

“The Ultimate Test of Religion”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “.... whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10:31).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of our time is the rapidly secularization of our society as well as our churches. This was brought home to me several years ago by an incident that took place at Davidson College. According to a report in *The Charlotte Observer*, an anonymous donor had contacted the President of the college. This donor intended to give the college a gift of \$1 million dollars on the condition that two plaques, each containing a verse of Scripture, be placed in a prominent place in the college administrative building. The president, Bobby Vagt, accepted the gift and instructed that the plaques be placed as requested. According to the article in *The Observer*, there were faculty members who objected. One was quoted as saying that “the presence of Bible verses on campus undermined everything the faculty was trying to do.” As I read the article, it struck me as somewhat bizarre that several verses of Scripture could undermine the work of a church related college.

The secularization of our society is not limited, however, only to the process of education. It influences almost every area of our life. Stephen Carter in his book, *The Culture of Unbelief*, cites a host of illustrations where people are eager to separate the religious portion of their lives from the other parts.

The church has not been spared this influence. Dr. John Leith in his book, *The Crisis in the Church*, has noted that whereas the church for many years insisted in a “call system” in which congregations sought to enlist the very best people for service, today there is a system by which ministers apply for jobs in the same fashion as one might apply to work at a bank or another business.

I.

One of the struggles in which all of us engage is the struggle to conform our faith to the life we live. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church in Corinth, confronted a very divisive issue in that church. It had to do with, of all things, “meat sacrificed to idols.” There were those in the church at Corinth who did not believe that Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed in the pagan temples of Corinth. The issue was not one of sanitation. It was a moral issue. Some in the church thought that it was not right for Christians to eat meat that had been slaughtered in a pagan temple. Others argued that it did not make any difference. Paul tried to mediate this dispute by affirming the freedom of the Christian and by affirming our responsibility to others who may be offended by some action that we take. Paul summarized his position on this by affirming the freedom of a Christian in matters that do not compromise the glory of God. He then went on to state that our goal as Christians is to imitate Christ. Paul seeks to bring together the secular and the sacred in this ringing affirmation, “...whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”

So, how do we manage to maintain continuity between the sacred and the secular?

II.

For one thing, as Christians we affirm the lordship of Christ in all our lives. That means that there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular. They are one and the same.

Certainly that was true in the life of Jesus. He grew up in a carpenter’s shop, surrounded by the common tools of everyday life. When Jesus talked about religion, he used the language of everyday life. He spoke of fields ready for the harvest, flowers that were fairer than Solomon in all his glory, and about children at play. He talked about shepherds and their sheep, carpenters and their buildings. He was present with families where weddings were celebrated. He understood the pain of parents who watched as a wayward son headed for some far-off country. He spoke of the difficulty of placing new patches on old wineskins. He understood the economies of town markets where two sparrows could be bought for a small amount of money. The teachings of Jesus are not like most of the language we hear today. For him the secular and the sacred were united. No wonder the religious people of his day had trouble with him. No

wonder religious people today have trouble with him. He has an irritating way of judging our lives. Paul Tillich once called it the “transvaluation of values.” The things we think are great, Jesus thought to be insignificant. The things we think are small, Jesus saw as having great importance. He found more beauty in the wild flower of the field than in Solomon’s temple with all its gold. He saw more faith in a widow who gave a small coin than he saw in all of Pharisees with the long speeches and great phylacteries.

When we try to separate the sacred from the secular in our lives, we are a long way from Jesus.

III.

Then, too, if we are going to live in a way that is pleasing to God, we are going to have to understand that there is no aspect of our life that is not lived under God’s lordship. Many of us try to separate our professional lives and our personal lives from our religious lives, but we cannot hide from God.

A famous actor by the name of Joseph Jefferson once said about his fellow actor, Edwin Booth, that he ran his theater as if it were a church. Once a member of the clergy, whose congregation did not think it was proper for people to attend the theater, wrote to Booth to ask if there was a back door or a side door in the theater in which this minister could slip in unobserved. Booth answered, “There is no door in my theater through which God cannot see.” No door in my theater, my business, my home, my hobbies, my habits through which God cannot see--that is real religion.

