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How Do We Practice Our Religion While We Practice?

Thomas B. Griffith

I was asked to speak at a J. Reuben Clark Law Society event in Portland, Oregon, as a last-minute fill-in replacement for Senator Gordon Smith, who couldn't attend because he was participating in the Senate's debate over the Iraq War resolution. All agreed that his absence was excused. I knew that the audience would be bitterly disappointed to settle for me in the place of Senator Smith, and, wanting to lessen their disappointment to the extent that I could, I decided that I would take a stab at the topic he had chosen for the day, "How Do We Practice Our Religion While We Practice?" I found the exercise of addressing that topic to be helpful to me. I hope that you find it helpful to you.

Senator Smith's question is, I believe, an acknowledgment that certain endeavors in this life entail greater spiritual risks than do others. Now, I realize that there are spiritual risks in all human activities, including church work. No less an authority than Screwtape himself observed, "Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar" (C. S. Lewis, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," *The Screwtape Letters* [New York: Macmillan, 1961], 172). Remember the Lord's warning to us in D&C 121 about the unrighteous use of the priesthood: "We have learned by *sad experience* that it is the nature and disposition of *almost all men . . .* to exercise unrighteous dominion" (D&C 121:39, emphasis added). Why, you may be surprised to learn that there are even spiritual risks that come in working at BYU!

It doesn't seem to me to be a very controversial proposition that *some* professional activities expose our souls to *greater* risks than do others. I

believe the Savior was warning us of this fact of life when He said, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . [I]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19: 23–24 NIV). Thomas Jefferson was certain that farmers, by virtue of their unique economic activity, were better prepared than any of us here today to contribute in a positive way to a republican form of government. (See, e.g., Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “Query XIX” [1787]: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.”)

Even our own church leaders have acknowledged that some careers lend themselves more easily to the religious life than do others. I remember attending the sessions of general conference at which James E. Faust and Grant Bangerter were first called to be General Authorities. Elder Faust noted that prior to his call, he had been a lawyer. He then remarked that since his call, he had been repenting of that (James E. Faust, “To Become One of the Fishers,” *Ensign*, January 1973, 81). Elder Bangerter, by contrast, noted that prior to his call, he had been a carpenter. For some reason, he said, he had not felt quite the same need to repent (William Grant Bangerter, “The People Who Influence Us,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 39).

In *A Man for All Seasons*, his play based on the life of St. Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, Robert Bolt contrasts the public life of Thomas More, a Christ-figure who is a lawyer (I know that must require a significant suspension of disbelief for many of you), with that of Richard Rich, a pathetic Judas-figure. At the opening of the play, we are allowed to overhear a spirited discussion at the house of More in Chelsea. More’s house had become a center of the New Learning taking hold in 16th-century England. Rich is a hanger-on in this distinguished company, envious of the prominence of More, who is the most respected man in England and is soon to become Henry VIII’s lord chancellor—the highest appointed office in the realm. Forgive my inadequate attempts at acting.

RICH: (*Enthusiastically pursuing an argument.*) But every man has his price.

MORE: No, no!

RICH: But, yes! In money, too.

MORE: (*With gentle impatience.*) No, no, no!

RICH: Or pleasure. Titles, women, bricks and mortar, there’s always something.

MORE: Childish.

[Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* 4 (1962)]

Rich then complains that despite his friendship with More he has been unable to find a political position. He wants More's recommendation, which he is confident will be the key to unlocking the door that is blocking his ascent to power. More, knowing Rich to be a weak, self-centered man, refuses to recommend him to government office. Instead:

MORE: The Dean of St. Paul's offers you a post; with a house, a servant, and fifty pounds a year.

RICH: What? What post?

MORE: At the new school.

RICH: (*Bitterly disappointed.*) A teacher!

MORE: A man should go where he won't be tempted. . . . Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps—a great one.

RICH: And if I was who would know it?

MORE: You, your pupils, your friends. God—not a bad public, that. Oh, and a *quiet* life.

