

Text: *Galatians 6:9-10* So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all. . .”

### **THE CHRISTIAN AS CITIZEN: Much Ado About Far Too Much**

#### **“Scratch a Christian and they bleed authoritarianism.” – Rev. Bob De Wolf**

Father Bob was sitting-in on a Bible study that I was leading when he said those words. They took me aback, for, being a good American, I just assumed that modern Christianity and democracy went hand in hand. Fr. Bob was right and I was wrong. So then, what is the role of the Christian as citizen of a democracy? It is a question that has been debated vigorously, although not always intelligently, since colonists first stepped ashore in North America.

With the founding of Virginia in 1607 the Church of England became the government supported state church. This was pretty much the pattern for all of the southern colonies. It was a bit different for the northern colonies. The Puritans wanted religious freedom and established their Massachusetts Bay Colony in order to secure it – for themselves. They had no tolerance for any other religious organizations or even non conformist thinking on the part of their citizens. While a legislature did exist, most decisions of importance were made by the clergy. Religious freedom and absolute citizen equality had to await the arrival of the Quakers under the leadership of William Penn.

By the time of the Declaration of Independence there was enough religious diversity that the issue of church and state had to be treated very broadly and inclusively. This was followed during the writing of the Articles of Confederation in which God only got two mentions. A few years later when the Constitution was written, God got zero mentions and the Bill of Rights guaranteed all citizens freedom of and from religion. Thomas Jefferson regarded as one of his greatest achievements the defunding of religion by the Virginia legislature. Most of us remember him for coining the phrase “there should be a wall of separation between church and state.”

Since preserving the wall of separation between church and state has been our national benchmark, just where does that leave the Christian citizen? Basically, it leaves the citizen in a dilemma, though not an insoluble one. On one hand Christians want to influence their government and see their values enshrined in law; on the other hand, not all citizens are Christian and not all Christians embrace the same values and social ends. As we have learned from our own witchcraft trials and from today’s fundamentalist Muslim countries, nothing is quite as destructive of a democracy and human rights as religious rules applied by the state.

Most public issues have two aspects: A values one and a fact one. Democracy depends on an informed public and politicians who should be able to agree on the facts of the case, while debating on the should, why, how much and when of the issue. The net result of the debate will be a compromise of sorts. That compromise may resemble sausage making or it might be very straight forward – in any case all sides are satisfied enough with the result that action gets taken.

Now, put God in the mix. Suddenly the sausages become communion elements. Every issue touched by God is an issue that cannot be compromised. Every proposal becomes a matter of principle and you certainly cannot compromise your principles or you may end up in hell! The culture wars are on and polarization freezes action and generates God-endorsed hates in the general population. We know that the flag follows the cross, but in the modern state the cross only goes where the flag tells it to. In any contest of power the cross will always serve the interests of the state. It is a lop-sided relationship: The guns and money are all on the side of the flag. The churches' role is to create true believers and provide a god fearing interpretation of national goals to the general population.

If we don't want God in the legislature, where do we want her? What about in our hearts and minds? What would happen if we all took Jesus seriously? Really seriously. So much so that instead of agitating for the Ten Commandments to be placed in the court house, we had posters printed of the Sermon on the Mount and asked every business to post it? Maybe we should ask our children to memorize it. The Sermon is community oriented, inclusive and directed toward action. It is as positive as the Ten Commandments are negative. If we truly believed our values would influence, but not control, our politics. For instance, we would value human rights, but would be open to compromise on how our nation responded to abuses in other lands.

This is a time to be thankful for living where we do – and a time for trying to make a great nation even better. Perhaps if we had less Christ talk in government and more Jesus action in Christians, we would all be better off. “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all. . .”

Amen