

The Mark of a Christian

I've taken the heart, or about a third, of Schaeffer's little book *The Mark of a Christian* for us to study this week. You can find the whole PDF online for free if you are interested. Next week we will return to Keller.

The Final Apologetic

But there is something even more sober. And to understand it we must look at John 17:21, a verse out of the midst of Christ's high priestly prayer. Jesus prays, That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. In this, his high priestly prayer, Jesus is praying for the oneness of the church, the oneness that should be found specifically among true Christians. Jesus is not praying for a humanistic, romantic oneness among people in general. Verse 9 makes this clear: I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. Jesus here makes a very careful distinction between those who have cast themselves upon him in faith and those who still stand in rebellion. Hence, in the twenty-first verse, when he prays for oneness, the "they" he is referring to are the true Christians. Notice, however, that verse 21 says, That all of them may be one... The emphasis, interestingly enough, is exactly the same as in John 13 not for a part of true Christians, but for all Christians not that those in certain parties in the church should be one, but that all born-again Christians should be one. Now comes the sobering part: Jesus goes on in this twenty-first verse to say something that always causes me to cringe. If, as Christians, we do not cringe, it seems to me we are not very sensitive or very honest, because Jesus here gives us the final apologetic.

What is the final apologetic? That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. This is the final apologetic. [our ultimate defense] In John 13 the point was that, if an individual Christian does not show love toward other true Christians, the world has a right to judge that he or she is not a Christian. Here Jesus is stating something else that is much more cutting, much more profound: We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus' claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians. Now that is frightening. Should we not feel some emotion at this point?

Honest Answers , Observable Love

Of course, as Christians we must not minimize the need to give honest answers to honest questions. We should have an intellectual apologetic. The Bible commands it, and Christ and Paul exemplify it. In the synagogue, in the marketplace, in homes, and in almost every conceivable kind of situation, Jesus and Paul discussed Christianity. It is likewise the Christian's task to be able to give an honest answer to an honest question and then to give it. Yet, unless true Christians show observable love to each other, Christ says

the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers. Let us be careful, indeed, to spend a lifetime studying to give honest answers. For years the orthodox, evangelical church has done this very poorly. So it is well to spend time learning to answer the questions of those who are about us. But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.

While it is not the central consideration that I am dealing with at this time, yet the observable love and oneness among true Christians exhibited before the world must certainly cross all the lines which divide men. The New Testament says, Neither Greek nor barbarian, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). In the church at Antioch, the Christians included Jews and Gentiles and reached all the way from Herod's foster brother to the slaves; and the naturally proud

Greek Christian Gentiles of Macedonia showed a practical concern for the material needs of the Christian Jews in Jerusalem. The observable and practical love among true Christians that the world has a right to be able to observe in our day certainly should cut without reservation across such lines as language, nationalities, national frontiers, younger and older, colors of skin, levels of education and economics, accent, line of birth, the class system in any particular locality, dress, short or long hair among whites and African and non-African hairdos among blacks, cultural differentiations, and the more traditional and less traditional forms of worship. If the world does not see this down-to-earth practical love, it will not believe that Christ was sent by the Father. People will not believe only on the basis of the proper answers. The two should not be placed in antithesis. The world must have the proper answers to their honest questions, but at the same time there must be a oneness in love between all true Christians. This is what is needed if men are to know that Jesus was sent by the Father and that Christianity is true

True Oneness

In John 13 and 17, Jesus talks about a real seeable oneness, a practicing oneness, a practical oneness across all [denominational/organizational] lines, among all true Christians. The Christian really has a double task. He has to practice both God's holiness and God's love. The Christian is to exhibit that God exists as the infinite-personal God; and then he is to exhibit simultaneously God's character of holiness and love. Not His holiness without His love: this is only harshness. Not His love without His holiness: that is only compromise. Anything that an individual Christian or Christian group does that fails to show the simultaneous balance of the holiness of God and the love of God presents to a watching world not a demonstration of the God who exists but a caricature of the God who exists. According to the Scripture and the teaching of Christ, the love that is shown is to be exceedingly strong. It is not just something you mention in words once in a while.

