

# The Call of Christ to Freedom

*by Stephen Legate*

Do not accuse a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.  
— Proverbs 3:30

Christians often conflate libertarianism with libertinism. We generally assume that not forcing others to behave virtuously is the same as countenancing vice. I believe, to the diametric contrary, that Christian virtue is imperiled by the coercive nature of politics and that Christians must adopt political principles of libertarianism as the best way to love our neighbors and lead them toward the light of Christ. On its face, this claim may seem implausible, so let me begin by examining what Jesus himself might have to say on the matter.

Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary. His radical pronouncements still have the power to astonish. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," is a command directly contradictory to all our instincts and our sense of justice. "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." As a young man reading this wisdom, I clearly remember thinking, "Well, what the heck kind of chance does that give me?" Perhaps Jesus' most supremely radical words were these, which concisely express the reason the Jews demanded His death: "Before Abraham was, *I am*."

I believe the most amazing aspect of Christ's ministry is a matter of first principle, one taken for granted so much throughout His message that it never specifically is stated. It is best evidenced in the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19. The man comes to Jesus asking what is required for eternal life. After assuring Jesus that he has kept all the commandments, he asks what he still lacks. Jesus says this: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give

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to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Most of the time, when we examine this scripture, we focus on the high cost of discipleship. Sell all your possessions, and follow me. That's quite a tall order. But we gloss over the first phrase, the phrase that begins with the conditional. "If you want to be perfect . . ." The implicit message of that phrase is this: not only did Christ die for us, not only did God become man and love us enough to endure the cross for our sins, but He did so and now *demand*s nothing in return.

He *asks*. He asks for our faith, love, and worship. He asks us to heed His call, and accept His grace. He asks us to practice temperance, charity, humility, and chastity, and to seek His strength in those moments when we falter. But He only asks. He only tries to persuade, He never forces. As C.S. Lewis put it: "He cannot ravish, He can only woo." He wants us to love Him and, by definition, love must be chosen. It cannot be forced or it is no longer love.

It is an incredible thing, that the All-in-All, the Alpha and Omega, would dress down into a frail human shell and die in agony to save me, only to give me the option of ignoring His effort. Here in this choice, left open for us, is an essential principle of Christianity that is too often forgotten: human

free will, specifically the freedom of each person to choose his or her path, is at the center of God's plan. We are free, and God wants us to choose Him, but our choice only has meaning if it is *our* choice.

### Laws of Vice and Virtue

Robert Heinlein observed that humans divide politically into two groups: those who want people to be controlled and those who do not. The former and larger division of humanity supports what I call Laws of Vice and Virtue. These laws are not enacted to protect individual rights, defend victims

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from criminal aggression, or settle civil disputes between parties. Rather, they are enacted in order to coerce individuals into adopting or abstaining from certain behaviors.

Vice laws prohibit "unwanted" behaviors, such as selling your body for money; selling, buying, or using drugs; and playing games of chance (unless, of course, these activities are run or regulated by the state). Laws of virtue amount to various forms of forced charity. They require us, through taxation, to fund social services, art museums, and medical research, whether or not we agree with these uses of our money. Together, Laws of Vice and Virtue peer into personal behaviors: sexual activity, substance use and abuse, the sharing, hoarding, or squandering of wealth, etc., and wherever these behaviors are deemed unacceptable or inadequate, the Laws of Vice and Virtue bring the full coercive power of government to bear.

Conservatives tend to favor and support vice laws; leftist liberals, conversely, tend to favor and support laws of virtue. Christians from both ends of this political spectrum tend to uncritically assume that those laws they favor are Christian in spirit and intent. Yet, neither Christian conservatives nor Christian liberals seem to give much thought to what Jesus might have to say on the topic.

They ought to. Put bluntly, the principle of God-given free will is not reconcilable with Laws of Vice and Virtue.

