What’s Un-Christian About the Christian Right

They’re still trying to put that camel through the needle’s eye

BY JONATHAN ROWE

There is something very strange about the Christian Coalition’s “Contract With the American Family,” released with much fanfare in May. The document says a lot about the usual conservative agenda—tax credits as rewards for doing right, abolishing the Department of Education, policing the Internet, and so on. But there’s little of the thing you’d most expect to find. There’s not one word that Jesus himself actually said.

In fact, the Contract does not start out from Scripture, but from election returns and polling data. “The message of the election was clear,” the introduction says, boasting that the provisions of the Contract “enjoy support from 60 to 90 percent of the American people.” This form of justification is not auspicious. I remember only one reference to a poll in the New Testament. It was when Pontius Pilate asked the people whether he should have mercy on Jesus. “Crucify him,” they said, and so Pilate did. An agenda that purports to represent the “Christian” view, but is assembled with the public-opinion wizardry of focus groups and polls, should raise eyebrows from the start.

Christianity of the kind Jesus taught is more about going against the flow than with it, more about telling people what they need to hear, rather than what they want. A minister by the name of Henry Drummond amplified this point in a sermon called “The Greatest Thing in the World.” Based on a passage in one of Paul’s letters (I Corinthians 13), it is a pointed commentary on the essential Christian character. When it came to faith, eloquence, commitment, and sacrifice, Drummond pointed out, Paul was the exemplar. He had suffered stonings and deprivations, and had taken enormous risks. He spoke “with the tongues of men and angels”; he had the “faith to move mountains.” Yet Paul thought he had still fallen far short of the mark. The traits that had come easiest to him, he came to see, were the least important. The most important thing, he said, is “agape,” simple compassion for his fellow beings, which for him was more difficult.

Christianity is, first of all, about making radical demands upon oneself. If the Christian Right in America today were a movement informed by the

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radical and tough-minded Christianity of the Scriptures—the kind that puts neighbor ahead of self and “seeketh not her own”—it would be a cleansing wind. It would promote an atmosphere of responsibility and mutual obligation rather than entitlement and right. It would challenge Americans—rich as well as poor—to whine less and do more. It would express concern about the family by taking on not just government, but also the corporations that are laying off breadwinners and moving their jobs abroad. It would not flinch from bearing witness against the rule of lucre in Washington, and the polemical licentiousness and character assassination that poisons the atmosphere of public life.

At the grassroots level, some of the people drawn to the Christian Right have shown evidence of this spirit. But the higher up you go, the further away you get. At the top, with the so-called Christian Coalition, it’s more of the same old Washington trip—take away the name, and you wouldn’t see much difference from any other right-wing group—except the sanctimony that the name itself provides. We are left with a Christian Right that, in important respects, has a ways to go before it is worthy of that name.

I am not a theologian nor am I a Scripture scholar. But I do try to give some heed to these matters, and, in fact, I actually agree with the Christian Right on many things. I think the public schools should teach the basics and leave such things as sex education for the home. I think that corporations like Time Warner ought to be accountable for the crap they spew. And I agree that the best giving is voluntary and individual rather than coercive and bureaucratic. If Christianity is about anything, it is about putting yourself on the line.

And that is precisely where the Christian Right disappoints. To be sure, Christianity is not primarily a social doctrine. It demands, first and foremost, radical inner change. But a central part of this change—of saving yourself—is the need to get out of yourself, to care passionately for those in need. “Give,” says Jesus, “and it shall be given unto you.”

This spirit is something which has not been in great evidence within the Christian Coalition today. The Coalition’s position on the Republican’s family tax credit is a small but telling example. The proposal would give a $500-per-child tax credit to every family. When Democrats, and even some Republicans, suggested that the well-to-do are not in urgent need in this regard, and that the available funds should be focused on the more needy—generously defined as families earning less than, say, $95,000—the Coalition screamed murder. They actually wanted the credit extended to families with incomes as high as $200,000. Yes, the tax laws are hardly the final test, but they do reflect larger values.

The Coalition’s stance (or, rather, it’s silence) is even more bizarre on Republican efforts to cut the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The EITC was begun by the Reagan Administration to help lift from poverty those who work honestly for a living. If there is anyone the Christian Coalition should be championing, it’s these people. “The federal government, through the tax code, has punished families for working, saving, and for staying together,” their Contract says. But when it comes time to save a tax provision that actually helps working families do these things, the Coalition is missing from the battle.

One could ask similar questions about medical care reform and a host of other issues. But the more basic matter is the willingness to bear the cross personally, to do the difficult, needful things. Commendably, the Coalition talks about voluntary service; at the local level, members no doubt do their part. But the national focus on bigger tax breaks for charitable contributions—do Christians really need a new bonus from the IRS in order to give?—rather than on service itself, is not exactly inspiring.

