

18. A Protestant Evangelical Speaks to His Lutheran Friends in a Day of Theological Crisis

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Born-again Christians, whether from the Lutheran tradition, the Presbyterian tradition or those with other distinctives, have certain basic things in common. One of these is certainly this task: to exhibit simultaneously the holiness of God and the love of God.

In the book *The Mark of the Christian* I have expressed and developed this notion in a slightly different way. There I have written about the need simultaneously to practice two biblical principles. The first is the principle of the practice of the purity of the visible church (not the invisible church we join when by God's grace we cast ourselves upon Christ, but the visible church). It seems to me that it is very plain in Scripture that we are called upon to practice the purity of the visible church. I am not just speaking about *talking* about the purity of the visible church, but about the *practice* of the purity of the visible church. The second principle is the practice of an observable love and oneness among all *true* Christians. The emphasis here is upon *true* Christians. *The Mark of the Christian* stresses from John 13:34-35 that, according to Jesus himself, the world has the right to decide whether we are true Christians, true disciples of Christ, on the basis of the love we show to all true Christians. John 17:21 provides something even more sobering in that here Jesus gives the world the right to judge whether the Father has sent the Son on the basis of whether the world sees love among all true Christians.

In a new book entitled *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, I emphasize another related parallelism: the call of God to simultaneously practice the orthodoxy of doctrine and the orthodoxy of community. The latter of these we have all too often all but forgotten. But one cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the dynamis, that was involved in the early church apart from the fact that they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world could see. By the grace of God the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community. Our churches have so often been only preaching points with very little emphasis upon community. But an exhibition of the love of God in practice is beautiful and it must be there.

The heart of this is to show forth the love of God and the holiness of God simultaneously. If we show either of these without the other we do not exhibit the character of God, but a caricature of God for the world to see. If we stress the love of God without the holiness of God, it turns out only to be compromise. If, on the other hand, we stress the holiness of God without the love of God, we practice something that is hard, something that lacks beauty. And beauty is an important thing to show forth before a lost world, before our generation.

All too often young people have been right in saying that the church is ugly. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we are called upon to show to a watching world and to our own young people that the church is something beautiful.

Several years ago I wrestled with the question of what was wrong with much of the church that stood for purity. I came to the conclusion that in the flesh we can stress purity without love or we can stress the love of God without purity. But it is not possible in the flesh to stress both simultaneously. In order to stress and exhibit both simultaneously we must look moment by moment to the work of Christ, to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let us consider, then, the exhibition of the holiness of God in relation to the purity of the visible church. Allow me to go back in history. You have asked me to speak as your friend from a different tradition. I come from the Presbyterian tradition. I will go back into the Presbyterian history of the 30's and beg you as Lutherans, especially The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, to learn from our mistakes. In the 1930's almost every large denomination in America came under the controls of liberalism. The Presbyterian Church in the USA is one of the clearest cases of all because it was a very strong doctrinal church, just as the Lutheran Church is a strong creedal church.

I take you back first of all to 1924, one year after the Auburn Affirmation was signed. The Auburn Affirmation was the liberals' public declaration of war upon the historic Presbyterian Christian faith. The Auburn Affirmation had thrown down the gauntlet. The conservatives of the church decided that the way to meet this challenge was to elect a moderator of the General Assembly who would clearly be a Bible-believing man. As a result, 1924 saw elected as the moderator of the Northern Presbyterian Church an orthodox, Bible-believing man, Dr. Clarence Edward Macartney. The conservatives were jubilant, they were filled with joy. The secular newspapers carried the story of the conservative victory, and the conservatives rejoiced. But while all the rejoicing was going on, the liberals simply consolidated their power in the church bureaucracy. And because they were allowed to do so, the election of the conservative moderator proved to mean nothing, not one single thing. By 1936 the liberals were so in control of the Northern Presbyterian Church that they were able to defrock Dr. J. Gresham Machen and put him out of the ministry.

Today, it seems to me there are two major denominations not yet taken over by the liberals which at this present time thirty-five years later, stand in an exactly parallel situation. It seems to me as your friend that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is one of them. I urge you to learn from the mistakes in the Presbyterian Church in the '30's: Do not think that merely because a Bible-believing man has been elected as executive officer this will give automatic safety to your denomination. There must be an exhibition of the practice of the purity of the visible church if you are really to dwell in safety. There must be an exhibition of the holiness of God in the midst of ecclesiastical affairs. You must practice truth, not just speak about it, in regard to the purity of the visible church.

