

Meditation on the Third Commandment

C. S. Lewis in *The Guardian* (1941)

From many letters to "The Guardian"¹ and from much that is printed elsewhere, we learn of the growing desire for a Christian 'party', a Christian 'front', or a Christian 'platform' in politics. Nothing is so earnestly to be wished as a real assault by Christianity on the politics of the world: nothing, at first sight, so fitted to deliver this assault as a Christian Party. But it is odd that certain difficulties in this programme should be already neglected while the printer's ink is hardly dry on M. Maritain's "Scholasticism and Politics."²

The Christian Party must either confine itself to stating what ends are desirable and what means are lawful or else it must go further and select from among the lawful means those which it deems possible and efficacious and give to these its practical support. If it chooses the first alternative it will not be a political party. Nearly all parties agree in professing ends which we admit to be desirable --- security, a living wage, and the best adjustment between the claims of order and freedom. What distinguishes one party from another is the championship of means. We do not dispute whether the citizens are to be made happy, but whether an egalitarian or a hierarchical State, whether capitalism or socialism, whether despotism or democracy is most likely to make them so.

What, then, will the Christian Party actually do? Philarchus, a devout Christian, is convinced that temporal welfare can flow only from a Christian life, and that a Christian life can be promoted in the community only by an authoritarian State which has swept away the last vestiges of the hated 'Liberal' infection. He thinks Fascism not so much an evil as a good thing perverted, regards democracy as a monster whose victory would be a defeat for Christianity, and is tempted to accept even Fascist assistance, hoping that he and his friends will prove the leaven in a lump of British Fascists. Stativus is equally devout and equally Christian. Deeply conscious of the Fall and therefore convinced that no human creature can be trusted with more than the

¹ The Guardian was a weekly Anglican newspaper founded in 1846 to uphold Tractarian principals, and to show their relevance to the best secular thought of the day.

² Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. M.J. Adler (London, 1950).

minimum power over his fellows, and anxious to preserve the claims of God from any infringement by those of Caesar, he still sees in democracy the only hope of Christian freedom. He is tempted to accept aid from champions of the status quo whose commercial or imperial motives bear hardly even a veneer of theism. Finally, we have Sparticus, also a Christian and also sincere, full of the prophetic and Dominical denunciations of riches, and certain that the 'historical Jesus', long betrayed by the Apostles, the Fathers, and the Churches, demands of us a Left revolution. And he also is tempted to accept help from unbelievers who profess themselves quite openly to be the enemies of God.

The three types represented by these three Christians presumably come together to form a Christian Party. Either a deadlock ensues (and there the history of the Christian Party ends) or else one of the three succeeds in floating a party and driving the other two, with their followers, out of its ranks. The new party --- being probably a minority of the Christians who are themselves a minority of the citizens --- will be too small to be effective. In practice. it will have to attach itself to the un-Christian party nearest to it in beliefs about means --- to the Fascists if Philarchus has won, to the Conservatives if Stativus, to the Communists if Sparticus. It remains to ask how the resulting situation will differ from that in which Christians find themselves today.

It is not reasonable to suppose that such a Christian Party will will acquire new powers of leavening the infidel organization to which it is attached. Why should it? Whatever it calls itself, it will represent, not Christendom, but a part of Christendom. The principle which divides it from its brethren and unites it to its political allies will not be theological. It will have no authority to speak for Christianity; it will have no more power than the political skill of its members gives it to control the behaviour of its unbelieving allies. But there will be a real, and most disastrous novelty. It will be not simply a part of Christendom, but a part claiming to be the whole. By the mere act of calling itself the Christian Party it implicitly accuses all Christians who do not join it of apostasy and betrayal. It will be exposed, in an aggravated degree, to that temptation which the Devil spares none of us at any time – the temptation of claiming for our favourite opinions that kind and degree of certainty and authority which really belongs only to our Faith. The danger of

mistaking our merely natural, though perhaps legitimate, enthusiasms for holy zeal, is always great. Can any more fatal expedient be devised for increasing it than that of dubbing a small band of Fascists, Communists, or Democrats 'the Christian Party'? The demon inherent in every party is at all times ready enough to disguise himself as the Holy Ghost; the formation of a Christian Party means handing over to him the most efficient make-up we can find. And when once the disguise has succeeded, his commands will presently be taken to abrogate all moral laws and to justify whatever the unbelieving allies of the 'Christian' Party wish to do. If ever Christian men can be brought to think treachery and murder the lawful means of establishing the regime they desire, and faked trials, religious persecution and organized hooliganism the lawful means of maintaining it, it will, surely, be by just such a process as this. The history of the late medieval pseudo-Crusaders, of the Covenanters,³ of the Orangemen,⁴ should be remembered. On those who add 'Thus said the Lord' to their merely human utterances descends the doom of a conscience which seems clearer and clearer the more it is loaded with sin.

