

WHY I AM CONSERVATIVE

As I write this, I am old and have completed chemotherapy for lymphoma. As my time on earth slips away, the thought occurred to me: Has my commitment to certain principles for most of my adult life made sense? As I have interacted with people who do not share that commitment, those encounters have left me with a whole mess of emotions. With some, I felt vindication, satisfaction, and encouragement to persevere. With others, I felt anger, insecurity, resentment, or, at worst, a sense of being unheard. So, what are those principles and why the commitment? The principles revolve around conservatism. The commitment to them resulted because of definition. Let me explain.

God has blessed us with language which involves structure and expression thereof. The elements of that structure would include vocabulary and grammar. Let us focus on vocabulary or words. What does any specific word mean? Every word has its own definition or definitions, which are dependent upon the context. That is certainly true of the word conservatism, which leads to the secondary word conservative.

I love dictionaries because, in general, they do not lie or deceive. So, here we go. For **conservatism**, the first definition is "The inclination, especially in politics, to maintain the existing or traditional order."¹ Another way to define a word is to say what something or someone is not. So, if I am conservative, the implication is that I am not liberal. The dictionary is a less helpful in dealing with liberalism. For **liberalism**, the first definition is "The state or quality of being liberal." One cannot then resist the urge to define **liberal**, whose first definition is "Favoring reform, open to new ideas, and tolerant of the ideas and behaviors of others; not bound by traditional thinking; broad-minded." Do you get the sense that *The American Heritage Dictionary* is stretching a little? I love the phrase **broad-minded**. Who would not want to be broad-minded, which I assume implies being intelligent, as opposed to some narrow-minded and less intelligent conservative. The only thing that the dictionary left out in defining **liberal** is "good-looking." So, in summary, the definition for a conservative is clear; and the definition of a liberal is lacking and not very helpful. The liberals may have felt that tension, so, the term **progressive** is now thrown around. I am OK with that term as long as the goal to which one is progressing is clear and the steps of progress in reaching that goal are clear. C.S. Lewis discusses this concept: "We all want to progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."² So, the goal and the steps required to reach that goal of the progressive are vague, maybe even "wrong-roaded," in most cases. Yes, I have an "inclination...to maintain the existing or traditional order"; and I understand the intellectual discipline and consistency that is required to do that.

I like the second definition of **science**, which is "A systematic method or body of knowledge in a given area."¹ In discussing the reasons that I am conservative, I will look at various bodies of

knowledge like the science of theology, the science of politics, the science of finance, the science of grammar, the science of science, and even the science of tradition.

Theology

Theology of any flavor is usually based on a canon, or a collection of written works that have authority. Since this is not a discussion of comparative religions, I will focus just on the Christian faith and its canon. The canon for the Christian believer, especially the protestant believer, is the Bible. The above definitions of **conservative** and **liberal** certainly apply here when one evaluates the place of the Bible in his /her theology. I think that it is accurate to say that the original apostles and men like Paul and Stephen were conservative. They were not interested in being tolerant and open minded in relation to the scriptures since their very lives depended upon their correct understanding of divine revelation. Even in those early days of Christianity, there appeared voices that expressed **reform** and **tolerance** which led to aberrations. How does one solve those problems?

Many churches incorporate this pastoral question and its congregational answer into their worship. "Christian, what do you believe?" The answer is "I believe..." which the opening phrase of The Apostles' Creed, written in the fourth century A.D. by some conservatives in response to **broad-minded** liberals' new ideas. Why would someone believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as stated in the creed? Because, the Bible tells me so. This is a simple answer; but it is not a simplistic answer. It is an answer of faith, but not only of faith. It is an answer of the science of theology that leads one to consider history, archeology, physics, biology, literary criticism, and then, things like hamartiology and soteriology. Hamartiology involves the study of sin from the fall to my own fallenness. Soteriology studies God's solution to sin and answers the Philippian jailer's question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"³ The right questions and the right answers are only found in the Bible. When one concludes that the Bible is the infallible and inerrant Word of God, his only posture is that of conserving and accurately expositing. I have been striving to do just that for about fifty years.

Politics

How about some politics! One of the great levelers in life is that no matter how well informed one is, no matter how much time one spends on the topic, no matter how persuasive one is, and no matter the size of one's bank account, he only has one vote. I highly value that vote. The first definition of politics is: "The art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as a nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs."¹ So, I guess we get to choose whether politics is an "art or science." How about "art and/or science?" For most, politics is a complicated curiosity that periodically attracts their attention. For some, like myself, they understand that politics affects so many aspects of our lives that its study is justified and even noble. For the latter group, just voting is not enough, and they want to know more of the science of politics for their own enrichment and to influence others.

