

# DWARVES ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

by Chuck Colson; Thursday, June 5, 2008

Some years ago, in a *Firing Line* interview with Bill Buckley, I argued for criminal justice reform. The moderator, Mort Kondracke — who then considered himself a liberal — was astonished. He stammered, “You want prison reform? But you’re a conservative!”

I almost laughed out loud. Kondracke was parroting the ideological stereotypes about liberals and conservatives. And, today, the same confusion dominates the election debates.

Ideology — that is, the manmade formulations and doctrines of both the right and the left in modern American politics — is the enemy of true conservatism, as it is the enemy of the Gospel, which rests on revealed, propositional truth. Russell Kirk, the great Catholic thinker whose writings have so influenced me over the years, said that ideology is “the abstract designs of coffee-house philosophers.” Most tend to be utopian and end up serving not the welfare of the people, but the interests of power-seekers.

Conservatism, on the other hand, is not a set of doctrines, but “a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order.”

The first principle of conservatism, according to Kirk, is that there exists an enduring moral order. Christians believe that moral order is revealed in Scripture. Conservatives, and some Christians, may also look to natural law. “Moral truths are permanent,” Kirk writes, and so the conservative “is one who defends the moral order.”

The first truth of the moral order is that human life has dignity. Both Christians and classical conservatives recognize this. So, why should it surprise commentators that we care about prisoners and the poor? It is “self-evident” to us all that humans have innate dignity. This is why human-rights campaigns are always fought by Christians and true conservatives like William Wilberforce.

Conservatives also have a deep respect for tradition — those customs and laws that have been found true, handed down to us by previous generations. Kirk famously said that conservatives “sense that modern people are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see further than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time.”

Indeed, according to Kirk, conservatives understand that “we moderns” are unlikely “to make any brave new discoveries in morals or politics or taste.”

Revering what is true, as opposed to embracing utopian fads, is what marks the conservative disposition. It is also at the heart of the Christian disposition — which relies on a Gospel revealed to the apostles and handed down over the centuries.

As the presidential campaign heats up, Christians need to see that most of the issues being debated arise from conflicting ideologies of the two parties. But we should be taken in by nobody’s ideology. Because we look to the revealed, enduring moral order, we may advocate things the world calls “liberal” — like prison reform — because doing so promotes human dignity. And we may also reject those things that ideology labels “conservative” that fail to recognize or uphold the moral order.

So, this campaign season, as we debate with our friends and co-workers, let’s try to see beyond ideological labels. After all, political ideologies come and go. The moral order — and the Gospel — are enduring.

