

THE PROBLEM WITH LIBERALISM

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Believers in the congregation of my youth took for granted that Christianity and liberal politics were opposed. The Bible seemed to back them up; of Lyndon Johnson's two great wars, for instance, they viewed the first, the war in Viet Nam, with enthusiasm because America was a "City upon a Hill," while viewing the other, the war on poverty, with indifference because "the poor will always be with us." An antiwar socialist, I rebelled, eventually leaving the faith completely. When in middle adulthood I returned, I found myself in a congregation of a different kind. Here, to my surprise, the believers took for granted that Christianity and liberal politics were brothers. Again Scripture was gleaned for support. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" -- obvious backing for the welfare state. "There is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" -- a manifesto for feminism. "God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" -- homosexual activists asked for no more. As a teenager I had hurled some of the same verses against my elders. God had devised a cunning penance.

Of course, both sides were tearing passages out of context and reading into them things that are not there. The City upon a Hill is the Body of Christ, not the United States of America. If the poor will always be with us, then we will always have to care for them. I am expected to look after the least of Christ's brethren myself, not to have the government send them checks. The apostle who said that in Him there is no male or female also said that in the family their roles are different. And the apostle who said that God is love also claimed for God the authority to define that love.

Unfortunately, knowing these things does not answer the ideological question. Should Christians be political liberals? Or even, to put the query the other way around, Can they be?

In one way, both forms of the question are wrongheaded. According to the letter to the Philippians, our commonwealth is in Heaven, not on earth. In the same vein, the Great Commission shows that the mission of the church to the world is to preach the Gospel, not to underwrite any worldly regime or ideology. Therefore the primary identity of the Christian is in Christ -- it cannot be in liberalism, any more than it can be in conservatism, Communism, or communitarianism.

But to stop at this truth would be evasive. Although the faith does not mandate any worldly regime or generate any worldly ideology, it does stand in judgment upon worldly

regimes and ideologies. Moreover, Scripture makes clear that so long as human institutions do not defy God's commandments, we are to submit to them. Under a monarchy, submission might mean nothing more than obedience. In a republic, however, submission includes participation, so we have no alternative but to take positions on political questions. Willy-nilly, this involves us in responding to the worldly philosophies by which other people settle such questions.

The result? Even though I am not a duck, I will sometimes seem to quack like a duck. I cannot be a liberal and I cannot even be in strategic alliance with liberals, but I may from time to time find myself in tactical alliance with them -- just as with conservatives -- defending the cause of particular laws, precepts, or policies that they too approve, but for reasons of their own. To keep my head, I had better be clear about what those reasons are and how they differ from mine. So although we cannot ask whether Christians can or should be political liberals, we can and should ask what Christians are to think of liberalism.

At the threshold of the question we run into another problem. The term "political liberalism" can mean several things. In which sense are we using it here? Its principal meanings are threefold. Broadly, it means constitutional government with a representative legislature and generous liberties. In political economy, it means a competitive, self-regulating market with minimal government interference. Colloquially, it means the contemporary variety of government-driven social reformism. The first sense makes both Senator Kennedy and Speaker Gingrich liberals. The second makes the Speaker a liberal, but not the Senator. The third makes the Senator a liberal, but not the Speaker. For present purposes I use the term in the third.

My thesis is that, even as worldly philosophies go, political liberalism is deeply flawed. We may best describe it as a bundle of acute moral errors, with political consequences which grow more and more alarming as these errors are taken closer and closer to their logical conclusions. I am not speaking of such errors as celebrating sodomy and abortion -- for these are merely symptoms -- but of their causes. Nor am I speaking of all their causes -- for this would require reading hearts -- but of their intellectual causes. I am not even speaking of all their intellectual causes -- for these are too numerous -- but of the most obvious.

No claim is here made that every political liberal commits all the moral errors all the time. Nor do I claim that all the moral errors are logically compatible, so they even could all be committed all the time. Certain moral errors support certain others, but others are at odds, so they must be committed selectively. One must not expect logical coherence in moral confusion.

The political implications of the faith are more negative than positive, so rejecting liberalism does not mean accepting conservatism. In the first place, under the influence of a liberal culture conservatives often fall for liberal moral errors too. In the second place, like

every worldly ideology conservatism commits heresies of its own. But we can study conservatism another time.

