

God and Other Famous Liberals by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 16040919
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 and Luke 15:11-24
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 19 September, 2004

A cruel and vicious act has been perpetrated against a defenseless and unsuspecting word. The word has become the victim of ridicule. It has been slandered, beaten, pummeled, and cast out of polite society. Politicians and business people, afraid to pronounce it in public, refer to it as the "I" word, but I'm going to say the word out loud: "Liberal!" There: I said it: "liberal, liberal, liberal."

"Liberal" really is a noble word. Its synonyms are free, generous, bounteous, lavish, hospitable, gracious, openhanded, giving, and large-hearted.¹ The word liberal implies giving, benevolence, and moderation. Its antonyms are "parsimony" and "economy."²

I will let you contemplate the implications when business and the marketplace are governed solely on economy. I submit that our marketplace and business should be based as much on human need. What is the greatest good for the greatest number of people?

When I use the word liberal, I am in good company. God is a liberal. I was reminded of this in a little book published more than a decade ago entitled, *God and Other Famous Liberals: Reclaiming the Politics of America* by F. Forrester Church.³ God is the profligate liberal creator. There are more asteroids than there are grains of sand in our universe. God is wildly extravagant.

God is a liberal lover. Jesus told a parable about a man with two sons. We call the parable "the prodigal son." I realized last Sunday that we had to clarify the meaning of "prodigal" when our children gave as a synonym the word lost. "The son was prodigal," meaning that he was "wastefully extravagant." He spent all he had on dissolute living.

The parable can also be called the Prodigal Father. "Prodigal's" synonyms are: profuse, extravagant, lavish, liberal. The father in the story was extravagant with his love and generosity in throwing a party for the son who returned home. The father did not punish the son as you and I might. The father did not say, "I gave you your share. You disappointed me. Get out of here. You're on your own!"

In telling story, Jesus was describing God's love as being like that of the father's in the story. Jesus told it to show how liberal God is. God squanders love on the likes of you and me. Have you heard the story of the Exodus? The newly-freed Hebrew slaves grumbled and complained to Moses, wishing to have died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when they ...ate their fill of bread. Instead of sending the Hebrews back to Egypt or allowing them to be destroyed by the Egyptians or by hunger, God fed the grumbling and complaining Israelites with manna.⁴ This was wasteful, extravagant, and liberal!

It is difficult for us to accept God's liberality. We box God in with doctrines and proof texts. Yet, when Moses asked God what God's name was, God said, "I am who I am," as if to say, "Don't box me in by naming me. I will be who I will be."

¹*Roget=s International Thesaurus, Fourth Edition* Rev. By Robert L. Chapman, 81984, New York, Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc., #853.4

²*The New American Roget=s College Thesaurus in Dictionary Form* Ed. Albert H. Morehead 8 1958 New York, Grosset and Dunlap, p. 208

³*God and Other Famous Liberals: Reclaiming the Politics of America* by F. Forrester Church, (C: 1991, New York, Simon and Schuster]

⁴Exodus 16:13-36

Synonyms for liberality in the Bible include hospitable, generous, and bounteous. Hospitable: Abraham and Sarah opened up their home to strangers.⁵ Generous: Proverbs says, "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor."⁶ Bounty: Deuteronomy chapter twenty-six is a later recounting of the Exodus story:

The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.... Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.⁷

It is not easy for us to be liberal. Some of us want to be liberal: kind, generous, and compassionate, but we get tripped up by fear, thinking about the safety of our future, like: our retirement and the protection of our homes, our families, our culture. So we withdraw our hands, and draw back into our pockets and homes. In doing so, we show our lack of faith in a bountiful and liberal God.

The Israelites, after they crossed over the Sea and after they escaped from Pharaoh's army, grumbled and complained: "We had it better in Egypt." God did a liberal thing by granting them freedom and saving them from slavery and pursuit, but liberality and freedom have a price: they mean having to make choices. They mean hard work. They mean cooperation: working together.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be liberal. Paul said, "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."⁸

Forrester Church points out in his book that not only is God a liberal in creating and loving, but Jesus is also a liberal in washing his disciples' feet and in showing compassion and healing. Jesus was flexible and non-doctrinaire: he broke the letter of the law to eat and heal on the Sabbath. Jesus was free-spirited in dancing and drinking.

The Holy Spirit is liberal: the presence of the spirit is almost always coupled with a stirring cry for justice, or liberty with equity.

The author continues with other famous liberals including the great forebears of our country: Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln. He includes the symbols of the Liberty Bell with the quote from Leviticus: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land" which refers to forgiving debts and servitude, and the Statue of Liberty which welcomes immigrants from all over the world, not just northern Europe.

Oh, and do you know who else is a liberal? Your mother is a liberal! She gave birth to you. She carried you for nine months. She suffered the indignities of child birth and child-rearing. She gave you food on your table even though you complained about how it tasted.

Liberal doesn't mean open to anything or "anything goes." Sexual immorality, violent entertainment, and the murder of the young in our inner cities are not the results of liberality, but of hedonism, self-centeredness, and terrible economic disparity. We must have standards and values so that others, all of whom are children of God, are not harmed.

Liberal does not mean big government spending programs, but should mean real family help

⁵Genesis 18

⁶Proverbs 22:9

⁷Deuteronomy 26:8-11

⁸2 Corinthians 9:6

for real family values. We should have decent public education for all our children, no matter where they live. We should have immunization programs for our children no matter where they live. We should have decent housing for all our children, no matter where they live. We should make it possible for parents to stay home with children, and if a parent has to work, we should make it possible for the children to have good, safe, and loving child care. We should not penalize people for working.

"Liberal" is not bad word. We Christians should pick it up, dust it off, and honor our liberal God by liberally loving all of God's children.