[*Id.* at 5, 6]

Rich rejects More's suggestion that he be a teacher, and by the end of the play he loses his soul. Rich yearns for worldly power and prestige. Because More will not aid that pursuit, Rich turns to More's enemy Thomas Cromwell, secretary to the king. Cromwell willingly appoints Rich to a series of government positions in exchange for Rich's undivided loyalty. As you know, More's refusal to support Henry's declaration of himself as head of the church in England—a stand born of his conviction that the Pope was the rightful successor to St. Peter as the head of the church—cost him his life. And it was the perjured testimony of Richard Rich, elicited by Cromwell at More's trial for treason, that led to his death.

Upon hearing Rich's perjury at that trial, a disheartened More knows that his fate has been sealed. Exercising his right to examine the witness, however, More responds:

MORE: I have one question to ask the witness. That's a chain of office you are wearing. (*Rich reluctantly faces More.*) May I see it? (*Norfolk, the presiding officer at the trial, motions Rich to approach. More examines the medallion.*) The red dragon. (*To Cromwell.*) What's this?

CROMWELL: Sir Richard is appointed Attorney General for Wales.

MORE: (*Looking into Rich's face; with pain and amusement.*) For Wales? Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world—but for Wales!

[*Id.* at 90, 91]

Now, for those of us who have rejected the advice of Thomas More and have gone places in our careers where we will be tempted, places worth far less than Wales (I'm of Welch ancestry, by the way), what are we to do to save our souls? I think that is a more blunt way to address the question posed by Senator Smith.

May I suggest that the answer to our dilemma—and by the way, I believe it is a dilemma—lies within a familiar passage of scripture describing an event from the last week of the mortal ministry of Christ, which may, by its very familiarity to us, have lost some power to guide our professional lives. Aptly, the answer to our dilemma comes in the Savior’s response to a hostile question put to him by a lawyer:

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, [testing] him, and saying,

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

[Matthew 22: 35–40 KJV]

Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. *These* are the templates by which we should measure our professional conduct. This is how we are to practice our religion while we practice our professions. Is that unrealistic? It is difficult, to be sure, but it is only unrealistic if we have bought into Satan’s fictions about what is real and unreal. How does one go about living one’s professional life out of a love of God and neighbor—something we are not only called to do but commanded to do?

First, we must reject the tendency to place our professional and religious lives in separate compartments. The “at-one-ment” of Christ is intended to bring unity and wholeness to our relationship with God, to our fellow beings, and within ourselves. Years ago, as I was about to graduate from BYU with a bachelor’s degree, I attended a stake conference in the Provo Tabernacle. In a few months I would be entering law school at the University of Virginia, but I was by no means certain what I wanted to do for my life’s work. I was ready to be taught. Elder Eyring teaches that the primary way God speaks to us is through speakers at church (Henry B. Eyring, “Ears to Hear,” in *Conference Report*, April 7, 1985; or *Ensign*, May 1985, 76). Although we can each identify obvious limits to that principle, this was an occasion when I believe the Lord was speaking to me. Gene Dalton, who was on the faculty of BYU’s business school, spoke as a member of our stake presidency. President Dalton told the story of an Italian immigrant to America who, when he passed through Ellis Island in the early 20th century, recorded on his papers under the box marked “Occupation”: “I am a servant of God. I mend shoes.”

That anecdote reminds me of what Dorothy Sayers, the Catholic apologist, translator of Dante, and mystery novelist, wrote:

The church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to

come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly—but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter’s shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie. [Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 56–57]

Now, that is a tall order, and it makes me feel about the same way that I feel whenever I hear the oft-used John Taylor quote about being accountable for those I might have helped had I been more diligent in my callings. Nevertheless, I believe that Sayers is correct when she recognizes that our professional work cannot be separated from our religious life. (By the way, I believe that President Taylor is also correct. Although I hope that the words of Mother Teresa quoted in general conference several years ago are also correct: “I know only two things about God’s judgment. First, it will be absolutely fair. Second, it will be filled with wonderful surprises.”) As Latter-day Saints, we understand that what Sayers is describing is part of the law of consecration. C. S. Lewis described that law this way:

Christ says “Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. . . .”

. . . The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—cent[er]ed on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 167–68]

A modern day apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Elder Boyd K. Packer, described the commitment he made to the law of consecration early in his life:

I knew what agency was and knew how important it was to be independent, to be free. I somehow knew there was one thing the Lord would never take from me, and that was my free agency. I would not surrender my agency to any being but to Him! I determined that I would give Him the one thing

that He would never take—my agency. I decided, by myself, that from that time on I would do things His way.

