general if they are to embrace a system that rejects the absolutes passed down from their elders.

We can respond to liberals who accuse conservatives of “bitonality” by punching them. Hear me out here. I do not mean out of anger—that will not solve anything. If I went up and punched a liberal, I would

¹Do you ever begin to get concerned that you are just a kind of parrot, repeating all the comments you have heard that you found particularly appealing for whatever reason? I worry about that. Sometimes I notice that I just repeat others. I often muse that I have never had an original idea in my life. Everything I am is the product of other men, combined into a sort of arbitrary pantheon of ideas made up of whatever I currently find particularly pleasing.

²This bugs me about many of my peers. Can I say something controversial if its down here in a footnote? In my brief history, I have seen so many of my associates give up on one belief or another. And they rarely have good reasons. It seems like they give up for the sake of giving up. I know that the other side of the fence always appears to have greener grass, no matter what the issue may be. But this kind of willy-nilly fence jumping is not prudent. For example, how many of my friends suddenly woke up one morning and decided not to be a dispensationalist? We have lost a lot of dispensationalists from [Editorial note: the use of the preposition puzzles us too] frozen pizzas.

quickly observe that they did believe in absolutes.³ Better yet, steal their wallet. Then watch their ideology crumble to dust. And this is a perfect response for both groups (For the amoralist, because he now insists that there is morality—he has been wronged. For the agnostic, because he now insists he knows what is right and that what you did was wrong).⁴ Thus we appeal to their conscience.

At the same time, it should be noted that conservatives do wrestle with moral issues. At least I do. Certain issues are complex. I believe that some things are morally right and wrong based on the specific circumstances. I would not consider mortally injuring a man in combat immoral while I believe murder is. In both instances a man is killed, but in one instance the death is right and even virtuous, where in the other it is wrong. I believe that the Holy Scriptures stand as a perfect and necessary guide to knowing what is right and what is wrong. At the same time, while they provide great insight into the matter, the Scriptures do not explicitly tell me whether or not I should watch *Seinfeld*. With all matters, I must wrestle, “Is this morally good?”

While sifting through moral issues can sometimes be a complex and excruciating struggle, I believe that we must arrive at moral conclusions. When liberals argue that we cannot know what is right and wrong, and even accuse us of being conceited in offering moral clarity, it is merely a smoke screen. I may be wrong, but I believe that the real issue is that they do not want to admit they have rejected moral axioms. But even if they argued thus in sincerity, what kind of a man leaves these kinds of questions unanswered? How can one be satisfied with agnosticism in regard to morality? Only if morality really did not matter in the end could this position be tenable. If the moral actions we commit really make no difference in the end, only then we can be satisfied with moral ambivalence. If we are uneasy with our conclusion on a certain issue and we suspect that we may be wrong, it may be best if we hold the high ground and those actions handed down to us by our fathers.

My Lapse into Cessation

By Joel Zartman

As a result of certain considerations to which I have been exposed in a recent class, I have ceased to consider myself a continuationist.⁵ I actually never thought of myself as a continuationist: I just knew that I was not a cessationist, which gave me all the status of a continuationist whether I thought of myself as one or not. I was not a cessationist because I thought the argument stood or fell on the interpretation of 1 Cor 13.8-13. What has changed is that I no longer think so. If it does, then nothing has changed, for to me the passage clearly speaks of the *parousia* throughout. But that is not where the argument that has persuaded me lies. Let me show you a better one.

There are varieties of cessationism and of continuationism I suppose. I can't say I was keen on the

³See the first couple chapters of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.

⁴By the way, this bears some resemblance to the great evangelical worship debate (which is becoming less and less of a debate). If the argument that music “amoral” is set forth, you can see how insincere its advocate is if you say something like, “well if music is amoral, then you won't mind going along with my preference when I believe that music *does* communicate.” Of course they will protest your selection, thereby showing that although “music is an issue merely of taste,” their “taste” is better than yours, and more worthy of being the norm in the worship of the church.