If Christ gives a man the freedom to choose the destiny of his very soul, does that not imply he is free to choose whether to inject his body with heroin? And if he chooses the needle, do we have the right to take it from him by force, saying, "Christ gave you this choice, but frankly we think that was a bad idea"? If Christ calls a woman to chastity and humility, but she chooses promiscuity, and then pornography and prostitution, are we to step in with the authority of government and say, "You've chosen poorly, please re-read 1 Corinthians 6 during your stay in jail"?

The Lord Himself let the rich young man choose to walk away, rather than surrender his wealth to charity and live a life of service to God incarnate. Are we to accost him on the other side of the hill with two armed agents of the Internal Revenue Service and say, "The Lord let you keep 100% but the poor people around you really deserve about 30% of that"?

I don't believe so. If we seek Christ, if we seek to follow His model and let Him mold us into His image over the course of a lifetime, one of the things we must surrender is our desire to police the vices and virtues of others.

### Grace, Freedom, and Government

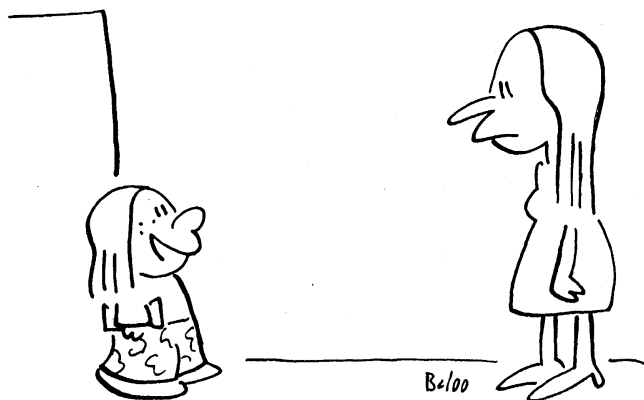
Two arguments spring immediately to mind against this assertion, one theological and one political.

As with all things, we should search God's will first. Some Christians might argue that, in the Old Testament, we see a series of laws that are far more invasive, proscriptive, and coercive than our modern Laws of Vice and Virtue. Leviticus, for example, recommended banishment of any Israelite who ate the fat of a cow, sheep, or goat, and the death penalty for anyone who cursed his father or mother. God handed down these harsh laws and they seem to indicate His support for the unrestrained use of state power to modify personal behavior.

But let's not forget that Christ has taken the burden of the law from our shoulders and left it at the Cross.

As Paul made clear throughout his epistles, this should not invalidate the concept of law so much as change our attitude toward it. The law is no longer a hard line that we must either toe or face judgment, because Christ extends His grace to us. He is pleased with our best efforts to shun vice and embrace virtue, even though we stumble and never reach perfection. As the writer of Hebrews put it: "The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God."

The story of the Pharisees and the adulteress in John 8 provides a concrete example of Jesus' approach to the law as it was applied to vices and virtues. The Pharisees wanted to stone the woman to death, as commanded by Mosaic Law. Jesus' renowned reply was: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." So, looking at our modern Laws of Vice and Virtue, do they track more closely to Old Testament legalism, or the grace of Christ? If we are to emulate Him, should we not offer those around us our own pale shadow of that flawless grace?



"We learned in school today that a million years ago, everybody was homeless."

## The Lever of Hell

Looking more deeply into Christian theology, we find further emphasis placed on the importance of free will. It is true that Christ only asks us to follow Him, recognize His sacrifice, and receive His grace. He makes clear it is our choice. But it is also true that our choice can have dire consequences.

To paraphrase Jonathan Edwards: choose wrong and you burn. If you choose to reject God, God will honor your choice, for all eternity. Whether Hell is an "outer darkness," or a "lake of burning sulfur," it is a fearful threat. Christians might wonder why, if God uses the threat of hell to coerce us to salvation, shouldn't we use prison to coerce others to virtue? I'll answer Jonathan Edwards with his postmodern counter-equivalent, Mojo Nixon:

You only live once  
So off with them pants,  
Hell ain't for sure,  
It's only a chance.

