

Henlee Barnette, longtime professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. wrote this op-ed piece but it was never published. This is one of the last articles, maybe the very last, that Henlee ever wrote. In many ways, it summarizes his life. Henlee Barnette died in 2004.

## **"Why I Am Proud to Be a Liberal"**

By Henlee Barnette

Liberal-bashing has become a favorite pastime. Religious fundamentalists and extreme talk show hosts are at it continuously. They deconstruct and demonize those who do not agree with their ideology. Rush Limbaugh is the "top gun" in bashing Democrats. He calls them idiots, imbeciles, fools, liars and nuts. He calls women feminazis and babes. Other talk show hosts, who are wannabes, echo the same sophistry.

I am proud to be a liberal and to be identified with the liberals. Below I state why.

1. I am a liberal because they have compassionate character. All seven dictionaries in my house characterize a liberal as someone who is free from prejudice, favoring more civil liberty and generous. Moreover, liberals favor policies of reform and progress.
2. I am a liberal because our Constitution is liberal. "We the people" produced the Constitution "to promote," among other things, "the general welfare," and to secure the "Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." The Declaration of Independence declares that Americans are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" - and when the "Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it." Over half of the Amendments to The Bill of Rights have to do with human rights, progressively achieved. These documents of democracy are progressive and call for reform in government when it fails to preserve and practice these values.
3. I am a liberal because I know what it is like to work under a conservative and an oppressive economic system. In the "good old days" (1925-1935) I worked in a cotton mill ten hours per day, five and one-half days per week. Beginning pay was eighteen cents per hour. There was no medical care, no retirement program, no minimum working hours, and no minimum wage. A worker could be fired for no reason at all. All members of the family had to work to survive. This was so-called "free enterprise." Progressive liberals changed the system and we now have legislation that provides a quality of life more in harmony with the principles of The

Constitution, the Declaration, and the Bible. Practice of these principles saved us from revolution that plagues other nations.

Neo-cons denounce economic and social progress led by liberals: minimum wages and working hours, Medicare, Social Security, and welfare for the poor. (Conservatives oppose welfare for the poor, but not for the corporate welfare.) Ironically, they gladly accept these government services for their retired parents and grandparents and will for themselves when they become older. Too, they argue for less big government and fiscal responsibility. But that is changing with the Bush administration. Government control of all areas of our lives is occurring and we have the largest US debt in history.

4. I am a liberal because Jesus was one. (See my article "Jesus was a Liberal," *Baptists Today*, Nov 20, 1997.) His mission was one of liberation. He was anointed to preach the good news to the poor, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:16-19). Jesus came to liberate us from sin (Matt 1 :21). He is a liberal because He put human need above ecclesiastical law (Mark 3:1-6; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5).

Jesus liberates little children (Mark 10:14). He liberated women by providing them with a place in His ministry (Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40-41). They financially supported His ministry (Luke 8:2-3), stood by Him at the Cross (Matt 27:55-56; John 19:25-27) and were first to witness His resurrection and to carry the joyful news to the deserting disciples (Matt 28: 1-10).

Jesus was a liberal because he was inclusive. He included Gentiles in the embrace of His grace and the orthodox sought to kill Him (Luke 4:16-30). Jesus was ecumenical. His disciples discovered someone casting out devils in Jesus' name but did not follow Him and they tried to stop him. Jesus rebuked their narrow view (Luke 9:49- 50). As Christians we are all one in Christ so "that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

For these reasons and much more I am a Jesus liberal who puts love above law, righteousness above ritual, justice above injustice and mercy above meanness.

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