⁵If you want to get the arguments in a better form, go get them from Dr. Bauder. This is not to say that he agrees with everything I'll say, but that I'm indebted to him for giving me the ideas I'm writing about. The exegetical ones, that is.

continual end of things, but I was convinced that Scripture could not be made to say these things had ceased.⁶ Indeed, if one should ask if the things themselves (miraculous things such as . . . well, miracles) have ceased, then one would not expect most people to say no. The question is not whether there are miracles today, but rather: is there a gift of working miracles in the church today. The question is not whether or not there are gifts in the church today, although there are those who make this the issue and argue for a negative answer.⁷ Most people believe that there are gifts of one sort or another in the church today. The question is whether the miraculous gifts, the sign gifts, are for today.⁸

The argument is made that the sign gifts authenticate the Gospel, and so they come naturally along with the business of evangelism. Perhaps those who argue for such a position will say that in places where Christianity is known already, the sign gifts are not so prominent. They will perhaps say that it is rather to the much neglected and yet unreached people-groups that such things must come in the routine process of evangelism.⁹ Indeed, the argument that the third wave makes is that the Gospel comes with these sorts of signs to authenticate it wherever it goes. The question is, what sort of sign are these signs? What do they signal? If they signal the Gospel, why would they cease as long as the Gospel is being proclaimed? If they attest to the veracity of the message and authenticate the messenger, then shouldn't we still have these signs?¹⁰

One of the things that is troubling for anybody who is a continuationist is the lack of a recorded continuation in church history. One has descriptions here or there of such phenomena, especially if one starts

⁶In a way, I still don't. My point is not going to be that this or that passage clearly says they have ceased or that we will never encounter this phenomena anymore.

⁷There must, or at least there are, always, some who will maintain any position. I have found, in my limited experience, that such people are driven to that position because they have despaired of something more fundamental (more related to first principles). And the point at which they seem fanatical is the particular manifestation of the consequences of their despairing relinquishing. I think this is why we are naturally suspicious of a position that is extreme or fanatical. I can't say that I have put my finger on what they gave up in this case, but the position seems a bit extreme. I could be wrong but I am not prepared to relinquish the observation. It must also be said, that if a great deal of people have joined together in their denial of something fundamental, then the fanatical position will not seem so fanatical. Nevertheless, it is.

⁸Making a category to include certain gifts and exclude certain others is certainly a tricky thing to do exegetically. But perhaps that is not where the argument is to be made. More of this later.

⁹One wonders about this people-group language. There is an artificial flavor to it. They can't say just 'people' because that would imply merely individuals, and they are not so interested. But simply to say 'group' would make it sound as if they were trying to reach the local association of romance novel readers or what have you. They seek after a national subcategory, like a tribe. So why don't they just call it new tribes?

¹⁰Great. Now, instead of just having to go door to door like freako cultists, or instead of having to hand out stupid tracts or try to strike up conversations so that we resourcefully use all our time witnessing, we also have to perform the occasional miracle or burst into *glossolalia, in media res!* As if going up to somebody cold-turkey and talking to them about heaven and hell and life changing decisions weren't difficult enough, now we have to add supernatural phenomena to make it even more stressful and demanding . . . and authentic.

counting some or another heretical or fringe group as an orthodox group.¹¹ A part here, a part there, fragments put together to make the semblance of a whole, as the wall of the Walker Center has it. But even then, one doesn't have the same thing as one sees occurring in the New Testament. What explains that? If you are a continuationist you might have to come up with an argument about the falling away of pretty much everybody till the 19th century, at which time God was pleased to restore to us, by one or another unsavory means, the real thing in all of its glory.¹² Or you might have to argue that it continued, in a way, and up to a certain point, before being eclipsed by other issues that came to the fore for one reason or another. You still have to scrounge around to find somebody actually practicing these things, or even advocating them.¹³

