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Jesus Christ: Conservative and Liberal

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was delivered as two sermonettes in the chapel of Concordia Seminary by the author, a member of the Seminary faculty. It is a study in the meaning of labels.

I. JESUS CHRIST, CONSERVATIVE

Politicians, intellectuals, artists, businessmen, and also theologians are often classified as conservative or liberal. Some are even classified as radical, a term which in its basic meaning is better used to describe the thoroughgoing consistency of both the conservative and the liberal. In naive thought the conservative is the person who sees great value in a situation as it is and seeks to preserve it. The liberal, on the other hand, is a person who sees greater value in new methods, in new thoughts, and in new structures. He seeks continually to be in the vanguard of those who break with the old and usher in the new. So the line has moved back and forth down through the ages.

Pastors also are often concerned and troubled by the concepts liberal and conservative. What stance should they take? Should they continually move with the rising sun and see the dawning day, or should they look back from the vantage point of the setting sun and see splendors which deserve another tomorrow? Should they be continually on the alert for the clever new phrase, for the new theological structure, and for the new meaning, or should they continue to sing the song that was dear long, long, ago?

Within these questions lurk problems that have troubled each and every one of us. Furthermore, when these terms

(conservative, liberal) are made ends in themselves, when they become slogans, banners, labels, and libels, they are quicksands of despair. Nevertheless, there may be some value in these much-used terms if properly orientated. Though my words may sound very logical, their essence will nevertheless be poetical.

To dramatize the quicksilver character of these captions, I propose to show that the person and work of Jesus Christ was of such a nature that today both conservatives and liberals would rightly claim Him as their Representative. Perhaps these brief meditations may fill us with a new sense of gratitude for the radical freedom which Christ brought to us. Perhaps at the same time we shall be reminded that these labels can be either helpful or harmful, depending largely upon the spirit which animates the person who uses these terms.

In the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus is described as being "the same yesterday, today, and forever." This continuous *status quo*, this eternal meaning, this unchanging absolute and ultimate, characterizes the greatest conservative of all times. There is only one Light of the world; there is only one Truth; there is only one reality and one meaning for our changing scenes.

But was Jesus really so impervious to change and to the march of time? For is not that really true of Him which is true of all of us—that time changes and we change with it? The transcendence of time is a very enigmatic characteristic of Jesus and of His teaching. That which is

true today is always true. But with this He has the necessary corollary: that which I do today is always done. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; he saw it and was glad." Although not yet 50 years old, He told a group of amazed and disbelieving critics, "Before Abraham was, I am." This unitary concept of time projects itself also into the future. Men from afar will sit down in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This kingdom itself is unitary in its time concept. From this viewpoint it makes little difference whether you say the kingdom has come, the kingdom is coming, or the kingdom will come. This is also true of those statements of Jesus which have led to so much debate regarding the "eschatological Jesus." The Judgment, for example, has come, is come, and will come.

Conservative notes are found throughout the logia of Jesus. He is anxious to preserve marriage in its pristine purity. He is eager to defend the original concept and meaning of the Sabbath against changes and innovations. The sign of Jonah is adequate for all times. That which Moses wrote he regards as descriptive of His activity, His meaning, and His thought. He did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets; He came to fulfill. He has an insight into the written codes shared by no rabbi. He shows a deep love for His people and their past as He points to their destiny.

Here, then, there is no room for the novice who is continually looking for the new; for the slogan seeker, the movement maker, the trend thumper. Here is no room for the Athenian who looks at every phenomenon in the hope of finding truth neatly wrapped and labeled in its center.

Here is no room for those who expect a march of truth on into the future until after a last explosion there will be left one hard, solid rock with the words "Truth at last" written on it.

For Jesus of Nazareth is the Changeless One. He is the Changeless One in spite of the fact that Sadduceeism, Phariseeism, scribism, pietism, Aristotelianism, and every wisdom of the world is confronted in Him with a call to change. He is the Changeless One in spite of the fact that in Him the old passes away and the new is ushered in. He is the Changeless One in spite of the fact that every genuine contact with Him means dramatic, radical change. In what lies His changelessness? Does it lie in that personality that changed from infancy to manhood as He grew in wisdom and stature? Or in a group of philosophical concepts and learned thoughts abstracted by a total knowledge from a total list of facts? Or in His approach to the Law whose handwriting He nailed to the tree? Does it lie in the words which He spoke at diverse times and in diverse manners to people? Or perhaps in His apostles who were all things to all men? Or in His church which He structures in various forms amid various cultures and in various ways?