There is something of a "reality gap" between the threat of imprisonment on Earth and the threat of eternal punishment after death. Even the most seasoned, spirit-filled Christian will acknowledge a difference between his fear of God's judgment and his fear of an IRS audit. If we reject God's grace, it is an article of faith that the consequences are dire. If the police catch us breaking the law, the consequences are tangible and they come whether or not we believe in them.

In addition, it is worth noting that as Christians we believe that God's judgment of our vices and virtues is perfect in every way: perfectly just, perfectly comprehensive,

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and without flaw in knowledge of fact or motive. Can anyone, Christian or otherwise, seriously claim that the government's judgment approaches that standard?

## Vengeance Is Mine

Let's ask another question. Can the government's penalties really add much weight to the punishments ready-built by God into the vices themselves?

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine . . . — Proverbs 23:29-30

Anyone who has escaped the clutches of a drug addiction will be able to tell you a great deal about the consequences of exceeding the design specifications of the human body. The short-term physical pain suffered by a heroin addict in withdrawal, the long-term negative health effects of alcoholism, the tendency of 20-something-year-old crack smokers to up and die right in mid-puff are all taps from God's clue-by-

four and would seem to deliver much nastier lumps than the negative experience of jail time.

Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.

— Ecclesiastes 5:10

Greed and charity are two sides of the same coin. Will you love people and use money, or love money and use people? Those who choose the latter path find that as time

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passes their money loses its luster and truly honest connections with the people around them get harder and harder to come by. Does taxing the miser's income and giving it to the poor add much to his burden of isolation, or create virtue where none before existed?

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.  
— Proverbs 5:3-4

Tales of the happy hooker are legendary. Precisely that — legendary. A minority of workers in the sex industry truly love their work, while in their 20s. By their mid-30s, their numbers are decimated. By their mid-40s, they've all but disappeared. God designed sex to be His most beautiful biological gift, a way for two to become one in flesh and spirit. Those who nightly throw that pearl before swine become so empty and jaded that incarceration becomes just a minor annoyance, a cost of doing business.

To be sure, the book of Job makes clear that God does not always punish vice and reward virtue, and certainly not to equal degrees. But, with occasional exceptions, a life of charity, chastity, and temperance is longer, healthier, and happier than a life dominated by greed, debauchery, and addiction. God has ensured that the very design of our bodies and psyches repays us — with interest — for our abuses, usually before prison enters the picture. Is God's price not enough? Can human laws and punishments have much effect on a person who clings to vice in spite of God's design?

## Jesus Christ, Anarchist?

In response to the theological possibility that Christ would rather we not legislate vice and virtue, many Christians turn to the notion that these laws aren't really about individual choices, but about the sum-total social effects of such choices. In doing so, they depart from the realm of theology and approach the happy demesne of politics.

The assertions run thus: we need social programs that redistribute wealth because, sum-total, people aren't charitable enough to care for all the poor, so the government must fill in the gap. We need laws against drug abuse because, sum-total, people aren't temperate enough, and without gov-

ernment force backing up the taboo, everybody would end up an addict.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

Libertarians have already published volumes of counter-argument to these assertions, challenging them on factual, empirical, theoretical, logical, and ethical grounds. My interest here is in the fundamentally anti-Christian presupposition made by the partisans of government coercion: that if the government doesn't do a thing, it won't be done.

## The Idolatry of Statism

Most Christians would assume the dominant religion in the United States in the 20th century was Christianity. Certainly, if you measure dominance by church attendance figures, that would seem to be the case. On Sunday morning we Christians, by and large, put our butts in the pews.

But where did we put our faith?

Beginning with the dawn of "progressive" politics at the turn of the century, moving through alcohol prohibition, FDR's New Deal, LBJ's Great Society, then Reagan's escalation of the War on Drugs, and culminating in Clinton's efforts to socialize health care and criminalize sexual misbehavior in the workplace, through all of this, our faith was growing. But not our faith in God. We gave lip service to God. We put our faith in government.

