Serving a New Master—An Examination of Chuck Colson’s Legacy with Regards to Prison Reform

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“I have committed my life to Jesus Christ and I can work for Him in prison as well as out.” These were the last words spoken by Chuck Colson as he left the District Court on the 21st of July 1974—words indicative of the profound transformation that he had only recently undergone. Up until 1973, Colson had pursued a life of ambition and worldly success, becoming a lawyer and, after what can only be described as a meteoric rise to power, Special Counsel to President Richard Nixon. But in the 1970s, it became abundantly clear that Colson, in his rise to success, had also lost his sense of fair play when he was indicted for his role in the Watergate Scandal.3

But amidst the hubbub of Watergate, he was introduced to C.S. Lewis’ Mere Christianity by his close friend, Tom Philips, and became an Evangelical Christian, joining a Washington-based prayer group.4 Colson enjoyed a spiritual revival, and though he felt innocent of conspiring to cover up the Watergate Scandal, he also felt a desire to be truthful, ultimately choosing to enter a plea of guilty to an obstruction of justice charge based on his prior attempts to defame Daniel Ellsberg, the military analyst who had leaked the Pentagon Papers.5 But throughout this entire ordeal, the press continued to cast doubts on the sincerity of his conversion; Tom Braden, in The Washington Post, bitingly suggested that Colson was “making one of the great sacrifice plays of history.”6 Indeed, it would take much more than a couple of months spent in prison to change the public’s view of Colson.

1 Thank you to Professor Young, who helped me to shape and refine my ideas and who has served as a mentor throughout the semester. Jasmine and Denise, you have been excellent conference partners who have forced me to complicate my thoughts and deepen my arguments. To my fellow Christians at Princeton Faith and Action, thank you for discussing ideas with me. Finally, thank you to my roommates for reading over my final draft.
4 Colson, Born Again, pp. 174-180.
Colson entered prison in July of 1974, spending most of his time in Alabama’s Maxwell Correctional Facility; there, he began to identify failures in the prison system as a whole, particularly with regards to the lack of a rehabilitative focus for prisoners. Spurred by his newfound religious sentiments, he formed a prayer group at Maxwell and became convinced that he was meant to serve God by developing a prison ministry. After being released from prison in January of 1975, Colson went on to found Prison Fellowship the following year, with the goal of seeking to “disciple inmates who will stand as living monuments of God’s grace.”

However, despite what can only be described as a liberal attitude toward social reform, Chuck Colson is often remembered as an outspoken social conservative who espoused traditional family values. Indeed, while his death in 2012 certainly inspired a slew of obituaries focused on Prison Fellowship and on Colson’s social policies, it also inspired articles that focused on Colson’s legacy as a Religious Right powerhouse. The latter association is one undoubtedly influenced by Colson himself, who constantly wrote and spoke about the correctness of the Religious Right movement. Similarly, scholarly sources have tended to approach Colson’s views on prison reform in two distinct ways. On the one hand, many sources have identified Colson’s views as being part and parcel of the New Right Evangelicalism of the

\[^{7}\text{Colson, \textit{Born Again}, pp. 310-411.}\]
\[^{8}\text{Ibid, p. 430.}\]
\[^{10}\text{In this essay, the terms fundamentalist and New Right Evangelical are used synonymously, as these terms both refer to theological attitudes. The term Religious Right (understood to be the Christian Religious Right) is used when appropriate, but note that Religious Right is a collection of political factions, characterized by support for socially conservative policies. Furthermore, also note that Religious Right policies are often fundamentalist in nature.}\]
20th Century, a movement that upholds traditional family values and anti-gay, anti-abortion views; these sources have tended to gloss over the fact that Colson’s support for rehabilitative justice is anything but fundamentalist in nature. On the other hand, many sources have dwelled on New Evangelicalism—a recent Evangelical trend—and its institutional support for social justice issues such as prison reform; however, these sources have tended to ignore how New Evangelical concepts on social justice are startlingly similar to Colson’s views on prison reform. While these two schools of thought are not directly contradictory, it is only by distinguishing between Colson’s fundamentalist beliefs and his attitudes toward prison that we are able to truly understand his legacy. Although many of Colson’s attitudes are in fact typical New Right Evangelical ideals, his views on prison reform and on applying the Christian worldview to social issues should be viewed instead as an important precursor to New Evangelical ideas; in a sense, Colson should be viewed as a transitional figure who exhibited both New Right Evangelical and New Evangelical views, but who did not fall entirely into one or the other category.