It must be understood that the new humanism and new theology have no concept of true truth. Hegelian relativism has triumphed. The Christian, on the other hand, is called upon not only to teach truth but to practice truth in the midst of such relativism. And if we are ever to practice truth, it certainly must be now. The principle of the purity of the visible church must be practiced; including discipline of the true liberals.

A paper of mine is to be handed out tonight entitled "Adultery and Apostasy — The Bride and the Bridegroom Theme" (this is published as an appendix in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*). It points out that the older liberalism and the newer existential type are both unfaithful to the Divine Bridegroom. It talks about the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of the Bride of Christ to the Head, Christ himself. These issues are not small matters, they are not doctrinal abstractions; they carry everything with them if we believe truly that Christianity is truth. We believe Christianity is not just doctrinal truth, but flaming truth, truth to what is there, truth as to the great final environment, the infinite-personal God. We believe that Christian-

ity tells us the truth of who man is, and of the universe. Above everything else, we believe that Christianity tells us that God is there, and that God is the Divine Bridegroom and that the church is to be the Bride. Then we must not forget that liberalism is unfaithfulness, spiritual adultery toward the Divine Bridegroom. As I said in concluding my talk yesterday morning — historic Christianity and the new theology have nothing in common; they are two separate religions. All they have in common is certain terms which are used with totally different meanings. There is simply no use speaking of truth (in the historic concept of truth) unless we practice truth and that involves antithesis and discipline.

We not only believe in the existence of truth, but we believe we have the truth — a truth we can share with the 20th-century world. Do you think our contemporaries will take us seriously if we do not practice truth? Do you think for a moment that the really tough-minded 20th-century youngsters — our own youth as they go off to universities, as they are taught in the fields of sociology, psychology, philosophy, that all is relative — will take us seriously? In an age that does not really believe that truth exists, do you really believe they will take seriously that their fathers are speaking truth, that their fathers will have credibility, if their fathers do not practice truth?

Don't you understand, this is a matter of loyalty, loyalty not only to the creeds, but loyalty to the Scripture. But beyond loyalty to the Scripture it is loyalty to the Divine Bridegroom.

Marshall McLuhan has a theory of hot and cool communication. Hot communication, according to McLuhan, is communication that has content, that appeals to men and moves men through the mind on the basis of content. Cool communication is merely a kind of personal first order experience wherein one is moved but without any content passing through his mind, his reason. It is a manipulation based on electronics. Father Culham, an important man in communications at Forham University, a follower of McLuhan, says this: "Gutenberg came and the Reformation came. Electronics comes and the ecumenical movement comes." He means that the ecumenical movement is rooted for its unity in the midst of a contentless situation, a situation that is completely cool and has nothing to do with doctrinal truth. I feel he is right. I do not believe that the modern ecumenical movement could have been built even in the day of the old liberals. The ecumenical movement is built, I believe, in organizational oneness on the basis of a total lack of content.

Equally, the new existential theologians in our churches live only in the area of cool communication. They have denied content — content is not important to them. An existential, upper-storey experience is separated from all reason and from all that is open either to verification or falsification. T. H. Huxley, as I noted in my first lecture, saw that the day would come when theology would be separated from everything that has anything to do with fact and as such would never be open to challenge. But as I said, of course, that kind of theology doesn't mean anything either.

We, on the other hand, believe completely in hot communication, and as our age cools off more and more in its communication, as content is played down and reason is ploughed under, I believe the historic Christian faith must more and more emphasize content, content, content and then more content. We are brought face to face in a complete antithesis with the existential theologian. If we are to talk truth at all, we must have content on the basis of antithesis and to do this we must have discipline with regard to those who depart from the historic Christian faith. It is thus that we can practice the exhibition of the holiness of God.

At the same time, however, we must show forth the love of God; we must love and show love to those with whom we differ. Thirty-five years ago in the Presbyterian crisis, we forgot that. We did not speak with love about those with whom we differed, and we have been paying a high price for it ever since. We must love the man, even if he is an existential theologian, even if he speaks only with cool communication and has given up content entirely.

