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ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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THE POLITICIZATION OF OUR CHURCHES, OR MY GROWING SYMPATHY WITH BLINDNESS



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INTERWEAVING POLITICS AND DOGMA

To help us get to know each other, why don't we each tell our names and how we became a Christian." It was a typical icebreaker for new Bible studies, but it was destined to set in stone some ideas that were still only wispy fears and doubts in my newly re-born mind.

At my turn I stammered out, staring at my hands, "I grew up in the church, but I don't believe that my parents were really Christians," I began. I ventured a look at the dozen or so other faces in our circle, and they were all one big question. Nobody was going to help me. "I mean how could someone be a Christian for so long and still be so ignorant, so blind to simple questions?" No one moved. "I mean, they still vote Democrat!" Suddenly heads bobbed and smiles returned to my friends' faces. Relief swept over me. I had proven my point to everyone's satisfaction. Clearly no one who was really a Christian could continue to vote Democrat.

Suddenly the Christian worldview and the Republican

worldview became so nearly synonymous that which one led the other was never clearly distinguishable. I was conservative because I was a Christian, and I was a Christian because that was the true face of conservatism. For me the cutting of taxes and school vouchers became interwoven with the virgin birth of Christ and his imminent return as all being threads in the one seamless tapestry of Christian doctrine.

And I was not alone in this idea. My experience in many churches has shown me that I had plenty of company. Nor are conservative churches alone in this. I have heard and read liberal Christians (in this article the term liberal will always refer to political leanings and not to theological liberalism) just as emphatically doubting that a Christian could be a Republican. "If God made us stewards of this earth," they ask, "then how could any Christian vote Republican?" Or they may highlight some other liberal plank to show that anybody opposing them could never really be a Christian.

And they also often begin to interweave Christianity and their own political agenda. Environmentalism, welfare, and disarmament become equal partners with recognition of sin and second birth as tests of Christian orthodoxy.

DANGERS OF THIS INTERWEAVING

Such confusion stems from and leads to misconceptions of the true nature of Christ, of his body the church, of his kingdom and of evangelism. Over the next few pages we will briefly consider each of these in turn.

Christ's Body, His Church

Jesus, whose visible body we now are, is indivisible. He is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). But, with somewhere around thirty thousand different denominations now going under the title of "Christian," we do not show that essential unity very well. We do not seem to have the unity for which Jesus pleaded just moments before his arrest. But it is not with these thirty thousand tiny divisions

that I now take issue, but rather with one very big one, a split down the middle of Christ's body which opens him up to public disgrace.

Let us consider this from two angles, both inside and outside of his church.

We as "insiders" in Christ's church are being "conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born within a large family" (Romans 8:28). And when we wound the conscience of a fellow believer, we are said to "thus sin against members of [our] family" (1 Corinthians 8:12). The church as a whole is seen by God as a family. To the degree that we fail to apprehend this essential unity, we sin against God by refusing to see with his eyes. And is not conformity to Christ to begin to see with his eyes?

I have heard that in heaven we will finally see as we ought, and we will begin to recognize as brothers and sisters many whom on earth we have fought against as against the devil. What a day of disgrace that must be. What does it mean to be a Christian except to look toward heaven as our real home? And what does it mean to look toward heaven except that we long to see glimpses of it now, in this strange land? Doesn't every traveler love the sound of her native tongue and the scent of a hometown meal? But do we really long to experience the family relationship, which God says exists, now? And not only with those whose political leanings lean our way but with all whom the Lord our God shall call?

What God declares us to be he does not say merely for our intellectual pleasure so that we can write it into our creeds but so that we will experience what he has told us. If he says that we are a family, then he does not intend for us merely to declare, against our own experience, that we are a family but to see the family relationships growing amongst ourselves.

Where are the voices mourning this second crucifixion? Long have the voices been silent who once wept over the mauling of Jesus' body:

Churches like floating Islands in the Sea,
Carried on th' giddy waves of Vanity:

If Christ's Coat no Seam, Church can't Schism admit,
Ah then consider how your Knot you knit! ¹

And what about the "outsider" looking in at the body of Christ? Does she see the Jesus of the Gospels, reaching out and speaking with a clear voice of things he knows, or does she see a split Jesus bickering endlessly with himself over matters which belong to another kingdom, one which is of this world?

The question of the world's perception of us is often set aside as being insignificant or even idolatry. We are not to seek to win the approval of the world, for it is not our judge. But we must guard ourselves against the notion that outsiders' perceptions do not matter. Paul took pains to protect his own reputation even from unjust slander by bringing chaperones along with him to vouch for the integrity with which he distributed the money given by the churches. "We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others" (2 Corinthians 8:20-21). While Paul was going out of his way to safeguard the world's concept of Christ from even lying slander, how far have we gone to legitimize that slander? We are even willing to join in to degrade our brothers and sisters if they are of different politics to ours.