If a man were a drunkard, the government would make him sober. If a family were poor, the government would take care of them. If a man didn't save enough for retirement, the government would garnish the wages of all workers to provide his pension. If a child didn't have enough money for a hot lunch, the government would fire up the oven in the school cafeteria. If a man didn't have a job, the government would make one for him. If people sold drugs to our children, the government would put a stop to it. If health care were too expensive, the government would foot the bill. If a person felt any degree of sexual tension in the workplace, the government would allow him or her to take action in court to rectify the situation.

In America today, though a majority of us call Christ our savior, a much larger majority of us hold to this creed: if something is wrong with the world, the government can and must fix it. If something is right with the world, the government can and must encourage (or even require) it. And if the government removes its influence from a particular area of society, the result will be chaos. This doctrine smacks of idolatry of a particularly futile nature.

Prohibition was an abysmal failure. Most of the New Deal was declared unconstitutional in 1935, and by 1938 it was clear the rest of the New Deal hadn't provided any measurable improvement of economic conditions. LBJ's Great Society did not end poverty in his lifetime, and the program's remaining vestiges won't end poverty in ours. Nixon was the first president to use the phrase "War on Drugs" and, by any quantifiable measure, the government has lost that "war." Clinton signed an expanded sexual harassment bill and, before he left office, he was in court defending himself against sexual harassment charges.

Never has faith been more misplaced. The golden calf was better to its worshipers than statism has been to its adherents. Every attempt to use the coercive powers of government to end poverty, indulgence, and debauchery has

failed in the long run, most often spectacularly. But if government fails us, how should we, as Christians, attempt to deal with these problems? The answer comes, as it so often does, in seeking to emulate Christ.

## Christ's Personal Nature

Christ is God: omnipresent and eternal. He doesn't need to speak to us in a group with a loudspeaker and a microphone. He is with each one of us every moment of our lives. His is that still, small voice that speaks to us at just the right time and in just the right way. He knows each of us better than we ever can know ourselves, and the degree to which He tailors His call to us is nothing less than, well, God-like. Christ's nature is ultimately personal and persuasive. Although we do not share His power and perspective, we ought to try to emulate His example when considering how to deal with the vices and virtues of others. So, getting personal here, it doesn't begin with "us." It begins with "you."

If Christ has pierced your heart with charitable desires, then, by all means, be charitable. Give your time, expertise, love, and money to those needy to whom Christ leads you.

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Speak to others about that need, urging them to join you in doing the Lord's work. If they do not share your calling, if you do not persuade them, let them be. It flies in the face of Christ's example to force charitable behavior from others.

If the Lord has inflamed your spirit against the vice you see all around you, then, by all means, speak out against it. Picket, boycott, publish, preach! Plead with anyone (and everyone!) who will listen. Persuade them to turn away from depravity toward the only true source of life and love. But if they will not listen and you call on government to force them to virtue, then that virtue ceases to have meaning, because it ceases to be a choice.

The question here is not what the Lord would have you do about your own vices and virtues. That's obvious. Nor is the question what the Lord would have you say to others about their vices and virtues. That also is obvious. The question is: When it comes to vice and virtue, what would the Lord have you *force* others to do?

I'll say it again. Christ's nature is personal and persuasive. Government's nature is general and coercive. When it comes to issues of vice and virtue, you cannot logically serve both. You must choose where to put your faith, and how your faith should translate into action.

## A Call to Action and Witness

When we insert government into issues of vice and virtue, we deny others' God-given freedom. Worse, we attempt

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to abrogate our responsibility to care directly for our fellow sinners.

If snorting cocaine is against the law, the addict becomes a criminal. The law builds a wall between him and law-abiding citizens. He becomes not a brother we pity, love, and witness to, but a miscreant we fine and jail. Following this line, his sin does not call for our compassionate action; it calls for government intervention.

If we pay our tax dollars to provide food stamps and public housing for a single mother of four children, it makes us that much less likely to take time to visit her personally and give direct attention to her family's needs. If it turns out that Chicago's housing project Cabrini Green is not the best environment in which to raise children, it also makes us that much less able to help that family.