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The first moral error of political liberalism is *propitiationism*. According to this notion I should do unto others as they want; according to Christianity I should do unto others as they need. Numerous mental habits contribute to the propitiationist frame of mind. Most of my college students, for instance, think "need" and "want" are just synonyms. Many also construe the Jeffersonian right to pursue happiness as a right to be made happy by the government. Propitiationism corresponds to a style of politics in which innumerable factions, both organized and unorganized, compete to become government clientele, fighting not only for shares of the public purse (such as grants and loan guarantees) but also for governmental preferences (such as trade barriers and racial quotas) and for official marks of esteem (such as multiculturalist curricula and recognition of homosexual unions). Of course, in a representative system every government functionary, whether liberal or not, finds it difficult to resist group pressures. Propitiationism, however, reinforces the habit of giving in by making capitulation a moral duty.

Christians can slip into propitiationism by misunderstanding the Golden Rule. This happens when we read *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* as though it implied *Do unto others as they would have you do unto them* -- "I'd want others to honor my demands, so I should honor theirs." The mistake lies in overlooking the fact that the "you" to whom the precept is addressed is a free subject of the kingdom of Heaven, not a stranger. We are therefore speaking of what *in Christ* we would have others do unto us -- to minister to our godly needs, not to our foolish or sinful wants. Unto others we should minister in the same way. It follows that keeping the Golden Rule may even mean saying "No" or suggesting a better way. Jesus instructs us to feed the poor, and so we should; but Paul says to the church at Thessalonica "For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat."

To be sure, it is easier to see the need to say "No" to a greedy industrialist who wants the government to protect him from honest competition than to a teen mother who wants to marry the government instead of a man. Both want what is bad for them, yet he is likely to get much more of what he wants but doesn't need than she is. The sloppy sort of compassionator is tempted to say "If he gets what isn't good for him, then it's only fair that she should get what isn't good for her." But to give it to her might be to take her sole beatitude away. Find another way to help her. Blessed are those who cannot pay the entry fee to Hell.

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The second moral error of political liberalism is *expropriationism*. According to this notion I may take from others to help the needy, giving nothing of my own; according to

Christianity I should give of my own to help the needy, taking from no one. We might call expropriationism the Robin Hood fallacy. Today, the expropriationist is usually a propitiationist too, confusing the needy with some subset of the merely wanty. So we are speaking of a style of politics in which the groups in power decide for us which of their causes our wealth is to support, taking that wealth by force.

Many Christians seem to miss the point, thinking that expropriation is wrong just because the wrong groups are in power, choosing the wrong causes for subsidy. This is where the horror stories are offered, and horrible they are: of subsidies to promote abortion, subsidies to photograph crucifixes in jars of urine, subsidies for all sorts of wickedness and blasphemy. But expropriation would be wrong even if each of its causes were good. Consider the following progression.

1. On a dark street, a man draws a knife and demands my money for drugs.
- 2.
3. Instead of demanding my money for drugs, he demands it for the church.
- 4.
5. Instead of being alone, he is with a bishop of the Church who acts as bagman.
- 6.
7. Instead of drawing a knife, he produces a policeman who says I must do as he says.
- 8.
9. Instead of meeting me on the street, he mails me his demand as an official agent of the government.
- 10.

If the first is theft, it is difficult to see why the other four are not also theft. Expropriation is wrong not because its causes are wrong, but because it is a violation of the Eighth Commandment. Thou shalt not steal.

But how, one may ask, can *government* steal? We live in a republic; aren't we therefore just taking from ourselves? No, not even in a republic are the rulers identical with the ruled, nor for that matter are the ruled identical with each other; if we were just taking from ourselves, there would be no need for the taking to be enforced. Then is it wrong for government to tax at all? No, government may certainly collect taxes for the support of its proper work; that work, however, is not the support of all good causes, but merely punishing wrongdoers and commending rightdoers. So Peter teaches in his first letter (2:13-14).

If government were to end its subsidy of good causes, wouldn't these good causes suffer? Not necessarily; they might even thrive. Marvin Olasky has shown in *The Tragedy of American Compassion* that government subsidy itself can make good causes suffer, for in taking money by force one weakens both the means and the motive for people to give freely. Not only that, government usually distorts good causes in the act of taking them over. But

what if the causes did depend on the proceeds of theft? Should we do evil, that good may come? When some people accused Paul of teaching this doctrine, he called the charge a slander. There is no such thing as a tame sin which will do only what we want it to, going quietly back into its bottle when we have finished with it. Sin is no more like that than God is. In politics, no less than in private life, it ramifies.