I suppose it would be possible to argue that these things only happen during revivals. The problem with taking this sort of argument is that there really aren't that many revivals in church history. If one is to say that revivals are an unusual phenomenon (and not an entirely explainable phenomenon), then what about solid citizens of the church who never had the privilege of such unusual outpourings? What about the unfortunates Calvin and Luther? What about Augustine and Athanasius who never had any revivals in their churches? My point is that it does not seem that revival is the norm. Revivals are unusual and rare, and for that reason not normal. One might say they are not average but still provide the norm. But I cannot believe that the usual state of the church is one of defeat. Isn't this what revival as the norm would imply? I do not believe that the majority who call themselves Christians actually are Christians, but I do believe that the few who are, are part of God's mighty work. If revival were the norm, then the track record of God's work seems to me a rather depressing one.¹⁴

One other matter to mention with regard to historical inquiry is the matter of grouping the gifts to find out which have ceased. The ones that stand out are tongues, prophecy and miraculous healing. Who, after the first century, had the gift? Any remarkable prophets come to mind? Healers? Or speakers in tongues for that matter? This observation is just something to think about.¹⁵

What really convinced me that I was a cessationist was a consideration of what Paul says is the purpose

¹¹It is the sort of thing Landmark Baptists do and it makes for strange bedfellows. If you doubt that they do it, then go to 286.09 and look for something small and with fire or a sword or blood or something similarly lurid on its cover.

¹²It is the sort of thing a so-called Latter Day Saint would say. Very strange bedfellows.

¹³This last is the combination that we will call the Landmark Day Moribunds. Very wide bed. This sort of reasoning causes the question to arise as to why so many of these groups are eager to find spiritual kinship with the Montanists. In their day, the Montanists were never so popular and influential as they have become in the latter days. Perhaps it is mostly thanks to distance and to vague notions regarding exactly what it was the benighted Montanists were wrong about. Perhaps in another thousand years the Landmark Baptists of that day, or their equivalent, will use the Mormons to establish another trail that serves to demarcate the genetic succession of God's true people-group.

¹⁴This may not be the strongest argument there is. The Vigilant Watchman Nee might disagree with me. I welcome a challenge on this point. I think I can hone and carry forward a good argument here.

¹⁵Perhaps this is the result of the historian's bias. But can it really be the bias of so many historians? Well, this whole historical thing is a bit of thin ice for me, but it still makes me wonder awfully keenly.

of tongues. The appeal of the argument is that it is based on two topics in which I have been keenly interested for a while. One is the use of the Old Testament in the New, and the other is like it, salvation-historical patterns.

In 1 Cor 14.22 the Apostle blithely explains that tongues and prophecy are signs. You will notice the verse begins by drawing a conclusion from what came in the previous verse. The previous verse has the Old Testament quotations. These quotations are from Is 28.11-12 and Dt 28.49. If you glance over the contexts of these passages, you will see that the context in which these quotations are found are contexts of judgment. From these quotations about not understanding a foreign language, the Apostle draws the conclusion that tongues are a sign to unbelievers.

Now we have to work in the Jews. NO! You will say. Not another of these incredible and illogical tricks of taking Scripture and making it not apply to any but the hapless Jews when it is altogether to strict for our liking or there is too much kingdom or just too much inspiration or whatever it is that drives people to say this or that part is not for them. No, none of that for me, I believe the whole of Scripture is inspired and it was written for our instruction. But you will notice that the context of the judgment pronounced is a context of deportation. Now, whatever else you may want to say about this not being for the Jews, Gentile deportation is not something that is really an issue for any of the writers of Scripture. In fact, if you have a division in which the only two categories are Jew or Gentile and the Jewish division is by far the smaller division, then there is only one direction in which you can be deported. The Jew can be deported to Gentile lands, but for the Gentile to be taken to the Jewish land is not a deportation, it is conversion. Nobody laments the coming of Ruth to Bethlehem.

The judgment of deportation can only be a judgment on the nation of Israel. Unless Paul is using the Old Testament with little regard to its original context, then the unbelievers he talks about here are Jews. But that is enough of that. Let me talk rather about salvation-history which won't smack so offensively of those who quarantine off the majority of the Bible to keep themselves from having to see the glory, mending the veil and still clamoring that Moses wear it.