Where is the man who would beat his brother to please a mob of strangers, and wouldn't we call him not a man but rather a louse and a scoundrel? But don't we do just that when we keep better company with the world than with our family? How then should the world esteem either us or Jesus whom we represent if we treat our own brothers and sisters worse than strangers?

Christ's Kingdom

When Jesus stood before Pilate, he clearly explained, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from

being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Jesus had come to declare that the ultimate kingdom, the kingdom in which he himself presides as the King over all other kings, both was coming and had come. But his kingdom was nothing like the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus' earthly brothers (they could not have been spiritual brothers because they did not believe in him) once advised him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world" (John 7:3-4). They saw his miracles and wanted him to go make a splash and become an important person in an uprising, either political or religious. Either way, it would have been an earthly leadership for him to undertake, and he refused. His kingdom is far beyond this earth and its kingdoms. Jesus had taught this, but his brothers had refused to listen.

The history of the Christian church is defaced by repeated attempts to meld these two incongruous kingdoms. From Constantine to the Roman and Orthodox Churches, from the diabolical Crusades to the pretense at baptizing newly captured slaves as they were loaded onto ships to sail for the Americas, these attempts have brought disgrace rather than glory to Christ. Christ continues quietly building his church in his own way. Just as the altar was built of stones on which no tool had been used (Exodus 20:25) so also he will not profane his church by building it with humanly shaped stones. He will not conform to our earthbound expectations. He fits us to his kingdom, not his kingdom to us.

Christ's Glory

At Christmas my two-year-old was often more taken with the pretty paper around her gifts than she was with the gifts themselves. We all thought that she was just adorable and let her enjoy what she found to enjoy. But suppose that I had given a stranger a car with just a small clod of dirt stuck in the

tire. And suppose that this stranger fell in love with the clod and ignored the car as worthless and wandered away staring lovingly at his clod. Now suppose (I'm sorry to work your imagination so hard) that this happened with two strangers, both in love with their clods. These two meet, and instantly their heckles are up and they begin arguing about whose clod is the better and more worthy of admiration.

Now suppose (and this should be even harder) that the Eternal Father adopted two urchins to be the brother and sister of his only begotten Son, but these urchins found their previous commitments to their street urchin customs more compelling than the mansion in which they now had a right to live. Instead of meeting and adoring their new father and brother, they seek out their old comrades. Instead of eating in the great dining hall, they run the streets scrounging meals as they used to.

Now if we are these urchins, how much value will the other urchins ascribe to our new father if they see that we are more preoccupied with life on the old streets than with our new family and mansion? Is our new brother, Christ, enough to hold our interest, or do we still owe allegiance to the rules of the street?

Evangelism

I have noticed a subtle tendency in my own heart related to my evangelistic urges and practice. I hope that I am alone in this, but I fear that I may not be. Because I see that it stems from my own allegiance to extra-biblical philosophy (the kingdom of this world), I will share it.

Instead of praying passionately for and evangelizing those with whom I am in the most contact, I seem to seek out others whom I deem "need Christ more." While I virtually ignore in my prayers and pleadings a coworker with whom I am in constant contact, I find myself concerned about someone else who is more distant both from my immediate surroundings and also in worldview. After consideration, I am sure that the reason is that I am less willing to see someone

with whom I agree about so many worldly issues as really in deep need of Christ. My allegiance to another kingdom skews my vision of Christ's kingdom.

And then on the practical side of evangelism, to what do we seek to convert the sinners around us? Do we present "nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2)? The fact is that as humans we cannot present only a portion of our ideologies, but we come as packages. If I am divided between two kingdoms, then that is what is presented as an option toward which a sinner might turn. I cannot present the crisp and clean gospel of Jesus Christ as long as in my own heart and life it is being compromised.

The common picture of evangelism as one person standing on a platform explaining Christianity and pleading for commitments is only a small part of the biblical concept. This new life needs more to sprout and grow than an anonymous voice. Evangelism that lasts only as long as the "evangelist" is on the platform can only produce sprouts that will wither under the sun, because they have no root. In order to bring a convert into the kingdom, more personal contact on the part of an older Christian is needed, as in Paul's analogy, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

And this personal contact means that more than the verbal message that was presented on the platform will be presented to the sinner/convert. They will see the whole person and never be able wholly to distinguish the Christian aspects from the idiosyncrasies and foreign allegiances. Unless God delivers them from our influence, they will always read Scripture and interpret life partially through the eyes of their earliest mentors/evangelists.

This intense need for personal involvement with new converts is both the beauty and the gamble of the system which Christ put in place for the growth of his kingdom on earth.

The question is whether we will trust converts to the care of Christ and seek to convert them wholly and purely to him. Because of our recognition of our own fallibility, we must

seek to protect young converts from ourselves even as we seek to mentor them. "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The last thing I would ever want is to be liable for another person's sin through their imitation of me as an older Christian. God, protect me from such a thing.

LEARNING TO DISTRUST MYSELF

While much more could be said of the causes and effects of interweaving our politics and our theologies, let us leave it there for the time being.