No, the changelessness of Jesus and His conservatism is in that fact which raises Him above time, namely, the mystery. This mystery is always one, although we see it in many manifestations. It is the mystery of God acting and communicating with men. It is the mystery of the incarnation, of the death and resurrection. It is the mystery found in the words "Our Father who art in heaven." It is the mystery whereby words, sounds, signs, symbols

become life and become spirit. It is in the mystery of Baptism, wherein we die and rise again. It is in the mystery of the Lord's Supper with its threefold *κοινωνία*. It is in the mystery of the church, which, though elect from every nation, of every race, of every tribe, and of every sort and condition of man, is nevertheless one and the same in Christ and in God. Here, then, is the conservatism of Jesus of Nazareth. It is this because Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

II. JESUS CHRIST, LIBERAL

A woman stands with bowed head before her accusers. A shiver runs through her body as she hears the suggestion that she be stoned. Though the great and wise lawgiver of her own people had commanded this sentence, life is loved even by the worthless. After her accusers had slunk away one by one, she hears, as in a dream, a calm voice of authority, "Neither do I condemn thee; go forth and sin no more." The cold, sullen, sarcastic, fearful eyes of this woman had met the eyes of the greatest Liberal of all times.

Freedom is a watchword of Jesus of Nazareth. "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." His words, His actions, and His doctrine aimed at freedom—freedom from sin, freedom from tradition, freedom from stereotyped living under the Law, freedom from social, economic, cultural, biological, sexual, national distinctions. "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." His life, His words, His actions flow with a freedom that is unique in His environment—yes, unique for all times. He felt free to break the

social traditions of His day by not insisting that His disciples wash their hands before eating. He freely entered into the company of publicans and sinners. He allowed His disciples freedom to pluck grain, rub it in their hands, and eat it on the Sabbath. He transcends and deepens the dignity of the past with the freedom of a single "but." "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old times, 'Thou shalt not forswear thyself . . .' *but* I say unto you, 'Swear not at all.'" Moses commanded that a statement of divorce be given, "*but* in the beginning it was not so." When He spoke (unlike the scribes and the Pharisees, who leaned heavily on tradition), He spoke with incisive truth that was a labyrinth of confusion to his foes but a pathway of light to His friends. "Never man spake like this man." Like a man sowing seed, He moved from one place to another, freely forgiving sin, freely healing diseases, freely offering every man—regardless of his station—a Father in heaven. And He sent out His disciples with the same command, "Freely have ye received; freely give."

Yet this freedom of Jesus is never irresponsible. The dumbfounded silence of His opponents, the conviction of His disciples, and the awe of the spectators—all testify to the relevant truth of His words. Scholars have called Jesus visionary, optimistic, and many other things, but His integrity and feeling of responsibility have remained fixed. Whence, then, came this freedom which never became license? Certainly Jesus was not constructing a Utopia. He was not building an ideal state, but He was building solidly on reality. He knew that this freedom would not be achieved by a Dec-

laration of Independence or by an Emancipation Proclamation. He knew that thereby men could not be freed from their guilt, because He Himself said, "One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law till all be fulfilled."

The freedom of Jesus centers in forgiveness. This is the air of His kingdom and the mystery of His message. Here is a king who was anointed in baptism to reign with a thorn-crowned head and to bless with pierced hands. Those who would live with Him in His kingdom must enter it through the same door through which He passed—through death and resurrection in baptism. Thereby they become one with Christ as He is one with the Father and with the Spirit. Thereby they enter into His kingdom, are united closely with Jesus, and participate in His gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a vision of the new reality; a vision whereby world and man no longer exist in isolation but in Christ are reconciled to God. Forgiveness unites Christ and any man and every man into a most intimate union. So the great sinner, the person in great error, the person who has strayed is seen no longer in isolation but as a new Christ-creature. So the early Christian martyr walks out and looks at his executioner. He does not, however, see a hard Roman soldier who has not had a tender thought since he left his mother's breast but beholds a fellow-man redeemed in Christ as the image and likeness of Christ moves over his executioner. A warm hand reaches out across the deep, deep abyss and shakes that cold hand of the other. Such is the depth and such is the meaning of the liberalism of Christ.

But Jesus was not only conservative;

He was not only liberal; Jesus was also radical. At His coming the ax was laid to the root of every tree. Where can you find more radical statements than these: "Think not that I am come to send peace on the earth. I came not to send peace but a sword . . . to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother." "Nation shall be divided against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." "If any man come to Me and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." There are many more radical statements in the words of Jesus. We cannot enter into the meaning of each one. These radical words strike us as foreign to His peaceful nature. But they were made necessary by a concrete situation. They were made necessary by an antithesis; they were made necessary by the reality of the outer darkness. There the selfish individual finally reaches his climax in egotistic existence. He finally has self far, far removed; out there in outer darkness, separated from God and even people who may be around him, he learns that even hollowed and emptied echoes of love do not penetrate. So real is that outer darkness that both the salvation of man and the condemnation of man must be a radical act.

Conservative, liberal — air, vibration, sound, word, signs, symbols. By these words power has been seized and power has been destroyed. By these words people have been blessed and victims ground to powder. By these words men have worked for the church, and with these words people have opposed the church.

St. Louis, Mo.