All this comes from pretending that God has spoken when He has not spoken. He will not settle the two brothers' inheritance: "Who made Me a judge or a divider over you?" (Luke 12:14). By the natural light He has shown us what means are lawful: to find out which one is efficacious He has given us brains. The rest He has left to us.

³ The bodies of Presbyterians who in the 16th and 17th centuries bound themselves by religious and political oaths to maintain the cause of their religion.

⁴ Members of the Orange Association (founded in 1795) who defended the cause of Protestantism in Ireland.

Kichijiro Was Right

Matthew Loftus in *Mere Orthodoxy* (2022)

You've probably heard this one before: a masked gunman bursts into church one day and fires a few rounds into the ceiling. "Everyone who believes in Jesus is getting shot today! Everyone who wants to deny Him can leave!" He gives the terrified congregation a minute to sort themselves out, with the apostates running for the door as he clears the pews, demanding to know if those who are staying truly believe. After only the tearful true believers remain, he announces: "Hey pastor, I got rid of all the hypocrites for you. Have a great service!"

In Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*, a pair of missionary priests are sent to Japan during one of the worst persecutions in Christian history. The priests serve many underground Christians, but the most memorable of them is an alcoholic named Kichijiro. Kichijiro is a conflicted Judas figure, waffling between worshiping with the priests and betraying them to the authorities as he denies Christ. Kichijiro, however, says this in his defense:

I am an apostate, but if I had died ten years ago I might have gone to paradise as a good Christian, not despised as an apostate. Merely because I live in a time of persecution... I am sorry.

Later, the voice of the protagonist reflects:

Kichijiro was right in saying that all men are not saints and heroes. How many of our Christians, if only they had been born in another age from this persecution would never have been confronted with the problem of apostasy or martyrdom but would have lived blessed lives of faith until the very hour of death.

Kichijiro's plea is one that resonates far beyond the situations where Christians are persecuted. The tension that tears his soul apart is just one extreme example of the struggle that churches and Christians around the

world face. To follow Christ is to be called to die, to live a holy life of self-sacrifice and never-ending growth in sanctification by walking in the grace Christ gives us through the Holy Spirit. Practically speaking, though, a random sample of Christians drawn from anywhere in the world will demonstrate only a handful of people who are laying down their lives as they become more sanctified.

Ask any pastor: every church has a core of committed believers who give generously, volunteer regularly, engage in personal devotions, and don't flagrantly violate the commands of Scripture. They represent probably 5-15% of the regular attendees. The most common parlance the Church has used in recent decades for these is "radical", based on David Platt's book by the same name, but they may go by different names and be associated with different ideals in different contexts. Everyone else in any church is missing at least two or three of these criteria.

This is true regardless of how you want to interpret the criteria, unless you create a strict enough bar to have a very small church. It doesn't matter if your ideal is an ultraconservative holy huddle that has all its doctrinal ducks in a row, a service full of people so filled with the Spirit that they're always high on Christ like a Pentecostal Cheech and Chong, a low-church corps of teenagers who came forward at teen camp to save their first kiss for marriage as they evangelize their friends, or a progressive polycule full of perfectly intersectional social justice warriors for Jesus. Wherever you are, you're going to have to deal with Christians who barely tithe, think the hypostatic union is something you learn in Algebra class, barely read their Bibles, and voted for Trump (or failed to).