At first glance, it seems evident and justifiable that Colson was a perfect example of a fundamentalist; after all, Colson viewed himself as a champion or at least a member of the Religious Right movement, arrayed against such concepts as abortion and sexual deviance. In his rousing essay Political Exile, Colson himself argues that in “a socially liberal era,” committed to “abortion rights...[and] to adding sexual orientation to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act” and to other such

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14 In this essay, the terms New Evangelicalism and Emergent Church movement are used synonymously, as they are in Marcia Pally, The New Evangelicals: Expanding the Vision of the Common Good (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011).

“threats to religious liberty,” it is necessary to build up “faith communities” and to continue to “adhere to biblical orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, Colson viewed himself as opposed to the socially liberal policies of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century and emphasized the need to continue adhering to Religious Right values. Indeed, in an article in \textit{The Christian Post}, Colson argued that “there is no such thing as a ‘gay child,” that “we are all designed to be heterosexual” and that parents “can lessen the chances their children will grow up homosexual,”\textsuperscript{17} firmly voicing the fundamentalist view that homosexuality is, at the very least, undesirable. The values that Colson supported—values that emphasized the need to preserve the traditional family unit—are those identified by the religious historian Seth Dowland as hallmarks of the Christian Right agenda and clearly contrast with socially liberal policies that take a much less involved stance in society.\textsuperscript{18}

However, while many of the ideals that Colson espoused fit comfortably with New Right Evangelical doctrines, his views on prison reform can only be described as exceptional and out of place. In his autobiography, \textit{Born Again}, Colson empathizes with the prisoners around him, arguing that the prison system destroys a prisoner’s sense of personal identity and spawns “contempt for the law, even among those receiving deserved punishment.”\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, after seeing what prayer and trust in God could do for the individuals around him, Colson became convinced that God had put him in prison so that he could devote the rest of his life to bringing the Word of God and rehabilitative change to prisoners across the nation.\textsuperscript{20} Colson, because of his prison experiences, was able to understand prison reform in a way that many other New Right Evangelicals could not; it was only in prison that Colson

\textsuperscript{19} Charles W. Colson, \textit{Born Again}, p. 361.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p. 350.
began to see justice from the prisoner’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of a lawyer, a civil servant, or a member of the general public. And it was only in prison that Colson realized the need to address prisoners as individuals—individuals not too different from members of the general public; by seeing prisoners as human rather than as statistics, or as a faceless bloc, Colson was motivated to approach prison reform in a truly rehabilitative way.

But Colson’s appreciation for rehabilitative justice contrasts starkly with New Right Evangelical attitudes toward prison reform, which have been thoroughly analyzed by religious and communications scholars as well as by sociologists. Anne-Marie Cusac, a Professor of Communications and award-winning journalist, explores the cultural evolution of prison reform in the United States, arguing that the 1970s and 1980s featured “the rise of belief in [the] evil criminal who will not reform.” The language of 20th-century commentators, according to Cusac, suggested that any attempt to rehabilitate and reintegrate criminals would not work because of an inherent, incurable wickedness that plagued these criminals. Interestingly enough, Colson himself seems to have been cognizant of just how much his views on prison reform differed from typical Evangelical attitudes toward criminals; in an interview with *Sojourners* magazine, a Christian publication, Colson identified and argued against the Evangelical, law and order attitude that if you “crack down on criminals, you’re going to stop crime,” noting how opposed many Evangelicals were to his ideas on rehabilitative prison reform. So on the one hand, the majority of Evangelicals as well as members of the general public in the latter half of the 20th century espoused politics of mass incarceration and believed the criminal to be incurable and a grave threat to society. On the other hand, Chuck Colson, at the same time, was advocating a rehabilitative approach

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toward prisoners and argued against mass incarceration; these views made him an outlier with respect to the rest of the New Right Evangelical Movement.

But while Colson’s views on prison reform set him apart from other New Right Evangelicals, they are startlingly similar to the views ingrained in New Evangelicalism, which has emerged only recently. However, while literature on New Evangelicals tends to focus on the newfound appreciation for social justice issues, that same literature has tended to ignore Chuck Colson and his attitudes toward rehabilitative prison reform; it is only when we view two of Colson’s attitudes as a precursor to New Evangelical ideas, however, that we can begin to more fully understand his tremendous legacy and realize that New Evangelicalism is not as entirely new as the name might suggest. New Evangelicals differ from the Old Guard of the 20th century in several important ways; in particular, Colson’s support for rehabilitative prison reform and his conviction that a Christian worldview had to be applied to all facets of society were ahead of his time and prefigured what was to come in New Evangelicalism.