We must deal with him as our neighbor because Christ has given us the Second Commandment that we are to love all men as our neighbors.

We must stand clearly for the principles of the purity of the visible church, and we must call for the discipline of those who take a position which is not according to the Scriptures. But at the same time we must visibly love them as we speak and write about them. We must show it before the church and we must show it before the world. And if we want our children to see true Christianity among us, we must show it before our children. We must say that these men are desperately wrong and require discipline but do so in terms that show that it is not merely the flesh speaking. This is beyond us, but it is not beyond the work of the Holy Spirit. I regret that thirty-some years ago we did not do this in the Presbyterian Church, we did not talk of the need of showing love as we stood against liberalism and as the Presbyterian Church was lost, and it has cost us dearly for thirty-five years.

But with prayer it can be done. Several years ago at Roosevelt University Auditorium here in Chicago, I had a dialogue with James Pike. I asked those in L'Abri to pray for one thing: that I would be able to give a clear Christian position to him and to the audience, and at the same time end with a good human relationship with Jim Pike. It was something I could not do in myself, but God answered that prayer. A clear statement was raised, with a clear statement of differences, without the need of destroying him as a human being. At the close, he spoke to me and said, "If you ever come to California, please come and visit me in Santa Barbara." Later, when Edith and I were out in Santa Barbara, we went to his place and were able to carry on further to present a clear testimony to him without one iota of compromise, yet again not destroying him but respecting him as a man. We also talked about the possibility that his belief that he was talking to his son on "the other side" was really a matter of demonology. Jim Pike did not get angry, though he was close to crying. I'll never forget the last time I saw him as I was leaving the Institution for Democratic Studies. He said one of the saddest sentences I have ever heard: "When I turned from being agnostic, I went to Union Theological Seminary, but when I graduated all that it left me was a handful of pebbles."

Who is responsible for the tragedy of Jim Pike? His liberal theological professors who robbed him of everything real and human. We cannot take lightly the fact that the liberal theological professors in any theological school are leaving young men with a handful of pebbles and nothing more. Yet even in the midst of this situation, we must by God's grace do two things together: We must do all that is necessary for the purity of the visible church to exhibit the holiness of God, and yet, no matter how bitter the liberals become or what nasty things they say or what they release to the press, we must show forth the love of God in the midst of the strongest speaking we can do. If we let down one side or the other, we will not bear our testimony to God who is holy and who is love. We must treat the liberal as a human being in the midst of our most strenuous objections that he is taking the young men we are sending to theological seminary and leaving them with only a handful of pebbles.

Let me go back again to the Presbyterian struggles of the 30's when our men did not remember this balance. On the one hand, they waited far too long to exert discipline, and they lost the denomination. On the other hand, they treated the liberals as less than human, and therefore they learned such bad habits that later, when those who separated had minor differences among themselves, they continued to handle each other in bad fashion. Beware of the habits you learn in controversy. Both must appear together: the holiness of God and the love of God exhibited simultaneously by the grace of God. It will not come automatically, it takes prayer. You must write about this in your papers. You must talk about it to your congregations. You must preach sermons pointing out the necessity of standing for the holiness of God and the love of God simultaneously, and you, by your attitude, must exhibit it to your people and your own children.

Let us notice that the wording is important here. The principle of which we are speaking is *not* separation. The principle is that of the practice of the purity of the visible church. That is the principle. It may have to be exhibited in various ways, but that is the principle.

The church belongs to those who by the grace of God are faithful to the Scriptures and hold to the creeds of the church. The liberals should be treated as human beings, but clearly disciplined. The church does not belong to the liberals and so discipline should be the first step in the principle of the practice of the purity of the visible church.