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The third moral error of political liberalism is *solipsism*. According to this notion human beings make themselves, belong to themselves, and have value in and of themselves; according to Christianity they are made by God, belong to Him, and have value because they are loved by Him and made in His image. "Your eyes shall be opened," said the serpent, "and ye shall be as gods." Solipsism holds that we already are.

Political liberalism was not always solipsistic, but the change has been hardly noticed. John Locke in 1688 and Immanuel Kant in 1797 both held that we are not to use others as means to our ends. And yet though one can read in many books that they were saying the same thing, Locke gives as his reason that we are here to serve God's ends, while Kant gives as his that each of us is an end himself. Locke therefore roots our dignity in God, while Kant makes us out to be gods ourselves. The two thinkers turn out to be as far apart as two thinkers can be.

Some might say the difference makes no difference; after all, Kant did reach the same conclusion as Locke, did he not? Say rather that he purported to. As we might have guessed from social conditions among the pagan deities, that is not the end of the story. Olympus was a world of irresistible forces and immoveable objects. The gods deserved everything, but owed nothing. While expecting divine honors, they did whatever they could get away with. Solipsism produces the same result. Not everyone can have unconditional value, so beneath the high public language of equal concern and respect some become more equal than others. Because mothers are not to be means to their babies' survival, their babies become means to their mothers' control over their pregnancies. Because speakers are not to be means to their listeners' purity, their listeners become means to the speakers' pleasure in filth. Because patients are not to be means to the quiet of their doctors' consciences, their doctors become means to their patients' desire to die.

As surely as cider makes vinegar, solipsism made this evil. It would have done so *even if it were true* that being ends in ourselves keeps us from viewing others as means to ourselves. The mere idea of Not Using Others cannot produce a moral code, for only by the light of a moral code can we tell what counts as using others.

Christianity does not suffer from this vicious circle. Our faith takes its code from the one Who alone possesses unconditional value, yet Who sacrificed Himself that we may live,

commanding that we love one another, not according to our own ideas, but as He has loved us.

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The fourth moral error of political liberalism is *absolutionism*. According to this notion we cannot be blamed when we violate the moral law, either because we cannot help it, because we have no choice, or because it *is* our choice; according to Christianity we must be blamed, because we are morally responsible beings. Of course absolutionism cannot be practiced consistently, nor would it be so convenient to its practitioners if it could.

For example a father may be absolved of child abuse because he was abused as a child himself; because of the abuse, however, the child may be absolved of murdering his father, and in this case the father is not absolved. A sodomist and a bully both may be absolved because of predisposing factors in their family or genes, but if the bully beats the sodomist, then the sodomist is absolved but not the bully. A woman may be absolved of leaving her husband because she feels trapped in the marriage, but a man is not absolved of leaving his wife for the same reason, because that would be sexist. A young man may be absolved of smashing a brick into a person's head in the excitement of a riot, but not of doing so in the excitement of a gang war: unless the motive is political, in which case he is absolved if he is a Freedom Fighter, but not if he is a Terrorist. Finally, in a reversal of vicarious atonement, the critics of absolutionism are blamed for the sins of those whom they refuse to absolve.

Nowhere does Scripture say that to know all is to forgive all. Rather it says that on the Day of Wrath, everything secret will be known and everything in darkness will come to light. Nevertheless Christians get pulled into absolutionism by all sorts of ropes. *Ours is a God of mercy*. Yes, but He is also a God of judgment. These two qualities are united by the atoning sacrifice of Christ, of which we cannot avail ourselves unless we repent. *Christ has commanded us not to judge*. Yes, but we are not commanded not to judge acts; we are only commanded not to judge souls. We know which acts are wrong because He has told us; we don't know which souls will repent because He hasn't. *God loves everyone*. Yes, and that is why He wants to save us from our sins. We are not saved by good deeds, but we are certainly saved for them. God does not overlook our wrongdoing; He forgives it when we turn in faith to Christ.

In the final analysis, absolutionism is cruel, not compassionate; harsh, not lenient; malicious, not magnanimous. It speaks of mercy, but shuts out God's grace by teaching that we have no need for it. It speaks of forbearing from judgment, but its main use is to demonize class enemies. It speaks of love, but justifies evil. God forgive us for thinking there is nothing to forgive.