Visible Love

What, then, does this love mean? How can it be made visible? First, it means a very simple thing: It means that when I have made a mistake and when I have failed to love my Christian brother, I go to him and say, “I’m sorry.” That is first. It may seem a letdown—that the first thing we speak of should be so simple!

But if you think it is easy, you have never tried to practice it. In our own groups, in our own close Christian communities, even in our families, when we have shown lack of love toward another, we as Christians do not just automatically go and say we are sorry. On even the very simplest level it is never very easy. If I am not willing to say, “I’m sorry,” when I have wronged somebody else — especially when I have not loved that person — I have not even started to think about the meaning of a Christian oneness that the world can see. The world has a right to question whether I am a Christian. And more than that, let me say it again, if I am not willing to do this very simple thing, the world has a right to question whether Jesus was sent from God and whether Christianity is true.

Dealing With Division

How well have we consciously practiced this? How often, in the power of the Holy Spirit, have we gone to Christians in our own group and said, “I’m sorry”? How much time have we spent reestablishing contact with those in other groups, saying to them, “I’m sorry for what I’ve done, what I’ve said, or what I’ve written”? How frequently has one group gone to another group with whom it differed and has said, “We’re sorry”? It is so important that it is, for all practical purposes, a part of the preaching of the gospel itself. The observable practice of truth and the observable practice of love go hand in hand with the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. I have observed one thing among true Christians in their differences in many countries: **What divides and severs true Christian groups and Christians—what leaves a bitterness that can last for 20, 30, or 40 years (or for 50 or 60 years in a son’s or daughter’s memory)—is not the issue of doctrine or belief that caused the differences in the first place. Invariably, it is a lack of love—and the bitter things that are said by true Christians in the midst of differences. These stick in the mind like glue.** And after time passes and the differences between the Christians or the groups appear less than they did, there are still those bitter, bitter things we said in the midst of what we thought was a good and sufficient objective discussion. It is these things — these unloving attitudes and words—that cause the stench that the world can smell in the church of Jesus Christ among those who are really true Christians.

If, when we feel we must disagree as true Christians, we could simply guard our tongues and speak in love, in five or ten years the bitterness could be gone. Instead of that, we leave scars — a curse for generations. Not just a curse in the church, but a curse in the world. Newspaper headlines bear it in our Christian press, and it boils over into the secular press at times—Christians saying such bitter things about other Christians. The world looks, shrugs its shoulders, and turns away. It has not seen even the beginning of a living church in the midst of a dying culture. It has not seen the beginning of what Jesus indicates is the final apologetic—observable oneness among

true Christians who are truly brothers and sisters in Christ. Our sharp tongues, the lack of love between us—not the necessary statements of differences that may exist between true Christians—these are what properly trouble the world. How different this is from the straightforward and direct command of Jesus Christ—to show an observable oneness that may be seen by a watching world!

Forgiveness

But there is more to observable prayer than saying we are sorry. There must also be open forgiveness. And though it's hard to say, "I'm sorry," it's even harder to forgive. The Bible, however, makes plain that the world must observe a forgiving spirit in the midst of God's people. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus himself teaches us to pray, Forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Now this prayer, we must say quickly, is not for salvation. It has nothing to do with being born again, for we are born again on the basis of the finished work of Christ plus nothing. But it does have to do with a Christian's existential, moment-by-moment forgiveness for our sins on the basis of Christ's work in order to be in open fellowship with God. What the Lord has taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer should make a Christian very sober every day of his or her life: We are asking the Lord to open to us the experiential realities of fellowship with himself as we forgive others. Some Christians say that the Lord's Prayer is not for this present era, but most of us would say it is. And yet, at the same time, we hardly think once in a year about our lack of a forgiving heart in relationship to God's forgiving us. Many Christians rarely or never seem to connect their own lack of reality of fellowship with God with their lack of forgiveness to others, even though they may say the Lord's Prayer in a formal way over and over in their weekly Sunday worship services.