We have been statist for so long we have become comfortable with the idea of using government as our proxy in all our best opportunities to care for our fellow human beings. The government can jail sinners. And the government can write checks and build ugly block housing. But the government can't say to the sinner: "I know why you're doing this because I've done it, too, and I'm here to tell you there's a better way." The government can't say to the needy: "Here are some groceries, let me help you cook tonight. How's your son doing on his math homework?" And the government definitely can't say: "You know, I don't do these things of my own strength. The truth is: Christ called me to help you. And I owe Him so much I just had to answer."

What would our society be like if we stopped voting for virtue and against vice, and started acting? If there are 150 million of us who claim Christ as savior, then there are five of us for every person in poverty. There are ten of us for every drug addict. There are dozens of us for every prostitute and porn broker. If we were to dismantle every vice law and state social program tomorrow, and replace them with direct Christian action and involvement, would our country really be worse off? And more importantly, wouldn't Christ's love be more evident in our world? How would that affect the unsaved?

For the Christians who've made it this far and remain unconvinced, I have only one more question:

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### *Letters, from page 32*

that even if it were possible to put one in place right away, it would be doomed to failure. Libertarianism requires self-discipline and personal responsibility, yet even a cursory glance at today's world reveals a grossly undisciplined culture that worships instant gratification — libertinism rather than libertarianism — and expects the government to take care of, if not pay for, its every problem. On the flip side, you have to deal with the folks of conservative Middle America, who aren't going to come rushing to your cause by trumpeting that you're the defender of making cocaine and heroin legal. And then you also have the truly apathetic — the people who right now are freely handing over their liberties to the government in the name of fighting terrorism.

The best approach, then, is to win over people's hearts

Do you have any friends or family who do not know Christ? Know any atheists? Muslims? Scientologists? Surely you must, unless you lead an unusually sheltered life. Now, consider your attitude toward their unbelief, and the long-term consequences.

Unless you style yourself a Grand Inquisitor, I imagine you respect their freedom to choose not to believe. I'm sure you worry about them, and use whatever openings the Lord provides to try to witness to them, but when push comes to shove, you know the choice is theirs. I highly doubt you ever would consider trying to get the government to imprison them until they saw the light. You recognize their right to determine the destiny of their immortal souls. They will either choose union with Christ or outer darkness. All you can do is love them, advise them, live your witness, and pray for them.

If you grant them freedom in this most final, most eternal of choices, how is their freedom to abuse their bodies and misuse their money even an issue? How do finite concerns trump the infinite?

### **Free by Design**

Freedom, paradoxically enough, can be something of a burden. There are times when I wish the world were different. I wish Christ had given us a smaller range of options. I wish the government actually were an effective counter to vice and promoter of virtue.

But God in His wisdom built the world as it is, not as I want it to be. He not only gave freedom to me, but also to Anton LaVey, John Rockefeller, Heidi Fleiss, and Jimi Hendrix. Their choices were perhaps less sound than mine, but no amount of votes, taxes, or jails could have changed them.

Libertarians — Christian, and non-Christian alike — often understand that an uncompromising commitment to Christ and an uncompromising commitment to liberty are not incompatible. Christians — libertarian and non-libertarian alike — should understand the same.

Christians, we are free. Christians, *so are they*. Let's recognize the boundaries, *and the opportunities*, and act accordingly. □

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and minds, incrementally, in terms they can understand and with causes they can rally around without pause, such as lowering taxes or regaining constitutional liberties. Once you've produced results that they can see and from which they benefit, they'll become more receptive to your harder-to-sell issues, such as the decriminalizing of drugs or the elimination of their favorite government program. And that will happen, as they again come to care about the principles on which this nation was founded. Even then, would we achieve a purely libertarian America? No. That will never happen, simply because you can never expect 260,000,000 people to think exactly alike. But at least by approaching the cause of liberty in a pragmatic fashion, we could get much closer to the ideal than the idealists will ever take us.

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