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Personal Convictions and Public Responsibility, or Theocracy versus Democracy: Part I

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This is an attempt to understand the proper balance between public responsibility and personal beliefs in a secular society. The importance of this discussion is magnified by the growing hostility to Christians in the public arena and as increasingly there are objections by progressives, liberals and socialists to Christian exercising their faith in regard to public matters. Equally significant is that more and more public policy decisions are being made which are intentionally contradictory to the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith. There is no place where this dilemma is being felt than in the fields of the three classical professions: medicine, law and ministry.

In his book *Doctors, Lawyers, Ministers: Christian Ethics in Professional Practice*, Dennis M. Campbell comments on the tension between personal convictions, professional responsibility and public policy: “In all the professions...serious Christians are seeking a relationship between their Christian faith and their professional practice. Christian teaching has always proposed that faith manifests itself in the believer’s daily life...A major obligation of Christian theology today is to demonstrate convincingly that Christian faith can and does make a difference in people’s lives.”

The Old Testament prophets understood the tension between religion and personal, public responsibility. Jeremiah said: “Do you think that being a king merely means self-indulgent vying with Solomon and striving to excel in cedar palaces? Did not your father Josiah as he ate and drank, do justice and righteousness -- being upright and in right standing with God? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Was not all this to know and recognize Me?, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

The Ruler’s exercising of “justice” – ruling by established law and not by personal whim – and of “righteousness” – ruling consistent with God’s mercy and truth -- toward his fellowman was an act of “knowing God.” It was an expression of religious responsibility in the public arena. The object of leadership was not and is not getting as much as you can from as many as you can for

as long as you can, for as little as you can,” which seems to be the standard of many modern, public “servants.”. And, the object of “true religion” was not only getting one’s self to heaven, but it was also the caring for one’s fellowman on earth.

Liberalism has tended to focus its attention upon the “here and now,” because of its pessimism about the “then and there – the eternal.” Conservatism has tended to focus attention upon the “then and there,” because of its pessimism about the “here and now.” The Truth is that both are of concern to God and to the Christian faith. And, it is in the “here and now” that one’s confidence in the “then and there” will be most clearly demonstrated. The pretense of declaring one’s love for God, and at the same time ignoring one’s responsibility to one’s fellowman, is exposed as a fraud by the Word of God. (See Epistle of James; Gospel of John and Epistle of I John) Yet, the preoccupation with the physical needs of man to the exclusion of personal devotion to God is equally a fraud. (See Jesus’ response to Judas about the ointment being used upon Him.) It is possible to serve mankind without loving God; but, it is equally impossible to love God without serving mankind.

Conservative Christians tend to place more value on close adherence to doctrine, which is derived from the Bible, than they do upon careful practicing of the implications of those doctrines in daily life. Another way of saying this is that conservative Christians are often more concerned with **ORTHODOXY** – believing the right thing about Scripture – than they are with **ORTHOPRAXY** – living the tenets of the Scripture in one’s daily and secular life. Doctrine is important to the Christian, but living the truth is equally important, and it is the living of the truth, which validates one’s profession of faith in the tenets of Scripture. The validity of one’s eschatology – doctrine about what will happen at the end of time -- is no greater than one's system of justice, personal and public, in the here and now.

This tension and these questions have been a part of our discussions for centuries but have become more acute as overt hospitality to faith in the public place has increased, particularly in the United States. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Walter Rauschenbusch, responding to social ills in Hell’s Kitchen in New York City, reduced the Christian faith to a social activism and wrote two books, *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Taken by itself, the “social gospel” was a distortion of true Christianity. As we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st Century, conservative Christians have often mistakenly reduced the exercise of their faith to a personal discipline – focusing only upon getting themselves to heaven -- and to a political activism – focusing upon passing laws which require others to live according to conservative Christian doctrine, while ignoring the plight of their fellowman. Both extremes are a betrayal of the life and message of the One of Whom it is said, “He went about doing good!”

Every Christian is responsible to exercise compassion and mercy toward his or her fellow man. Every Christian must see his or her occupation as an expression of his responsibility toward God. This means that he or she will act with integrity, kindness, diligence and joy toward employers,

colleagues, subordinates and customers. It means that when given the opportunity – which means permission by the one to whom they are speaking -- the Christian will explain to others in the workplace why they act in the way they do. Of course, if the Christian worker's conduct contradicts the message of the Gospel, fellow workers might not be very interested in what they believe. Furthermore, Christians should not and cannot by law or by force impose their beliefs upon others. In Part II of this discussion, we will examine why, while we choose to practice our faith, we would not want our faith imposed by law upon anyone else.