Government 101 tells us that the United States of America was founded on a canon, primarily the constitution and its amendments, the Bill of Rights, and duly passed laws that are consistent with the first two. Considering the spectrum of political thought, I do not know of anyone at either end saying, "Do not change anything" or at the other end saying, "Change everything." As one considers two and a half centuries of the existence of our country and the status of other countries in the world, past and present, I surmise that things are working pretty well for the USA. Thus, I have "the inclination...to maintain the existing or traditional order." In other words, I am conservative in maintaining the canon. Conversely, a liberal must be more concerned about changing the canon, or at least, less maintenance thereof. Our freedoms, restrictions, and responsibilities are well defined. As stated above, a liberal (or progressive) should be clear what goal he is progressing towards and the steps required to get to that goal. For the politically liberal, the question is what freedoms, restrictions, and responsibilities are to be changed? For the conservative, the questions are what is the justification of and what is the method used in making those changes within the provisions of the canon described above?

Finance

Now, how does conservatism apply to the science of finance, whose definition is: "The management of money, banking, investments, and credit."¹ That sounds pretty dry. How about using the word stewardship, which is something done by a steward: "One who manages another's property, finances, or other affairs."¹ For the Christian, **another's** should be **Another's**. As I have entered this financial school (of thought), it behooves me to do well in the classes therein. The primary canon for this science is the Bible as well; some other canons are books on mathematics and on the ebb and flow of money. There is a fascinating passage in Psalm 50:10, 11: "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine." The Morris paraphrase is: "I own it all." I do not **own** cattle, but I do **own** a house, banking accounts, investments, retirement, etc. But, I am responsible for how I steward that stuff. Since our marriage, Nancy and I have returned to the Owner well over 10% of what is actually His. That is conserving the Biblical tradition; that is being conservative and stewarding what belongs to Another.

Grammar

I will never forget outlining a sentence in elementary school. I learned about pronouns, prepositions, the position of adverbs, and even the advanced concept that an adverb could modify an adjective or another adverb. And yes, we acknowledged canons as we looked up words in a dictionary (thus began my love of dictionaries, see paragraph three above) and studied grammar books. All this helped us communicate good...I mean well. When I hear someone use an objective pronoun as the subject, my palms get sweaty and I yearn to correct the poor, unfortunate someone. So, I am a conservative in terms of grammar, and grammar leads to communication which is such a vital part of God's provision. We should note the clear communication of Genesis 1:3, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." There was a command, there was a word, and there was then, the absence of darkness, i.e. light. The

structure and words of that sentence must be conserved. The liberal does not have the right to redefine nor to make implications. Now, I understand that languages evolve. But as a conservative, I feel that any changes should be controlled and beneficial. And, yes, the definition of the word **marriage** means a life-long commitment between one man and one woman; pardon my falling short of being “broad-minded.”

Science

We have heard the phrase “I believe in science” a lot lately. The science of science is certainly complicated, but it is still based on canon: textbooks, papers in journals, expert organizations which interpret data and propose guidelines, etc. Science usually works likes so: theory > proposal to prove theory > design and do experimentation > re-experimentation > analyze results > arrive at proof that the theory is correct or incorrect. Reproducible data is key as well. But that system is not perfect. For example, in my forty-one years of practicing the science of medicine, I have seen at least three drugs removed from the market after evidence showed them to have unacceptable risks. So, I had always been conservative in using new drugs. Any attempt at proving a theory that shortcuts one or more of the above steps should be open to questioning because of the possibility of being “wrong-roaded” or even “danger-roaded.” A liberal (i.e., “broad-minded”) application to the scientific method is unwise. A conservative (i.e., “maintain the existing or traditional order”) application is wise and, I feel, is more disciplined.

Tradition

It may sound a little weird that one would discuss tradition in the context of “A systematic method or body of knowledge in a given area”¹ (i.e., in the context of science), and it may be a little of a stretch to apply the concept of a canon here, but there are books on manners, on entertaining, and on being polite. All this could be summarized by just the showing of respect. A few examples will have to suffice: opening the door for women, standing with hand over heart for the national anthem, setting a table correctly (fork to the left, knife to the right), respecting your elders, saying please and thank you, and, in general, doing the right thing when no one is looking. Some of these examples may be trivial and some not, but any country or society has similar “glues” that do what glues do: hold things together. I am conservative in maintaining the adhesives of tradition and very conservative in applying any solvent that might loosen those bonds.

So, there you have it, the definitive discourse on why being conservative in the areas of theology, politics, finance, grammar, science, and tradition is right and true. It is not so much an argument against liberalism as it is a defense of what I think is the higher ground or the narrower gate. The Bible says: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”⁴ That ultimately conservative reality is beyond us, but it sets the tone for a conservative worldview. I will strive to fashion my life with that reality in view, whether I make it to seventy-five or one hundred-twenty.

David B. Morris

1. The American Heritage Dictionary
2. Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis
3. Acts 16:30
4. Hebrews 13:8