Dr. Briggs was put out of the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the late 1890's because he was the first man who brought modern liberalism into Union Theological Seminary. By the 1930's the liberals were able to put out Dr. Machen because of his clear stand for the Scriptures and for the gospel. Think: Before 1900 Dr. Briggs could be disciplined. In the 1930's Dr. Machen was disciplined and put out of the ministry. What had happened in the intervening years? Discipline had not been consistently applied until it was too late. The church was able, indeed, to discipline Dr. Briggs but after that there was no more word of discipline. Faithful men waited too long. The men who were faithful to the Scriptures achieved one outstanding victory in the case of Dr. Briggs, and then, after the first burst of discipline, they did nothing until it was far too late. Discipline is not something that can be done in one great burst of enthusiasm, one great conference, one great anything. Men must be treated in love as human beings, but it is a case of continued, moment by moment, "existential" care, for we are not dealing with a merely human "organization," but with the church, the Bride of Christ. Hence, the practice of the purity of the visible church first means discipline to those who do not take a proper position in regard to the teaching of Scripture and to the creeds of the church.

Why is it so unthinkable today to have discipline? Why is it that at least two denominations in this country are now so in the hands of liberals that it is officially and formally no longer possible to have a discipline trial, ever — even in theory? It is because both the world and the liberal church have become Hegelian and caught with synthesis. Because the world and the liberal church no longer believe in truth, any concept of discipline has become unthinkable. It was not unthinkable to our forefathers, because they believed that truth existed. The reason that it is impossible for men to speak of heresy today, the reason they withdraw from the concept of discipline, is that knowing it or not knowing it, they have become infiltrated with Hegelian relativism.

However, if the battle is lost as it was lost in all but three of the major denominations in the thirties, then we must understand that there is a second step to take in regard to the practice of the principle of the purity of the visible church. I believe that all three major denominations which were not lost in the thirties are today in the midst of this battle, and I think The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is one of these. You have friends throughout the world praying for you, friends who believe that you stand in the place of decision.

When a church today (like the Presbyterian Church 35 years ago) comes to the place where it can no longer exert discipline, then with tears we must face before the Lord the second possibility of the practice of the purity of the visible church. If we must leave our church, it should always be with tears and not with drums playing and flags flying.

We are not practicing separation. Separation is a negative concept and builds a bad mentality. The principle of the practice of the purity of the visible church is a positive concept: It is an affirmation, not a negation.

Still, we must make a previous decision about what price we are willing to pay when the chips are down, or we are not free under Christ. For example, one of the brightest girls I have ever met was a teacher at Oxford Uni-

versity. She and her husband are committed Christians, brilliant, both of them professors. Later she was teaching at another university in the social sciences, where a behaviorist was the head of the department. He told her that she had to either teach her social science from the basis of behaviorism or leave. It was a big decision for this girl, but fortunately she and her husband had already previously prayed about it and made a decision that when the chips were down Christ was first and their academic position was secondary. Is there any other possibility for a Christian who really loves Christ?

If sacrifice is necessary in the case of the young professor in a British university, it is certainly the case in ecclesiology. Before we ever come to the place where this horrible decision has to be made, the issue must be already settled: The church as an organization is not first; Christ is first. Once Christ is no longer King in a church, then that church cannot have our loyalty. As a friend of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod since the days when I knew Dr. Maier when I was a pastor in St. Louis, I pray that you might make your decision ahead of time. If you ever have to come to this second stage of the practice of the principle of the purity of the visible church, I pray that Christ will be first in your decision.

And if unhappily the Christians of a church come to this place, then I would suggest that there are two further lessons from what I have observed as I have worked over many countries. You must also face the fact that if you come to that unhappy moment it will not be a simple situation where all the faithful Christians will come out at the same time, and this sets up an emotional tension among the true Christians. I watched it in the Presbyterian Church as a young man under care of Presbytery in the thirties and I cried. I've watched it in other countries — in Holland and England. Those who have stood side by side for years — suddenly there is a tension between them.

This results in two different tendencies. First, those who come out tend to become hard; they tend to be absolutists even in the lesser points of doctrine. They tend to lose their Christian love for those true Christians who did not come out. Men who have been friends for years suddenly become estranged.

Second, on the other hand, those who stay in have an opposite tendency toward a growing latitudinarianism, and this has happened in evangelical circles in this country. They tend to go from ecclesiastical latitudinarianism to cooperative comprehensiveness. Thus they still talk about truth but tend less and less to practice truth. The next step comes very quickly, say in two generations. If you stay in a denomination that is completely dominated by liberals and you give in to ecclesiastical inclusiveness which becomes a cooperative latitudinarianism, there is a tendency to drift into doctrinal comprehensiveness and especially to let down on a clear view of Scripture.