One defining characteristic of New Evangelicalism is widespread support for applying a Christian worldview to different aspects of society. This New Evangelical value has been well documented by media sources and is seen as a significant break from the concerns of New Right Evangelicals. Jim Wallis, Editor-in-Chief of Sojourners, argues that while “conventional wisdom still says that liberal Christians have a social conscience and Evangelicals do not…reality is changing…and Evangelicals are exhibiting a growing conviction and conscience.”24 While the New Right Evangelicals of the 20th century were focused on debating the morality of issues such as homosexuality and abortion, the New Evangelicals, argues Wallis, are characterized by a focus on applying their values to such social issues as “poverty, race, and the environment.”25 This shift in values is significant because it heralds a newfound Evangelical involvement in society and, as Wallis’ piece demonstrates, is changing the public

25 Ibid.
perception of Evangelical Christianity for the better. Frances Fitzgerald, in The New Yorker, takes Wallis’s argument further, suggesting that the Emergent Churches are characterized by a focus on social justice, but adding that they actually pose the “first major challenge to the religious right in a quarter of a century.” While this argument is contentious and somewhat sensationalist—after all, many New Evangelical ideals are rooted in New Right Evangelical values—it illustrates the point that the New Evangelical focus on applying Christianity to such demographics as prisoners, sex workers, and drug users represents a break from the New Right Evangelical focus on the morality of issues such as homosexuality.

But characterizations of this newfound focus on the Christian worldview are markedly incomplete, for they fail to link the New Evangelical concern for social welfare to Colson’s own ideas; this goes beyond giving credit where credit is due—linking aspects of New Evangelicalism to Colson sheds light on the roots and rise of New Evangelicalism. That Colson, like the New Evangelicals of today, believed in applying a Christian worldview to society is most clearly demonstrated in his book, Justice That Restores. Christians, Colson argues, have a “cultural commission or cultural mandate” to “obey God’s command to be fruitful, to fill and subdue the earth;” focusing on justice, he goes on, is the best way of fulfilling this mandate, of renewing culture. And the only way to escape chaos is to accept God’s “physical and moral order;” taking the biblical worldview and applying it to social issues is the only way to achieve any measure of “true justice.”

In both the case of New Evangelical doctrines and in the case of Colson’s personal ideology, there exists a core belief that Christians have a specific responsibility to extend their influence into social issues. Colson’s focus on prison reform employs the same logic as the New Evangelical focus on human rights issues, on sex workers and on addicts; all of them...
these cases stem from a desire to go beyond mere evangelism and belief in God and extend instead to cover all facets of society. Therefore, Colson, who worked mostly in the 20th century, should be viewed as a precursor to the New Evangelicals specifically with regards to the principle of applying a biblical worldview to social issues; consequently, the New Evangelical emphasis on this Christian worldview is by no means revolutionary, for Colson was advocating precisely this idea in the 20th century, long before the rise of the Emergent Churches.

Furthermore, Colson’s attitude toward rehabilitative justice specifically was pioneering. The 20th century view on the criminal, held both by the public and by Evangelicals, favored mass incarceration and punitive measures, which contrasted with Colson’s goal of providing spiritual care for the individual. Prison Fellowship, with its goals of evangelizing prisoners and restoring families, emphasizes the prisoner’s innate capability for goodness, rather than the innate evilness that the majority of 20th century commentators identified. According to a University of Pennsylvania Study, Prison Fellowship’s focus on prisoner reentry and on rehabilitative measures has paid off. The first batch of prisoners to go through the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI)—an initiative organized by Prison Fellowship—had a recidivism rate of eight percent, compared to a just over twenty percent recidivism rate of the matched comparison group. The drastically lower recidivism rate found among graduates of the Prison Fellowship programme indicates that Colson’s spiritual, rehabilitative approach to prisoners was far more successful than other approaches used at the time.