We must all continually acknowledge that we do not practice the forgiving heart as we should. And yet the prayer is Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, as we forgive our debtors. We are to have a forgiving spirit even before the other person expresses regret for wrong. The Lord's Prayer does not suggest that when the other person is sorry, then we are to show a oneness by having a forgiving spirit. Rather, we are called upon to have a forgiving spirit without the other person having made the first step. We may still say that this individual is wrong, but in the midst of saying that person is wrong, we must be forgiving. We are to have this forgiving spirit not only toward Christians but toward all people. But surely, if it is toward all people, it is important toward Christians. Such a forgiving spirit registers an attitude of love toward others. But, even though one can call this an attitude, true forgiveness is observable. Believe me, you can look on a person's face and know where that one is as far as forgiveness is concerned. And the world is called on to look upon us and see whether we have love across the groups, love across party lines. Do they observe that we say, "I'm sorry," and do they observe a forgiving heart? Let me repeat: Our love will not be perfect, but it must be substantial enough for the world to be able to observe or it does not fit into the structure of the verses in John 13 and 17. And if the world does not observe this among true Christians, the world has a right to make the two awful judgments that these verses indicate: That we are not Christians, and that Christ was not sent by the Father.

When Christians Disagree

What happens, then, when we must differ with our brothers in Christ because of the need also to show forth God's holiness either in doctrine or in life? In the matter of life, Paul clearly shows us the balance in 1 and 2 Corinthians. The same thing applies in doctrine as well. First, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 he scolds the Corinthian church for allowing a man who is an active fornicator to stay in the church without discipline. Because of the holiness of God, because of the need to exhibit this holiness to a watching world, and because such judgment on the basis of God's revealed law is right in God's sight, Paul scolds the church for not disciplining the man. After they have disciplined him, Paul writes again to them in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 and scolds them because they are not showing love toward him. These two things must stand together. I am thankful that we have the record of Paul writing this way, in his first letter and his

second, for here you see a passage of time. The Corinthians have taken his advice, they have disciplined the Christian, and now Paul writes to them, "You're disciplining him, but why don't you show your love toward him?" He could have gone on and quoted Jesus in saying, "Don't you realize that the surrounding pagans of Corinth have a right to say that Jesus was not sent by the Father because you are not showing love to this man that you properly disciplined?"

A very important question arises at this point: how can we exhibit the oneness Christ commands without sharing in the other people's mistakes? I would suggest a few ways by which we can practice and show this oneness even across the lines where we must differ.

Regret

First, we should never come to such difference with true Christians without regret and without tears. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Believe me, evangelicals often have not shown it. We rush in, being very, very pleased, it would seem at times, to find other people's mistakes. We build ourselves up by tearing other people down. This can never show a real oneness among Christians. There is only one kind of person who can fight the Lord's battles in anywhere near a proper way, and that is the person who by nature is un-belligerent. A belligerent man tends to do it because he is belligerent; at least it looks that way. The world must observe that when we must differ with each other as true Christians, we do it not because we love the smell of blood, the smell of the arena, the smell of the bullfight, but because we must for God's sake. If there are tears when we must speak, then something beautiful can be observed.

Second, in proportion to the gravity of what is wrong between true Christians, it is important consciously to exhibit an observable love to the world. Not all differences among Christians are equally serious. There are some that are very minor. Others are overwhelmingly important. The more serious the wrongness is, the more important it is to exhibit the holiness of God, to speak out concerning what is wrong. At the same time, the more serious the differences become, the more important it becomes that we look to

the Holy Spirit to enable us to show love to the true Christians with whom we must differ.

If it is only a minor difference, showing love does not take much conscious consideration. But where the difference becomes really important, it becomes proportionately more important to speak for God's holiness. And it becomes increasingly important in that place to show the world that we still love each other. Humanly we function in exactly the opposite direction: in the less important differences we show more love toward true Christians; but as the difference gets into more important areas, we tend to show less love. The reverse must be the case: as the differences among true Christians get greater, we must consciously love and show a love which has some manifestation the world may see.

So let us consider this: is my difference with my brother in Christ crucially important? If

so, it is doubly important that I spend time upon my knees asking the Holy Spirit, asking Christ, to do His work through me and my group, that I and we might show love even in this larger difference that we have come to with a brother in Christ or with another group of true Christians.