That was a great trial for me, for I thought I was giving away the most precious thing I possessed. I was not wise enough in my youth to know that because I exercised my agency and decided myself, I was not losing it. It was *strengthened!* [Boyd K. Packer, “Spiritual Crocodiles,” *New Era*, January–February 1981, 29: emphasis in original]

Consecration is a lofty goal and I wish that I could tell you from my own personal experience how it may be attained. But I cannot. Still, I am convinced that unless we have that law firmly fixed in our mind as a principle by which we are *currently* bound, we will look short of the mark, *cf.* Jacob 4:4, and our professional lives will work at cross-purposes with our religious lives. In other words, we will not be practicing our religion while we practice our vocations.

But how do we live the law of consecration here and now in this world? Do you remember how Elder Maxwell has described the frustration of following celestial traffic signs in telestial traffic jams? (Neal A. Maxwell, “Notwithstanding My Weakness,” *Ensign*, November 1976, 12). Aren’t our careers the ultimate examples of telestial traffic jams? I believe there is an important lesson to be learned from the life of Thomas More. Now, as you have already recognized, I am of the view that there are many lessons to be learned from More’s life, and I would heartily recommend to any of you to learn as much as you can about this man. In my estimation, the best biography of More was published in 1999. The author is Peter Ackroyd. His book is titled *The Life of Thomas More*. I own no stock in the publisher; nor do I have any relationship with the author.

More is fascinating for our topic because, unlike his good friend and fellow Christian humanist Erasmus, More rejected the life of the cleric and the life of the scholar, both of which Erasmus estimated to be more suitable to More’s deep spirituality. Instead, More, like most of us here, chose the life of business, politics, and the law. (The educators among us have chosen the better part, are immune from all weakness, and don’t need a lecture from me. Rather, I should be learning from them.) Yet More is, in my view, only a shade behind King Benjamin as a role model for the nonclerics and the nonscholars among us. More was a devout churchman whose piety was genuine. Each day he would spend much time in prayer, devotion, and the contemplative study of the scriptures. (He wore a hair shirt, too, but I wouldn’t recommend that.) More was a devoted family man who held daily devotionals and taught his children (five daughters and a son) virtue and the liberal arts. By the way, the education of his daughters was of equal priority with that of his son. His daughter Margaret was known throughout England as the most erudite woman of her day. More was widely respected as one of the finest lawyers of his time. Listen to this description of More’s approach to his profession, supplied by one

of his biographers. Although it is not the ultimate lesson from his life that will help answer Senator Smith's challenge to us, it is such a remarkable account that I couldn't resist including it in my remarks:

To his clients [More] never failed to give advice that was wise and straightforward, always looking to their interests rather than to his own. [Remember President Faust's conference address from the October 2002 general conference, "What's in It for Me?"] In most cases he used his best endeavors to get the litigants to come to terms. If he was unsuccessful in this, he would then show them how to carry on the action at least expense. He was so honorable and painstaking that he never accepted any case until he had first examined the whole matter thoroughly and satisfied himself of its justice. It was all the same whether those who came to him were his friends or strangers . . . : his first warning was ever that they should not in a single detail turn aside from the truth. Then he would say: "If your case is as you have stated it, it seems to me that you will win." But if they had not justice on their side, he would tell them so plainly, and beg them to give up the case, saying that it was not right either for him or for them to go on with it. But if they refused to hear him, he would refer them to other lawyers, himself giving them no further assistance. [Quoted in Gerard B. Wegemer, *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage*, at 51, 52 (1995)]

A prayer he composed for lawyers captures the essence of his spiritual approach to his vocation, a vocation that he knew had power to do great good and great evil. "Lord, grant that I may be able in argument, accurate in analysis, strict in study, candid with clients, and honest with adversaries. Sit with me at my desk and listen with me to my client's complaints, read with me in my library, and stand beside me in court, so that today I shall not, in order to win a point, lose my soul" (quoted in Ave Maria School of Law Applicant Information booklet, 2003).