Nor is the selective condemnation of sin—the way they indulge the sins favored by certain conservative Republican constituencies. The Coalition is a tiger on lust, but it is strangely docile on its counterpart: greed. Jesus made no such distinction. He whipped the money changers from the Temple, condemned the charging of interest, and admonished the rich man to sell what he had and give the proceeds to the poor. “It is easier for a
camel to go through the eye of a needle,” said Jesus, “than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Yet America’s top executives now make 140 times what their average worker does, up from 40 times in 1972—quite a bit of baggage to carry through the Kingdom’s gate. I also suspect the early Christians might have had some concerns about the Thai women being held in slave-like conditions so that American consumers can buy bargain T-shirts. The Christian Coalition certainly hasn’t shown any concern.

And while it is so eager to blame the government for strains on the family, somehow it doesn’t count when corporations cut pay and health benefits for those same families. Nor does the siege of commercial culture, which fills every nook and cranny of waking life with beguilements to hedonistic self-indulgence. To blame the decline of our culture on 1960s liberals and the National Endowment for the Arts, and to virtually ignore corporate commercial culture (except for a few convenient targets like Democrat-leaning Time Warner) invites the suspicion that moral principle is not their only consideration.

Could campaign contributions to favored allies be one of those considerations? “Gifts and bribes make even wise men blind to the truth and prevent them from being honest in their criticism,” says Sirach in the Apocrypha. You’d think that the Coalition might have something to say about a politician like Senator Phil Gramm, who spends two hours a day on the phone raising money for himself when he could be raising money for people in need. Yet conspicuously absent from the Contract with the American Family is any reference to campaign reform or the corrupting influence of money in politics. The Christian Coalition becomes soft indeed before the one sin—the love of money—which Jesus said was the root of all the rest.

Is the Coalition concerned primarily with spiritual values, or with building an old-fashioned power base? It was hard not to ask that question after their exertion on behalf of the Contract With America. Ralph Reed, the Coalition’s executive director, called it “the single largest lobby effort in our history.” Certainly Newt Gingrich’s Contract represents a conservative political agenda. But is it a markedly Christian one?

A typical Contract provision is the so-called “Takings Bill,” which would require compensa-
tion for property owners when government restricts the use of that property. Since Reed is not running a secular property-rights association, the question should be what Scripture says. Jesus was not the world’s most ardent property-rights man. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth,” he said in his most quoted (and most ignored) sermon. Henry Drummond added this thought:

“[T]o give up the things that are obviously yours—that you have earned perhaps by years of labor and sacrifice of trouble or money—to give up those things which are your own, that is the hard thing. And yet the most obvious lesson of the Gospel is that there is no happiness in having and getting, only in giving.”

No, this doesn’t mean that we should all line up at the Interior Department to hand in our deeds, or that we should support every last land-use regulation. But it does suggest something about the spirit and temper with which a truly Christian Coalition would approach such an issue. Would it not seek to balance a concern for property rights with a concern for neighbors and the general well-being? Should not the Christian show some grace regarding reasonable restrictions that work to the benefit of all?

Moreover, it’s fine to say there should be less regulation, but there is another side of the equation: Namely, that the deregulated have a responsibility to do right voluntarily, on their own. That corporations, say, should stop poisoning the air we breathe and the water we drink. If welfare recipients have a responsibility to work—and they do—then the major corporations that benefit so handsomely from America’s marketplace, and from a government monetary policy which deliberately maintains unemployment, have a corresponding responsibility to stop cutting wages and moving entry-level jobs abroad.

The failure to raise such issues suggests an unwillingness to expect anything of anyone, except the poor (and others who do not vote Republican). To his credit, Newt Gingrich does raise them from time to time. That is his good side. But this vital concern gets lost in a sea of other issues that have a somewhat tenuous connection to Scriptural concerns.

An example is the demand, one of the ten planks of the Contract with the American Family, to abolish public broadcasting and the National
Endowment for the Arts. In the first place, the distinction between PBS and NBC derives much more from secular political philosophy than from the kinds of issues with which Jesus was concerned. Whether a broadcast entity is owned by a nuclear power corporation such as General Electric, or by a corporation established by the legislature, would seem a secondary matter. The first question for the Christian, one would think, is what these entities project into the family living room.

By this standard, it is hard to understand why public broadcasting—public radio in particular—would be first on the hit list of those who say they are concerned with this country’s moral atmosphere. I would invite Ralph Reed to spend a week watching any of the commercial networks, and a week watching PBS, and then explain why PBS should be singled out for abolition as a matter of Christian principle. Would not Fox be at least as worthy a target? I would also invite Reed to listen to Rush Limbaugh for a week, and then Scott Simon of NPR’s Weekend Edition. Does Limbaugh really embody the qualities Paul talked about in I Corinthians 13 (patience, kindness, modesty, etc.) better than Simon?