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The fifth moral error of political liberalism is *perfectionism*. According to this notion human effort is adequate to cure human evil; according to Christianity, our sin, like our guilt, can be erased only by the grace of God through faith in Christ. Perfectionists also think the cure can be completed in human time. Some even believe it can be arranged for whole societies at once. By contrast, the faith teaches that God must start over with each person, and that although guilt is erased immediately, the cure of sin is not complete until the next life.

Perfectionism is rich in consequences. The war to end all wars that ushered in a century of wars, the war on poverty that spent trillions of dollars but left poverty untouched, the war on unhappiness that enriched assorted gurus while rates of suicide soared, these are but its nuts and berries. According to the faith, its final fruit is unending darkness. Yet though emptied of Hope, perfectionism is full of hopes. "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement." "Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves." "Man sets himself only such problems as he is able to solve." Statements like these were once considered extreme; the first and second are from the Humanist Manifestos, the third from Karl Marx. Yet today such sentiments are the boilerplate of liberal speechmaking. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has imagined what we can build," the current President has prophesied, misquoting Paul and Isaiah.

Christians bear some responsibility for the advent of perfectionism. For instance today's believer does not often hear that Love is a disposition of will toward good, Faith a disposition of reason toward revealed truth, and Hope a disposition of longing toward Heaven. Once he has followed nonbelievers in using first word for an emotion and the second for something inimical to reason, there is nothing much to stop him from using the third for complacency about the course of this present, broken world.

Other slidepaths to perfectionism are just as well travelled. Some people even think Jesus was a perfectionist; did He not urge us to be perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect? But the Greek word translated "perfect," *teleioi*, means merely "complete," meaning that we are not to stop at half-measures but grow up to full maturity. Thus John, who ought to have known what the Master meant, wrote in his first letter that if any man says he has no sin, he deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. Nor is perfectionism to be found in biblical prophecy. True, some Christians distort the prophecy of the millennium -- the thousand-year reign of the martyrs with Christ -- into the idea that worldly suffering will diminish and finally disappear through human social reform. But the text of the Revelation says nothing of such things.

One sometimes hears that perfectionism is a prerequisite for pity -- as though one offers a cup of cold water to a thirsty child only because he foresees an ultimate victory in the War on Thirst. On the contrary, one takes pity for the love of souls, not for the love of abstractions;

moreover one takes it because these souls are suffering, not because he expects suffering to end. Perfectionism is more likely to annihilate pity than to heighten it. All for the sake of paradise, the tyrants of our generation stacked bodies higher than Nimrod stacked bricks; yet they came no nearer heaven than he did.

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The sixth moral error of political liberalism is *universalism*. According to this notion, the human race forms a harmony whose divisions are ultimately either unreal or unimportant; according to Christianity, human harmony has been shattered by sin and cannot be fully healed by any means short of conversion.

The argument that human divisions are *unreal* is usually some form of pantheism. According to the Eastern way of putting it, all is in God -- the obvious consequence of which is that God includes evil. For instance, the psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that Christians are mistaken in worshipping God as Trinity. Instead they ought to worship Him as "Quaternity," the fourth Person of Godhood being Satan -- a dog in the manger if ever there was one. For this some praise Jung as more "spiritual" than Freud. Most Westerners, though, prefer a formula which suppresses such unsettling conclusions: not "all is in God," but "God is in all." Thus George Fox taught that the "light of Christ" resides within each person already. By making such divisive steps as conversion unnecessary, this would seem to hold out hopes of bringing people together; actually it makes the origin and persistence of our divisions wholly mysterious.

The argument that human divisions are *unimportant* is usually some form of myopia. In one version, everyone is just like me -- my class, my set, my outlook. We may all seem to want different things, but deep down we all *really* want the same thing and seek the same God. This is the stuff of beauty pageants and Robert Fulghum books. In another version, we are all different, but that is all right because it takes all sorts. Each ingredient adds its flavor to the salad. We are the world. This is the stuff of rock telethons and multicultural curricula.

Such delusions are almost cruelly easy to explode. Did the Nazis want the same thing as their victims? Did they seek the same God? Did it take both sorts to make a world? Our wants are different -- wealth, redemption, power, death, revenge. Our Gods are different -- Yahweh, Allah, Krishna, Kali, Volk. Even our sins are different -- lewdness, envy, pride, resentment, sloth. God has placed in all hearts a longing for Himself, but not every way in which we try to satisfy this longing is a search for God. A diversity of gifts has been strewn among the children of men, but not every vice or twist of the children of men is a gift. In Christ there is no slave or free, no Greek or Jew; but there are slave and free, and there are Greek and Jew.