In all these ways, we can and should emulate Thomas More, but there is one virtue in particular that made him the man for all seasons that he was. It is this virtue I believe is central to our effort to consecrate our professional lives to the Lord—to practice our religion while we practice our vocation. From his earliest days as an adult, Thomas More believed that the most effective way to put himself in a frame of mind where he could resist the temptations attendant to his profession was, in his own words, "to consider how Christ, the Lord of sovereign power, Humbled Himself for us unto the cross." "Christ's ineffable Passion," More wrote, is "a strong defense against all adversity" (id. 25 [quoting from one of the earliest of More's works, *The Life of John Picus*, in *English Works of Thomas More*, 360]).

In the film version of *A Man for All Seasons*, there is a poignant scene in which a physically spent Thomas More, dressed only in a tattered monk-like robe, is kneeling in prayer in an anteroom adjacent to the courtroom where he is about to be tried for treason. He has spent more than a year

imprisoned in the Tower of London. If you turn up the sound on your TV set and listen very carefully, you can hear More utter a prayer that includes the phrase “Sweet Jesus.” This private and soulful prayer before his public trial and execution reminds us of the Savior’s private and soulful prayer in Gethsemane before His public trial and execution. That scene in the film is an artist’s version of history. It is based, however, on good history, for in the final months of his life, during his imprisonment in the Tower, More was able to pay wholehearted attention to the topic that motivated him throughout his life, and it is the topic, I believe, that will help you and me most as we try to bring all areas of our lives—even our professions—under the Savior’s charge to love God and love neighbor as self.

During his imprisonment in the Tower, Thomas More wrote *De Tristitia Christi*, “a . . . meditation upon the ‘sadness’ of Christ; it is a commentary” upon the New Testament account of Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane (Ackroyd, 380). It was the premise of More’s final work, based upon a lifetime of experience and reflection and a mortal life that had known enormous professional success but was now ending in the Tower of London, that “nothing can contribute more effectively . . . to the implantation of every sort of virtue in the Christian breast than pious and fervent meditation on the successive events of Christ’s Passion” (Wegemer, 208–209).

What does this have to do with Latter-day Saint professionals in the 21st century? Can it possibly be that this Catholic saint from the 16th century has something profound to teach us about how we are to practice our religion while we practice our professions? I think so. To support my argument, I turn to a lesson from the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith I learned several years ago while teaching an early-morning seminary class in Church history in Leesburg, Virginia. We decided that we would look at Joseph Smith as an Everyman figure. In other words, we would look at the lessons Joseph learned as if they were lessons that each of us needs to learn as we improve our efforts to be disciples of Christ. As we followed the lessons Joseph learned under the tutelage of the Lord, we discovered something quite startling.

Joseph Smith learned a number of lessons that deepened his discipleship from the time of his first visions until he was prepared to organize anew Christ’s church on the earth. The last canonized revelation he received almost immediately prior to organizing the Church in April 1830 is set forth in D&C 19. In verses 18 and 19 of that revelation, the Savior took Joseph Smith (and takes us) back in time to Gethsemane and Calvary—the scenes of the most awe-inspiring events since the Creation. Here the Lord narrates a personal account of the suffering He endured so that we could gain access to the transforming and redemptive power of His atoning sacrifice.

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

It occurred to our class that the Lord was telling the Prophet Joseph (and us) that we should do nothing in His church, or I would argue, in our lives, without bearing in mind what the Father and the Son did for us in Gethsemane and on Calvary. We should carry on our vocations in light of this sobering yet joyous reality.

One of the distinctive features of the Mormon experience, one that is widely noted, has been our emphasis on community building. It shouldn't surprise you then that one of the icons of our faith is the beehive. To be sure, Mormon communitarianism is, in part at least, a natural reaction to the persecution we have experienced and a predictable result of our exodus history. But our communitarianism, which was so threatening to 19th- and early-20th-century America, is also a reflection of our belief that although spirituality begins with allowing the effects of Christ's atoning sacrifice and His awe-inspiring grace to heal the wounds that sin has inflicted upon our broken hearts, its most profound manifestation comes when we work to make the effects of the Atonement of Christ radiate beyond ourselves and our families to unite our communities. There are in the canon of the Restoration powerful insights into the link between the Lord's Atonement and the imperative to build community. The work of community building is, I believe, the most important spiritual work to which Christians are called. It is a natural outgrowth of what Thomas More called "pious and fervent meditation on the successive events of Christ's Passion" (Wegemer, 208–209). All other spiritual work is preparatory to this and therefore incomplete without this.