Evangelicals have started to realize the merits of Colson’s approach only recently. In fact, attitudes toward prison reform have changed only in the 21st century, as proven by a seminal piece of American legislation, the Second Chance Act of 2007, which called for the development of

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“comprehensive strategic reentry plans” and was meant to drastically reduce the recidivism that 21st century commentators thought to be a result of punitive prison approaches.\(^{33}\) The Second Chance Act is reflective of a newfound focus on individual prisoner care as well as of shifting Evangelical concerns—David Green, a criminologist, argues that George Bush, who proved instrumental in helping to pass the Act, was greatly influenced by his Evangelical speechwriter, Michael Gerson, a supporter of rehabilitative justice; Bush, for his part, once “told journalists of his hope that his presidency would usher in a Third Great Awakening,” emphasizing the reviverist nature of Bush’s theology.\(^{34}\) It is probable that Bush’s ideas on prison reform were influenced by Gerson’s focus on social justice—a focus reflective of the social values of the New Evangelicals. Furthermore, this Evangelical shift in attitude appears to have occurred not only among politicians, but amongst individual groups and community organizations as well. Indeed, a June 2013 Evangelical Leaders Survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals noted that “almost all Evangelical leaders (95 percent) have visited a prison” and that many have become “engaged in prison ministry;” furthermore, leaders tend to visit prisons “through different parachurch organizations including…Prison Fellowship.”\(^{35}\) Thus, as a whole, Evangelicals have moved away from aligning themselves with punitive justice and law-and-order attitudes to publically supporting Colson’s vision of rehabilitative justice. That political reforms have been enacted only in the 21st century and that Evangelicals have begun to relinquish their support for punitive justice only recently indicates just how avant-garde Colson’s ideas on justice were.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to view Colson as purely falling into the New Evangelical camp; while his attitudes toward prison reform are particularly well-received today, the Religious Right values that Colson supported—traditional family values—are in decline among today’s Evangelicals. The


\(^{34}\) David A. Green, “Penal Optimism and Second Chances: The Legacies of American Protestantism and the Prospects for Penal Reform,” in Punishment & Society, p. 139.

Public Religion Research Institute determined that while only fifteen percent of white Evangelical seniors supported same-sex marriage, fifty-one percent of white Evangelicals under the age of thirty-five supported same-sex marriage,\(^{36}\) indicating that younger Evangelicals tend to espouse more socially liberal views than older Evangelicals, at least toward gay marriage. This shift in values has also been accelerated by the shifting views of important Evangelical figures; Joel Osteen, an American televangelist, argued on the Piers Morgan show that while homosexuality is a sin, Osteen was accepting of homosexuals and would attend a homosexual marriage out of respect.\(^{37}\) This view, that homosexuality should at least be allowed, represents a shift from the hardline opposition of Christian fundamentalists espoused by such figures as John Macarthur; indeed, while Osteen accepts and respects homosexuality, Macarthur argues that the rise of homosexuality, in all of its evil and darkness, has led to hate against God.\(^{38}\) Clearly, the values that the New Evangelicals cherish today are already quite different from the policies and ideas that Colson and other Religious Right Evangelicals espoused in the 20\(^{th}\) century.

Thus we cannot simply view Colson as purely being part of the Old Evangelical movement or of the New Evangelical movement. To fully understand his tremendous legacy, we must instead view Colson as a transitional figure; while many of Colson’s attitudes and beliefs can only be described as fundamentalist or as New Right Evangelical in nature, his views on prison reform were out of place and must be interpreted as a precursor to the New Evangelical focus on social policies. This, in turn, creates several implications. Perhaps the best way of viewing Colson is to not label him either as a New Right or New Evangelical, but to realize that Colson was indicative of larger social changes, of the evolution of New Right to New Evangelicalism; this evolution, still continuing today, has not been an all-in-one event, but rather has featured a gradual shift in social values. Colson, whose ideology was a synthesis of

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\(^{37}\) “Joel Osteen Interview on Piers Morgan Tonight.” In Piers Morgan Live. CNN. January 26, 2011.

Old and New, can thus be seen as a transitional figure, as a symbol of that gradual evolution of Old to New Evangelicalism. At the very least, we can conclude that New Evangelicalism is not quite as utterly new as its name might suggest; after all, Colson was arguing for rehabilitative justice and for applying the Christian worldview to all facets of society long before the emergence of New Evangelicalism. Finally, while it is evident that the influence and popularity of New Right and fundamentalist views are declining among today’s born again Christians, the fact that New Evangelicals are carrying out Colson’s vision—of bringing Christ to the troubled in society—indicates that Colson’s legacy will be carried on by the Emergent Churches, even after the decline of traditional, fundamentalist Evangelicalism.
Bibliography


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