The problem of wanting people to be more radical has been around for as long as churches have. Many of the earliest cults, heresies, and Christian sects were heavily populated by people who wanted to enforce ideals of Christian belief and practice well above what most Christians could muster. From the Donatists who wanted a church uncompromised by the Kichijiros of their day, to the New Lights of the First Great Awakening, there have always

been voices trying to uphold a certain purity within the Church. There are Christians who consider certain practices and statements as evidence of their own faithfulness, while others call the same actions a capitulation to the demonic. While some of these disagreements focus on core ethical and doctrinal commitments, others do not. We need to be careful how we talk about the things that aren't as crucial, because otherwise we'll just generate more heat than light.

These days, one hears many Christians rejoicing that “cultural Christianity” is being stripped away, leaving behind a remnant of true believers. While this kind of rigorism can be found in any doctrinal or ideological expression of Christianity, Russell Moore is perhaps the most prominent voice celebrating this pruning. He says, for example, that “[s]ecularization in America means that we have fewer incognito atheists.” His point sounds good; don't we want to have a pure church full of people who are truly sold out for Christ? It almost sounds like Moore would like to have the masked gunman clear out every service for him at the beginning.

It may sound good, but this is not the Church of Scripture or history. As Brad East points out in his post on “Church for normies”:

“It's certainly possible to make a case, based on the Gospels and the teaching of Christ, that the church exists solely for such Christians, since the condition for faith is discipleship to Christ, and discipleship to Christ is costly. I believe this to be a profound misunderstanding, however, not least because the rest of the New Testament exists.”

Even the Old Testament idea of a remnant that remains after God judges His people for their sins is a reflection of His mercy, not His ideal process of consecrating a people for Himself.

Furthermore, if one spends any time in any church that has been stripped down to true believers, you will still find scoundrels, scammers, and schismatics. Our Christian brothers and sisters across the world will tell you

that the purifying flame of persecution does not work perfectly. A church full of overachievers for Jesus will almost inevitably dissolve into conflict, so we should not celebrate the winnowing of the incognito atheists among us.

In fact, “cultural Christianity” and the incognito atheists are good things. A culture in which Christianity is socially acceptable means that the ethical norms and laws that Christ gives us are upheld by those who don’t fully believe in them, which means that more people can flourish. Incognito atheists may still be giving money to care for the poor and save the lost; what’s more, by showing up every Sunday for the sake of social pressure they may have far more opportunities to hear and believe the Gospel.

Scripture itself and history reveal that there is no perfect church and allowing this fact to dominate your ecclesiological imagination will only lead to unnecessary sorrow and vexation. If the idea of a bunch of lukewarm believers running around out there with their brains rotted by liberalism or white supremacy enrages you, that is simply not a healthy way to live. You may, sadly, be able to make a living by getting other true believers afraid and angry enough alongside you, but that’s not what glorifies Christ. It only creates a cycle of hyperbole, catastrophization, and onanistic Bulverism that chews up your soul, especially on the internet.

This is not to deny that cultural Christianity brings about its own problems, nor is it to suggest that we should tone down the downright radical claims of Christian ethics on human beings. The history of the Church is full of people whose lives of faithful worship and practice burned brightly to challenge and encourage their brothers and sisters to work a little harder or give a little more, even if they never got anywhere near an ideal of costly discipleship. Without celebrating the true believers for their faithfulness, the Kichijiros of the congregation would have nothing to guide them or aspire to.

Church discipline is also still indicated for all the reasons that Scripture teaches, and it is still entirely reasonable to have high standards of Christian living for pastors and leaders. Lies should still be called lies, the works of the

devil and the powers subject to him should still be identified as such. People should still be exhorted to faithfulness. Lower your expectations, not your standards.

Just as not every soldier in an army can be a Green Beret, not every Christian can be a Maximus or a Bonhoeffer. It is still good to hold up these examples of courage and faithfulness because their outsized works exert a certain kind of moral gravity on everyone else and lead the way through times of trial. (The Green Berets of the Christian world, who need grace and have feet of clay like everyone else, also tend to rely on a large corps of ordinary, mild-to-moderately faithful believers praying and financially supporting them.) We simply have to stop speaking, preaching, teaching, and (Lord help us) posting as if the right combination of words and deeds with greater and greater intensity will somehow inspire other Christians to feel and act the same way that we do.

Jesus is for losers, normies, and the cringe. We ought to want a world in which Kichijiro faces no conflict but that which Scripture and the Holy Spirit, working as they do in all of our stony hearts, present to him.