Over the past few years, I have read widely in the Christian poetry of the past. Being a proud and judgmental person, I first was struck by how many misconceptions of Christianity were represented by the voices from our history. Many of the poets seemed absolutely blind to clear teachings of Scripture. For the sake of brevity, I will quote only one, which both discusses and illustrates such misconceptions.

William Cowper uses a little humor to illustrate hypocrisy. In the first stanza he explains how Mohamed had forbidden the eating of a certain portion of the hog but had failed to mention what that part was. Therefore, good Muslims could eat no part for fear of eating the forbidden part. Others though found their consciences clear to eat one part or another. The end of the first stanza and the second are given below.

Thus, conscience freed from ev'ry clog,
 Mahometans eat up the hog.
 You laugh—'tis well—The tale applied
 May make you laugh on t'other side.
 Renounce the world—the preacher cries.
 We do—a multitude replies.
 While one as innocent regards
 A snug and friendly game at cards;
 And one, whatever you may say,
 Can see no evil in a play;
 Some love a concert, or a race;
 And others shooting, and the chace.

Revil'd and lov'd, reounc'd and follow'd,
 Thus, bit by bit, the world is swallow'd;
 Each thinks his neighbor makes too free,
 Yet likes a slice as well as he;
 With sophistry their sauce they sweeten,
 Till quite from tail to snout 'tis eaten.²

My first reaction when I read this poem was one of horror that he could be so legalistic, forbidding the playing of cards or of enjoying a concert. Hadn't he read Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." How could Cowper willingly submit to the yoke of so many little rules?

Thank God that I did not stop reading Cowper there. Good poetry lets us see through the eyes of the poet and experience and feel with him. Reading the rest of his poems I soon came to realize that he was no sour old man. He loved the good gifts of God and reveled in God's outdoors, even the misty, drizzly outdoors of his English home. He was not making rules to remove the fun from life but rather he was protecting a beloved gift. He cherished the time that God had given him and feared and loathed anything that seemed to him to waste that precious gift.

And, as only poetry allows, I soon came to see through Cowper's eyes how he would react to my cavalier attitude toward the use of my time. Not only would he be furious over my squandering of my time, but he would doubt that God could ever have worked in me and left me so careless and unaware even of my carelessness. And I quickly realized that he would have at least as much scriptural "ammo" to defend his position as I did. What I had at first seen as his blindness actually revealed my own blindness. In fact, I think that the reason the poem upset me at first was because I had wanted to protect my own blind spot.

This revelation of my own blindness was followed by countless others. From Christina Rossetti I learned that I had never learned to hope in heaven. From John Montgomery I discovered how closely God identifies with the downtrodden.

From Chaucer, L'Engle, Dryden, and a host of others I have learned of more and more blind spots that they would see instantly in me, and for which they would have no explanation except to doubt that I could truly be a Christian. And while I continue to see non-Christian thoughts and attitudes within the work of most of these poets, I find much more troubling ones in myself.

Through years of this process I have begun to suspect my own thoughts and attitudes. I have found that never am I as sure to be wrong about something as when I am most proud to be right about something else.

A Plea for Simple Friendships

Along with learning of my own blindness, I have come to recognize that God is not limited to loving only those who see fully. God has loved me before I ever read Cowper, despite my blindness to fundamental biblical principles, and he has loved all of his other children despite their blindness. He never promised to make us all-knowing.

When we as Christians maintain the tacit political divisions in defiance of the essential unity that Christ prayed for in the garden before his arrest, that unity which Paul affirms exists, we sin against our Lord, and we sin against our brothers and sisters. We rob ourselves of a foretaste of heaven, and we hamper our testimony. And we lose the chance to grow, which exists only from removing ourselves from the comfort zone of like-minded company.

In my town there is a very good ministry to poor and homeless drug and alcohol addicts. The other day, while discussing it with a friend, I realized that I had never even prayed for this ministry, largely because I don't feel myself to have much to do with it. It is in one world and I am in another. How pathetic! Can two Christians really live in different worlds? Why is it that of the many people who work with this ministry none attend my church? Would they be welcome? Why have I not gone to theirs?

Let me end with an open plea for anyone in either camp,

conservative or liberal, to seek friendships with Christian brothers and sisters from the other camp. Pray together and for each other's ministry. Seek ways to appreciate their perspective on Christ's work. Chances are that you will discover more blindnesses in yourself than in your friend.

A few people might even seek out churches that lean a different direction to become part of. Please do not go as "missionaries" to change them to your perspective; you won't succeed. Rather, go to become a real part of their church and to learn to know both yourself and the enormity of God's grace, that he can love both you and them even with all of your differences.

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NOTES

1. John Collop, *Poesis Redivida* (London, Hunphrey Moseley, 1656, reprint; Menston, Yorkshire, Scholars Press, 1972).
2. William Cowper, "The Love of the World Reproved," in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper, Esq* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee, and Company, 1860).