Here is the salvation-historical bit. There is a new exile, a spiritual exile. The nation of Israel is hardened and they hear the judgment in foreign tongues. The pattern from the Old Testament exile is repeated and Paul is explaining it to the Corinthians.¹⁶ Curiously, every time you have the phenomenon of tongues in Acts, you have Jews present. Or perhaps, not so curiously. There is a radical change occurring. The old covenant is going by the way and the new one appears. Even the apostles had a hard time understanding the change.¹⁷ What authenticates the new? Who has the authority to lay down the law? Well, since we keep alluding to 2 Cor, look at 12.12. Who is a minister of the New Covenant? The Apostle. And he has authenticating signs and wonders - so you see tongues and prophecy and miracles occurring in the New Testament. The signs of the changing era occur, not only with the apostles (although, clearly they serve to authenticate an apostle), but also in their day. Where is the authority for this new message, this Gospel? The Apostle explains in Rom 15.18-9 (note who are granted obedience) that the divine stamp is upon the new

¹⁶Yet another reason why perhaps tongues was not the most desirable gift. I am not, however, saying that anybody who spoke in tongues in the New Testament made his utterance in the presence of an unbelieving Jew. After all, one can't say that there were unbelieving Jews present in Cornelius' house. But the purpose for the bizarre phenomenon of speaking in tongues at all is that of making any thinking Jew realize the judgment of a new exile and repent as Peter says.

¹⁷Who ever gets already/not yet the first time? Some don't seem to ever get it. I wonder if their mistake is not mainly in thinking already/not yet is an explanation rather than a description.

message.

One other point. Jack Deere is one of the prominent third wavers. He wrote a book with a chapter that deals with the frequency of miracles in the Bible. I had never before bought the idea that the miracles in the Bible, in the main, were clustered into three periods of great significance in salvation history. What convinced me that they were was Jack Deere's list of the miracles in the Bible (which he makes in order to disprove the idea that they are exclusively clustered around three periods of great significance in salvation history). What are the three periods? Roughly they are exodus, exile and then new exodus and exile. They occur with the transition, or the impending transition in the case of the Exile. Isn't that a curious idea? It seems that the first century was a period of transition and once the transition was made, the church stopped using the signs of the transition. Now you will see why I made so much noise about church history earlier. Even if we have to work in the thing for the Jews, still, can you see how it fits in the pattern of salvation history? This great display of wonders that Luke keeps talking about in the early chapters is part of an economic transition. The apostolic era had the signs, then they passed away (not because the canon was completed, but because the new was authenticated). From national Israel has the Gospel been taken, and this radical departure was attested by God himself, and established beyond question.

For the Bash

Come ready to discuss the following poetry from the pen of John Donne.

A HYMN TO CHRIST, AT THE AUTHOR'S LAST GOING INTO GERMANY.

In what torn ship so ever I embark,
That ship shall be my emblem of Thy ark ;
What sea soever swallow me, that flood
Shall be to me an emblem of Thy blood ;
Though Thou with clouds of anger do disguise
Thy face, yet through that mask I know those eyes,
Which, though they turn away sometimes,
They never will despise.

I sacrifice this Iland unto Thee,
And all whom I love there, and who loved me ;
When I have put our seas 'twixt them and me,
Put thou Thy seas betwixt my sins and Thee.
As the tree's sap doth seek the root below
In winter, in my winter now I go,
Where none but Thee, the eternal root
Of true love, I may know.

Nor Thou nor Thy religion dost control
The amorousness of an harmonious soul ;
But Thou wouldst have that love Thyself ; as Thou
Art jealous, Lord, so I am jealous now ;
Thou lovest not, till from loving more Thou free
My soul ; Who ever gives, takes liberty ;
Oh, if Thou carest not whom I love,
Alas ! Thou lovest not me.

Seal then this bill of my divorce to all,
On whom those fainter beams of love did fall ;
Marry those loves, which in youth scatter'd be
On fame, wit, hopes—false mistresses—to Thee.
Churches are best for prayer, that have least light ;
To see God only, I go out of sight ;
And to escape stormy days, I choose
An everlasting night.

HOLY SONNET X.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so ;
For those, whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy picture[s] be,
Much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou'rt slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke ; why swell'st thou then ?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more ; Death, thou shalt die.