If the goal is to rid the airwaves of sex, violence, and intemperance, then the crusade against public broadcasting calls to mind what Jesus said about straining gnats and swallowing camels. As for the National Endowment for the Arts—personally I think it should fund WPA-type civic art and projects in ghetto schools, and let the Maplethorpes fend for themselves. But do we really want to turn the funding of the nation’s arts over to the very same corporations that use prurient sexual imagery to sell everything from cereal to shampoo, as the Christian Coalition suggests? How about using the NEA to fund projects in the poorest neighborhoods to paint over the pervasive cigarette and malt liquor billboards with positive messages? (There’s a dose of old-fashioned politics in the Contract, the kind Tip O’Neil and Dan Rostenkowski would have appreciated: While the Coalition wants to cut off funds for PBS, the NEA, legal services for the poor and others, they want churches to be eligible for those same noxious federal funds.)

On the scale of sheer moral cowardice, however, it is hard to beat the so-called “Istook Amendment,” which the Christian Coalition warmly embraced. Right-wing House members turned Istook into a jihad upon the groups that oppose their agenda. Basically, the Amendment would prohibit any organization that receives federal grants from seeking to influence legislation in any way, even if it uses other funds to do so. Applied consistently across the board, Istook might not be a bad idea. If defense contractors, for example, could no longer flood Congress with lobbyists on behalf of budget-busting weapons systems, it could be a definite advance for the republic. The same goes for tobacco and sugar growers, timber and mining companies, and others who benefit financially from federal policies and largess.

The trouble is, that’s not what Rep. Istook, a Republican lawyer from Oklahoma, and his cohorts had in mind. Their idea of cleaning up Washington didn’t include defense contractors or most others who make money and give large sums of it to Congressional campaigns. Instead, with enthusiastic Christian Coalition support, they focused on nonprofit groups for the ban on lobbying and the expression of views on legislation—even though they are already prohibited from using government funds to lobby. In the version the Christian Coalition supported, defense contractors could continue to besiege Congress for B-2 bombers which the Pentagon doesn’t even want. But the YMCA that receives federal money for after-school programs for troubled teens would have to watch what it says.

Now, if you are simply a conservative Republican who thinks big business interests should run the country, that’s one thing. But if you are Pat Robertson, who founded the Christian Coalition, it is quite another. Robertson has said of Istook “this may be the most important piece of legislation in this session.” More important than crime, and drugs, and cigarette marketing aimed at kids? While the little guys get fed to the legislative li-
ons, the Christian Coalition has been up in the sky boxes with the right-wing lobbyists, cheering the lions on.

**Talking Like Newt**

The worst sins are those of attitude. Indulgences of the flesh make no pretense at being other than what they are. Those caught up in them cannot hold them forth as virtue before the world. But sins of attitude can have a deeply corrupting effect, precisely because they often announce themselves as good.

Jesus told the story of the publican and the Pharisee who go to pray. The Pharisee says, “God, that I thank thee that I am not as other men.” The publican, by contrast, says “God be merciful to me as a sinner.”

“I tell you,” Jesus said, “this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

It is hard to read that passage and not think of the public displays of the Christian Right and its political entourage. These people have difficulty pronouncing on any subject without demonizing the opponents they consider themselves to be better than. If you missed the Republican convention of 1992, you can take in the venomous speeches on the floor of our House of Representatives on almost any given day. Ask yourself if those suggest the qualities that we associate with Christian character? Or do they remind you more of Saul on the road to Damascus, before the new light dawned and he became Paul, seething with the righteousness of his mission, “breathing out threatenings and slaughters.”

I am not excusing the Democrats here. I’m talking about anyone who wears the title “Christian” as a lapel pin, and therefore announces the standard to which he or she wishes to be held. Newt Gingrich has even distributed a list of words he recommends using when demonizing the Democrats—such as “sick,” “pathetic,” and “intolerant.” “Language,” he advises, “is the key to control.” Paul, by contrast, said “overcome evil with good.” Hubert Humphrey once dealt thusly with a colleague who had been untruthful to him: He went to the Senate floor and praised the Senator for other reasons. Instead of toxifying the situation, he elevated it.

Jesus talked primarily about radical inner change—what is somewhat misleadingly translated as “repentance” (“metanoia” in the original Greek). He said we need to get beyond the small-“s” self, and all the downward inclinations it harbors. This has implications for politics and social action—but it speaks most directly to how we conduct ourselves in politics, or any other realm.

People will always disagree, and none more so than religionists. But where religion becomes an all-purpose political banner it feeds precisely the sense of self-righteousness and self-love Jesus continually warned religious people against. (It was, in fact, the main thing he warned religious people against.) Hatred, and even violence, are almost always the result. Examples come readily to mind. Lebanon. Bosnia. Iran. The religious extremist who cut down Yitzhak Rabin. Exceptions are harder to recall.

With the holy season upon us, then, I propose a simple exercise. Put a copy of I Corinthians 13 by your radio or television. Rate the politicians—Christian Right and otherwise—according to how they meet Paul’s standard. Do they suffereth long? Are they kind? Or do they vaunt themselves? Do they behave in a seemly manner? Or do they get provoked easily, think evil of others and rejoice in iniquity?

Put the politicians to Paul’s test—something the Christian Coalition is strangely reluctant to do. And then commend the deserving. They are there, and they don’t hear from us enough. As for the rest, don’t wait for them to commission a poll. Write a short letter: Tell them, respectfully, that we all expect better.