In our time, the universalist fallacy has even given rise to a new type of professional,

the "facilitator," whose bag of tricks for uncovering supposed latent unity is more and more familiar. Some of these, like active listening and decision by consensus, can be useful at times. Others, like unconditional inclusiveness, spell disaster if taken literally. What happens when they are imposed where a basis for unity is presumed that does not in fact exist? Various things; for instance the parties may stall, fly apart, or reach conspicuous agreement about points that are not at issue. At least these outcomes are straightforward. But just as often the technology of reconciliation becomes a technology of domination, more subtle than most, whose adepts simply bamboozle those who cannot talk the talk.

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The seventh moral error of political liberalism is *neutralism*. According to this notion the virtue of tolerance requires suspending judgments about good and evil; according to Christianity it requires *making* judgments about good and evil. We can break neutralism into three components. According to the Quantitative Fallacy, the meaning of tolerance is tolerating; therefore, the more you tolerate, the more tolerant you are. According to the Skeptical Fallacy, the best foundation for tolerance is to avoid having strong convictions about good and evil; therefore, the more you doubt, the more tolerant you are. According to the Apologetic Fallacy, if you can't help having strong convictions the next best foundation for tolerance is refusing to express or act upon them; therefore, the more pusillanimous you are, the more tolerant you are.

Closely examined, each fallacy explodes itself. If you really believe that the meaning of tolerance is tolerating, then you ought to tolerate even intolerance. If you really believe that the best foundation for tolerance is to avoid having any strong convictions at all about right and wrong, then you shouldn't have a strong conviction that intolerance is wrong. If you really believe that when you do have strong convictions you should refuse to express or act upon them, then your tolerance should be a dead letter; it should be one of the things you are pusillanimous about.

But if consistent neutralism is self-refuting, then why is it so persistent? How is it possible for it to live on in our newspapers, on the television, in the schoolroom, and even in the pulpit? There are main two reasons for its vigor. The first reason is that it *never is* practiced consistently. Rather it is used selectively as a weapon for demoralizing Christians and other opponents. For the neutralist too has strong convictions; it's just that his convictions aren't the ones he says one shouldn't act upon. Consistent neutralism would hold that if it is intolerant to express the conviction that unborn babies should not be torn from the womb, then it is also intolerant to express the conviction that they may be torn from the womb. By contrast, selective neutralism remembers itself only long enough to condemn the defenders of life.

The second reason for the vigor of neutralism is that it encourages the illusion that we

can escape from moral responsibility for our beliefs and decisions. "I am innocent of this man's blood; it is your responsibility" -- in these words Pilate implied that one can authorize a wrong without taking sides. "I am neither for nor against abortion; I'm for choice" -- this statement is based on the same view of responsibility as Pilate's. Indeed in trying to evade our choices we set ourselves not only against the laws of conscience but also against the laws of logic, for between two meaningful propositions *X* and *not-X* there is no middle ground; if one is true, the other is false. Even the pagans knew that.

What then is the truth about tolerance? The meaning of this virtue is not tolerating *per se*, but tolerating what ought to be tolerated. Practicing it means putting up with just those bad things that, for the sake of some greater good, we ought to put up with. We aren't practicing the virtue when we fail to put up with bad things that we ought to put up with, such as the expression of false opinions in debate; nor are we practicing it when we do put up with bad things that we ought not to put up with, such as rape. But making such distinctions requires knowing the truth about goods, bads, and greater goods. There is nothing neutral about that. It requires that we avoid not strong convictions, but false convictions; it requires not refusing to act, but acting. As Abraham Kuyper, J.B. Phillips, and C.S. Lewis have said in nearly identical words, "there is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan."

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The eighth moral error of political liberalism is *collectivism*. According to this notion the state is more important to the child than the family; according to Christianity the family is more important to the child than the state. To be sure, collectivists do not usually put their point so bluntly. A good example of hypocrisy and circumlocution is found in a court case from 1980.