One of the most disturbing things that one observes in the church today is the pressure that is being exerted today for the church to conform to the culture. We are a people that are accustomed to entertainment. We are self-absorbed to the point that we think that everything, including our faith, has to revolve around us. Some weeks ago a man spoke to me, as he was leaving worship. “I didn’t like that last hymn,” he said. All I could think was, “We didn’t sing it to you.” Worship is not about you and me. It is about God. It is not about whether we felt better or worse after the service. It is not about whether we liked the music or the hymn. It is about God. That is what Paul means when he writes, “whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”

When Craig Barnes was here several years ago, he observed that there is a saying that one hears now frequently, “It’s not about you.” He said as a minister, he found himself thinking about that saying on a number of occasions. He thought about it when he was in a committee meeting and some individual was going on and on and he wanted to stand up and say, “It isn’t about you.” He thought about it when a bride or mother of the bride went on and on about a wedding and how everything had to be a certain way, and he wanted to stand up and say, “It isn’t about you!”

Isn’t that at the heart of faith? Didn’t Jesus pray, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” Isn’t that at the heart of all the rejection and pain we experience when we don’t get the attention

we seek, when we can't get our way, when everyone refuses to bow to our will? Perhaps the prayer that many of us need to pray today, whether it is about your family, your business, or even this church, is this prayer: "Not my will, O God, but thy will be done!"

IV.

Then, too, the great test in our lives is not just what happens in our personal lives, but what happens in our community as well. Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of Israel spoke well, when he said, "Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?" That is the ultimate test of religion.

One of the most influential ministers of the early part of the Twentieth Century was a man by the name of Walter Rauschenbusch. Born in Rochester, New York, he taught Church History for a number of years in a seminary. But the most decisive event in his life was the eleven years he served a German Baptist congregation that was situated in New York City's famous "Hell's Kitchen." It was there that Rauschenbusch encountered an endless procession of men who were "out of work, out of clothes, out of shoes, and out of hope." Out of that experience Rauschenbusch articulated what was later to be called "The Social Gospel." In his book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, he appealed to the great prophets of the Old Testament and to the teachings of Jesus. Rauschenbusch saw that as Christians we are called not only to a life of prayer, faith, and worship, but we are called to the Christianity of Christ, who said "in as much as you did it to the least of these (not talked about it, but did it) you did it to me.

Throughout the Old and New Testament there is a consistent witness that unites the secular and the sacred, the realm of personal religion and social religion. Take the prophet, Jeremiah, for example. He prayed, "O Lord, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction." That is personal religion. But Jeremiah did not end there. He was a social prophet concerned with statesmanship, economics, and international relationships. For forty years he was a tower of strength, urging his people to live in their personal lives the vows they had made in their religious lives.

The same was true with Jesus. No one was ever closer to God. He prayed at every point of his life. But no one was ever closer to the human condition. He wept when his friend Lazarus died. He excoriated religious leaders who prayed long prayers and then exploited widows and orphans. He fed the hungry. He clothed the naked. He gave shelter to those who had no place to turn.

This past week *The Presbyterian Outlook* featured an article on William Sloane Coffin, who for a number of years served as the Chaplain of Yale University. Coffin was very active in the Civil Rights movement as well as in his opposition to the war in Viet Nam. William Sloane Coffin was a controversial figure who was deeply loved by some and hated by others. His preaching and his presence on the Yale Campus, however, was a definitive part of that troubled time.

A friend of mine at Yale told me once that on one evening in New Haven a young boy was missing from his family. It was feared that he had been abducted. The whole town was in a panic. Coffin was the one person who took charge of the situation. He stood in the middle of the street and stopped automobiles, sending them in different directions to find this lost child. According to my friend, Coffin flagged down an obnoxious Connecticut cab driver and told him to head in a certain direction. The cab driver was irate. "Who's paying?" he demanded. Coffin shot back, "No one's paying. Do something for your fellow man."

Say what you will about William Sloan Coffin. He had faith and he made a difference.

If any of us is to have a faith that can redeem the secular world in which we find ourselves today, that faith must be very real. No one can lift the world if he or she cannot stand above it. No one can have a faith that can elevate the secular unless there is within him a sanctuary pure and undefiled. No one can follow Paul's admonition, "whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God," unless he has said with Jesus, "For their sakes I sanctify myself."