Two stories from the Book of Mormon make this point. The first is the story of the prophet King Benjamin, who worked to unite his people, people deeply divided by culture, language, class, and race. He had tried, without a great measure of success, educational reform, political reform, and legal reform (see Mosiah 1–2). It was only when he taught his divided people of the great unifying power of the at-one-ment of Christ that he was able to help them create a community. It was only by teaching them of their fallen nature—which reveals itself in the very breaches Benjamin was seeking to heal—and the atoning power of Christ's suffering that Benjamin was able to achieve, for a season at least, unity among his people (see Mosiah 3–6).

The second story describes the post-resurrection ministry of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ to the Book of Mormon people. In that story the Risen Lord descends out of heaven in a foreshadowing of his Second Coming,

and the people fall to the earth in worship. After teaching them about His suffering (3 Nephi 11:11), He commands each of the almost 3,000 people to come one by one and feel the wounds in his hands, feet, and side (3 Nephi 11: 14, 15). As one might imagine, this shocking and gruesome experience transformed them. In fact, those who were confronted by the physical emblems of his suffering form the core of a new Christ-centered society that for the ensuing 200 years is devoid of strife, malevolence, racism, and greed (see 4 Nephi 3, 15–17: “And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. . . . And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. . . . [T]hey were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God”). Significantly, we are asked to do the same each Sunday when we partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We are commanded to have physical contact with the emblems of His suffering. The response of the people in 3 Nephi (“they did cry out with one accord, saying: Hosanna! [Save us, now!] Blessed be the name of the Most High God! And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him” [3 Nephi 11:16–17]) becomes the mark by which we measure the depth of our appreciation for the Lord’s sacrifice.

Now, what is so striking to me about these stories is that each highlights the idea that one cannot serve a God who has no personal needs in any other way than by working to unite His children. Each makes clear that it was the shared understanding of Christ’s role as Savior and Redeemer that formed the basis for creating a community. We learn from the story of Adam and Eve that Satan’s primary goal and his chief tactic are to divide God from humanity, Adam from Eve. The most cursory study of human history shows his relentless pursuit of that goal and his effective use of that tactic. Everywhere we see around us the carnage of his work. We are divided by sex, race, class, religion, and nationality, just to name a few. By contrast, the at-one-ment of Christ is a powerful force to overcome those divisions and create a bond of unity among humankind. To build a community that extends beyond family or congregation—and I believe we are compelled by our understanding of the Atonement of our Savior and especially those sources to which I just referred to do just that—involves law. Properly understood, then, the vocation of a lawyer is to help build communities founded on the rule of law. By doing so, lawyers are participating in the redeeming work of the atoning power of the Savior at its zenith. To be sure, the working out of the power of the Atonement occurs initially at the intimate level of a sinner realizing her individual need for God’s grace.

But it must also ultimately include creating a community based on the rule of law. Near the close of his biography of Thomas More, Peter Ackroyd wrote, “He embodied law all his life, and he died for it” (Ackroyd, 400). That is a challenge worthy of each of us, especially those, like More, who have gained some awareness of the power of the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should each, in the words of Thomas More, engage in “pious and fervent meditation on the successive events of Christ’s Passion” (Wegemer, 208–209).

When we do, at least two things will happen. First, we will begin to develop a sense of gratitude to God for the “shock of eternal love” expressed in the Atonement, and that gratitude will humble us before God (Eugene England, “That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement,” *Dialogues with Myself*, 90). Second, we will begin to realize that Christ’s Passion was not endured solely for us, but that He suffered what He did because He loved those we encounter everyday in our lives as much as He loves us. In the words of C. S. Lewis,

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. [C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 18–19]

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

This address was given to the Salt Lake Chapter of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society at the Joseph Smith Memorial Building in Salt Lake City on November 19, 2003. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, fall 2004, 12–19.

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