In that year, the Supreme Court of the state of Washington ruled that lower courts had been right in granting 15-year-old Sheila Sumey's request to be taken from the Sumey home and placed in another that was more to her liking. The Sumeys were not unfit, and Sheila had not been mistreated; these points were not even at issue. Under the 1977 statute, all Sheila had to do was say that she was in "conflict" with her parents, and go on saying it after state-imposed counselling had run its course. The nature of the "conflict": She disagreed with her parents' rules that she stay away from drugs and dealers, abstain from sex and alcohol, and be home every night at a reasonable hour. Mr. and Mrs. Sumey called the statute unconstitutional. The court, however, defended it as a "means for providing social services to the family and nurturing the parent-child bond." The intrusion on parental rights was "minor," it declared, because Sheila would have to petition every six months if she wanted to stay away from her parents for the rest of her minority. Although "the family structure is a fundamental institution" and "parental prerogatives are entitled to considerable legal deference," these prerogatives must yield to "fundamental rights of the child or important interests of the State."

Before collectivism, our family law was based on a philosophy that ran something like this. Growing up takes time, and until the process reaches its end children are not fully capable of deciding what is best for them. Moreover, the family is a more fundamental institution than the state, based on a closer harmony of interests among its members. From these premises we may conclude that in normal families, during the period while children are growing up, their parents may be trusted to act in their best interests. It follows that the state should not intervene except on evidence that the parents are acting abusively. In other words it should confine itself to the restraint of wickedness rather than trying to absorb the functions of the family.

The regnant political class is increasingly unhappy with this approach to growing up. Implicit in the position of the Washington court is the thought that of the two human institutions, family and state, the state is the more fundamental, and that normal families are characterized by conflict rather than harmony of interests between parents and children. From these premises the court concludes that parents should not be trusted to act in their children's best interests, and that therefore the state may intervene even when there is no evidence that parents are acting abusively.

Collectivism hides in a forest of reassuring bromides. "It takes a whole village to raise a child," the secular intone; "Every child is my child," the pious drowsily respond. Of all these deceptions the language of "children's rights" is the most brilliant -- and also the most daring, for in no imaginable world would children be competent to exercise their "rights" themselves. The primary decisionmaker in the life of a child must always be, and always is, someone else: if not parents, then the state. So, although most rights limit the reach of the government, so-called children's rights increase it. They do nothing to empower children; they only empower mandarins.

I am reminded of an election-year scuffle between a father, who was also a candidate, and a social service functionary. "No government bureaucrat could love my children as I do," the father said. "That's not true," protested the functionary, "I love them just as much. "What are their names?" asked the father.

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People do wrong, and I have to do something. People are unhappy, and I have to do something. People are foolish, and I have to do something. I will absolve them. I will give them things. I will take their children. At last we come to the ninth and most mysterious moral error of political liberalism: *the fallacy of desperate gestures*. Though it mixes with all the others, it is different from each of them, different even from perfectionism, with which it is often confused. The perfectionist acts, at least in the beginning, from a desire to relieve someone else's pain. The desperationist acts to relieve his own: the pain of pity, the pain of

impotence, the pain of indignation. He is like a man who beats on a foggy television screen with a pipe wrench, not because the wrench will fix the picture but because it is handy and feels good to use.

Not long ago I sat up late listening to two friends debate. The first maintained that federal antipoverty policies were an engine of misery, which had bought off the poor with checks and coupons while undermining their families and fossilizing them in permanent dependence on the government. For a while the second denied the charge, but his denials were half-hearted and at last he conceded it. Whether the state is really doing more harm than good is not my present point; perhaps he should have held his ground. But the interesting thing is what happened next.

Having admitted that federal antipoverty policies were doing harm, he defended them anyway. "What do you propose doing instead?" he demanded. "*Nothing?*" My other friend replied that he meant no such thing, and spoke of what people could do individually and through the Church. Friend one was contemptuous. "Government is unique," he said. "You cannot convince me that mere charity can take its place." "I don't want it to," said friend two. "We've already agreed that government hurts instead of helping. Besides, I'm not trying to end poverty. I don't know how. I'm just trying to help where I can reach." Friend one was unmoved. "We have to do *something*," he said, and so he went on repeating.

The two friends were at cross-purposes. The rule of the first was "Do no harm, and help where possible"; of the second, "Better to harm magnificently in the name of help, than to help but a little." Not that he would have put it that way. He was medicating his pity with symbols, and the power of the drug depends on self-deception.

Here lies the power of political liberalism: Its moral errors are fortified with opiates. We may think that reality will break through the dream by itself, but reality is not self-interpreting; the causes by which errors are eventually dissipated and replaced by other errors are hidden in God's Providence. All we can do is keep up the critique which is in the Gospel, and in the meantime go on being Christians: our eyes lifted up not to the spectacular idol of political salvation, but to the Cross. Let those call this doing nothing who will; we know better.