

FROM THE PULPIT

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Three Loyalties in Religion

Being religious can mean many different things—like going to church, reading scripture, believing in God, keeping the commandments. In fact religion embraces so much that one needs to cast his own religious beliefs and feelings into some kind of mold or framework that will bring simplicity out of complexity and order out of miscellaneity.

There is more than one acceptable way to integrate one's religious living into a meaningful whole. Tonight I wish to do so in terms of three basic loyalties. One reason for my choice is that the religious life means commitment and so it appears logical to think of it in terms of loyalties. I shall speak in personal terms; I cannot speak for you since I am not sure you share these same commitments in the order in which I do, or at all.

My first, central, and highest loyalty is to persons, both mortal and divine. Nothing else in religion, on earth, or in the universe is quite as important. Nothing matters ultimately except what happens to persons and relationships between persons.

Many experiences and ideas have led me to this conviction, including religion itself. Nothing inspires me more than the view of creation depicted in the first chapter of Moses (verse 39) in which the prophet is given a glimpse of some of the creations of God through the Son and is told that "worlds without number have I created." Moses pressed his Creator to tell him the meaning of his endless, ongoing creations. Finally, the now well-known answer came: "For behold this is my work and glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."

It would seem that "eternal" in this context has a qualitative connotation, meaning God-like, even as it does in the Gospel of John, wherein Christ said, "This is life eternal to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." The very work of Deity is to bring man—all men—to a greater realization of the life which God knows, to help men increase in integrity, love, freedom, and creativity, to achieve the full measure of their creation as sons of God. If this is the divine purpose, why should it not become yours and mine, if we are to do His will and love God with all our hearts, minds and souls?

The Hebrew prophets have taught me in unforgettable language to care above all else for what happens to persons. In the days of Amos, ancient Israel was doing many things in the name of religion—keeping the sabbath and the new moon, offering sacrifices, uttering prayers, remembering their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But they had forgotten one thing—God's concern for man. To paraphrase Amos, they were at ease in Zion, playing musical instruments, drinking wine out of bowls, stretching themselves in idle luxury as the chosen of God, but "they were not grieved for the affliction of Joseph." They gave no thought to the widow, the orphan, the poor, those who were "hurting," except to sell them into slavery for the price of a pair of shoes or to take advantage of them in the court by bribes and deception.

Among the prophets Micah defined religion most beautifully when he asked and then answered his own question:

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? (Not, he continues, with sacrifices and rivers of oil and human sacrifice, for) . . . He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. (Micah 6:6-8)

Here Micah is defining religion in terms of personal relationships between man and man (do justly and love mercy) and between man and God (walk humbly).

You are familiar with the Savior's concern for persons. He had, I believe, two supreme loyalties—to his Father and to his fellowmen. He began his ministry by quoting from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. . .

Follow the Christ through the Gospels and you will see how closely he kept to his original charge. "He went about doing good." Even "sinners drew near unto him." He sought out those who needed him, fed their hunger and stilled their thirst. Even the sacred law—the sabbath—in his eyes was made for man. "Is it lawful . . . to do good, or to do evil, to save life, or to destroy it?" was the question that guided his actions.

Christ was as humane and man-centered as any humanist in His concern for person, but He also loved God and shared with Him His love for man.

And so my loyalty to persons includes man, every man I hope, but also deity—the Father and the Son. They too are persons. I don't know that they need my direct adoration and affection, but it is my simple faith that they suffer when men suffer and rejoice when men have cause to rejoice. So in a modest way, but with all my heart, I would diminish their suffering and enhance their joy.

My second loyalty in religion is to the principles of the Gospel—to faith, repentance, justice, freedom, the Beatitudes, love and its many expressions—empathy, mercy, and forgiveness. These have my loyalty because I have seen what they do for persons, how they help men to be whole, hopeful, self-controlled and generous; how they refine and enrich human relationships and increase peace and good will among men.

I have seen these principles work in the lives of converts, countless students and friends. There was the young man who confessed that he had committed every sin in the book: stealing, adultery, drunkenness and hypocrisy. Then I saw him find faith in Christ and overcome greed and lust and regain self-respect, a self-respect chastened by "the furnace of affliction," mellowed and meek but not without strength and joy. There comes to mind also a young woman, single and alone, who was once steeped in fear and self-pity. I heard her say, "I used to be afraid of life and of myself, but I am no more. I can love and serve others. I have found joy in following the Master."

Gospel-principles do not excite me in the abstract. They have meaning only in the life of the individual and in his relationship to fellowman and Deity. And so my second loyalty is intimately related to the first.

This too, I have learned from Jesus. He was not committed to the law as an end, but used it to serve life. His entire mission was geared to human needs; he taught repentance not to the righteous but to sinners, gave hope to the poor, the healing power of faith to the afflicted, and forgiveness to sinners. Gospel principles and human need were inseparable in his mind.

To be a disciple of Christ one doesn't have to always be turning the other cheek. Christ knocked over the tables of money changers, called Herod, "that old fox," and told Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan." He called principles into play to affect change in human life and behavior, including honesty and moral courage. We too can use gospel-principles in business, in politics, in the courthouse and in the classroom. There are those appropriate to every real situation.

My third loyalty in religion is to the Church. I place it third, not because it is unimportant, but because, in my judgment, it is instrumental to the other two loyalties already discussed. In the language of Paul, Christ

gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; . . . for the perfecting of the saints . . . till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we . . . speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things. (Ephesians 4:11-15)

The Church is not an end to be served, but an instrument through which together we may serve God and man. It is a fellowship, called and ordained of the Lord, blessed and empowered from on high, to inculcate the principles and spirit of the gospel into the lives of men.

I am grateful to the Church, for within its fold I have begun to learn and experience the meaning of the gospel. There I have found a choice fellowship with co-believers; through it I have received faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the priesthood, and rich opportunities of service and worship.

But again, one cannot serve the Church fruitfully without prior loyalties to God

and man. I once asked a group of church-workers: "What is your goal in your position in the Church?" A coach of an M-Men basketball team answered: "To win the stake, and if possible the Church championship." I asked, "Is this your first and highest purpose as coach?" He replied, "Yes." How idolatrous! With such a goal one might lie, cheat, play unfair and ignore the inner life of any or every boy on the squad. Even in basketball, one's first commitment ought to be to boys and his second to principles of fair play, brotherhood, honest effort. Winning should only be a means to human ends.

There is always the danger in organized religion that institutional ends become the goals of religion. Meetings may be held as ends in themselves, missionary work measured in terms of baptismal quotas, and welfare projects evaluated in quantitative terms. When this happens, the religious life becomes idolatrous—serving false gods instead of God and His children. Whenever institutional goals are placed first, persons become means to these ends and integrity and love become secondary if not forgotten.

Years ago I learned of a scout master who—eager to have 100 percent of his boys advanced on honor night—promised the only one who had not earned an award that he would let him pass his test the following week, if he would only show up for honors on the award night. Fortunately, the boy refused to go along with his scout master.

A thing like this may happen because the Church, though called of God, is made up of men like you and me among whom "many are called but few are chosen," and our human interests and ambitions becloud our vision of God's work and glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.

Yes, I have three basic loyalties in religion: *to persons, to gospel principles, and to the Church*. They are not in conflict with one another, but blend beautifully even as the moon, stars, and open sky, if I remember all three and serve them in proper conjunction with the others. I pray that we may always remember these commitments in the name of one who did, even Jesus Christ, Amen.