Being Politically Correct:
A Slippery Slope

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When I started working at the University of California as a secretary, the Christmas holiday motif was pretty much intact. Toward the end of December there were Christmas trees in the hall and an annual "Christmas Party." The party included a professor dressed up as Santa Claus and Christian hymns, a.k.a Christmas carols. We also exchanged gifts. It was great!

The one year, Christmas started to change. A memo went around just before the holiday season banning Christmas trees in the hall. A year later, the Christmas party became a holiday luncheon. Santa was not there and neither was the music I loved so much. The year after that the holiday part of the party disappeared altogether and I was invited to join the staff at an End-of-the-Semester gathering at a Chinese restaurant. The pot stickers were great, but when I asked the coordinator if I could bring some bright red poinsettias as decorations she said, "That would remind people of Christmas and this is *not* a Christmas party." That is when it hit me. Celebrating Christmas at work was not going to happen anymore. It was no longer politically correct.

My first reaction to all this was to get indignant. "Why shut out Christmas," I said, "Can't we just include the other religions as well. We'll just make it a Chanukah/Christmas party." This idea was rejected and after pouting for awhile I let the whole thing drop.

Soon after the Christmas party was banished, I began becoming self-conscious about being a Christian. I took all the Christian symbols off of my bulletin board. Down came the fish engraved with the words, "I love Jesus," and the card that read, "Jesus loves me, this I know." Then I discreetly hid my Bible away in a file drawer—out of site. Next, I stopped mentioning my faith when talking to people. When someone asked me what I had done the weekend before, I did not mention that I had spent part of my time at church or that I had participated in a church function. Eventually, my vocabulary changed and the Sabbath became Saturday so no one would ask me what I meant by the "Sabbath." This kind of avoidance got worse over the years and before I knew it I had become a closet Christian—all in the name of not wanting to offend anyone at work who was of another religion or had no faith at all.

If this was the end of the story you might say: "No harm done. After all, I was just being sensitive to the feelings of others." But I must confess, it got worse. One day, I was having a conversation with one of the Jewish professors and somehow the subject turned to religion. Then, to my surprise, I heard myself referring to Christianity in the abstract as if it had nothing to do with me. "Christianity is an interesting religion," I said, "but who knows if they are right about Christ being the messiah. Perhaps he was just a teacher."

I was immediately aware of what I had just said. The blood drained from my face and I quickly excused myself. As I walked away, I began rattling off rationalizations for why I had denied my faith. "I was just trying to avoid offending him," I told myself. "This is a place of business. My faith has no place here." But praise the Lord, I didn't believe a word I was saying to myself and as I walked back to my office I felt a great sadness fall over me.

Back at my desk, I opened my filing cabinet and found the Bible I had tucked away under a pile of papers. I quickly opened it to the story of Peter denying Christ. As I read the words I got even sadder. Finally the story ended: "And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:75 RSV) I quietly closed the Bible and laid it on my desk as my own tears began to stream down my face.

As I thought about it later, I came to the realization that I had gone from being discreet about my faith at work to being self-conscious and then, finally, ashamed. I had also become too dependent on the validation of sponsored events like Christmas parties and a day off from work on Good Friday to give me permission to speak about my faith and announce who I was and what I believed. Finally, I realized I had a serious problem with "people pleasing" and wanting to fit it.

This was a turning point for me and I knew I had to do something. I began by praying. I asked God what I should do to be true to my Christian faith at work. The answer came back in the form of a deep-seated desire to find the middle ground between tolling the bell and being invisible. And what does this mean in practical terms? It means being willing to talk about my faith whether I am with other Christians or alone in the proverbial lion's den. It means taking my faith out from under the bushel and putting that fish back on my bulletin board —and a Christian screen saver on my computer for added measure. It means sprinkling my vocabulary with Christian words like faith, Christ, Lord, Sabbath, charity, church, vespers—words that might invite someone to ask me about my beliefs. It means inviting people to my church when I sense they are hungry for the love of the Lord. It means giving up the need to blend in if I have to give up being me to do so. It means having my own little Christmas party at my desk even if my supervisor won't let me have a tree.