There is, therefore, a danger for both those who come out and those who stay in. And in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we must face these dangers ahead of time in order to help each other if or when that unhappy moment comes.

If a division comes, true Christians must not polarize. This must not be allowed to take place. In the Presbyterian Church in 1935, we made this mistake, and we have never fully recovered from it. Most of those who left totally broke off fellowship with brothers in Christ who stayed in.

In 1936 when Dr. Machen was going to be put out of the church, the General Assembly was meeting in Syracuse, New York. The leading conservative Presbyterian pastor in Syracuse, Rev. Walter Watson of the First Ward Presbyterian Church, did something which showed great ecclesiastical courage. The Sunday before the General Assembly acted, he opened his pulpit to Dr. Machen. Dr. Machen preached from that man's pulpit with everyone knowing that before the following Sunday he was going to be defrocked by a liberally controlled General Assembly.

The following week the Philadelphia Bulletin (June 11, 1936) carried an article with a heading *NEW CHURCH GETS UNDER WAY: Presbyterian*

Constitutional Covenant Union Dissolved. Just a headline, but what did it mean? Rev. Walter Watson, who had shown such courage the week before Dr. Machen was defrocked said to those who were leaving the church: You must start a new church, but I plead with you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ not to dissolve the Constitutional Covenant Union. The Constitutional Covenant Union was the organization to which the Bible-believing people within the Presbyterian Church had belonged. The Bulletin article read:

Rev. Watson asked for less haste in dissolving the Union. He pointed out that there were thousands in the established church who had not seen the light yet and the only way we can reach them was through an organization similar to the Covenant Union. I foresee, he said, that for a while at least this new denomination will only be a little one with only a dozen churches, but in five or ten years we can expect several hundred thousand members.

Instead of following his advice those who came out dissolved the Union and largely ceased to have any fellowship with the true brothers in Christ who had stood with them in the battle up to that moment. We have paid a dear price for their decision for thirty-five years.

Let me tell you what happened because we failed in the 30's. Since we broke off fellowship with the true Christians in the established church and had nothing to do with them, the Reformed churches in this country — both in the North and the South — have become more and more liberal. The true Christians who remained in those churches became discouraged by the attitude of those who had already left, and so they remained in the established church. Man after man has talked to me in the last three or four years saying, "Back there I was hurt, I was injured. And because of that I have just stayed where I am, I have been discouraged."

We discourage our brothers in Christ unless consciously and prayerfully ahead of time we are prepared for the situation — ready with a simultaneous clear doctrinal stand and an exhibition of real, observable love among true Christians that the world can see. This must be consciously thought about and prayed about and written about — it does not come automatically. In the moment itself, tensions run high and thus it must be prepared for ahead of time.

I plead with you, therefore, if that moment comes for you (I pray that it may not come to you, but if it does), find some way to show an observable love among *true* Christians before the world. Don't divide into ugly parties. If you do this the world will see an ugliness which will turn it off. And your children will see an ugliness and you will lose some of your sons and daughters. They will hear such harsh things from your lips against men that they know have been your friends that they will rightfully turn away from you. Don't throw your children away, don't throw other people away by forgetting, by God's grace, to practice the two principles simultaneously — showing love and the practice of the purity of the visible church.

And finally I would say, don't forget that the world is on fire. We are losing the church and our entire culture as well. We live in the post-Christian world which is under the judgment of God. I believe today we must speak as Jeremiah. Some people think that just because this is the United States of America we will not come under the judgment of God. This is not so. I believe we have had such light as few other countries have ever possessed. The Northern European culture since the Reformation has had light that no one else has had. We have walked upon that light in our culture. Our cinemas, our novels, our art museums scream out as they walk upon that light. And worst of all, modern theology screams out as it walks upon that light. Do you think God will not judge our country simply because we are the United States of America? Do you think that the holy God will not judge?

And if this is so in our moment of history, we need each other. Let us keep our doctrinal distinctives. You are Lutheran, be Lutheran. I am Re-

formed. It is by choice for me from my study of Scripture. Let us keep our distinctives. And let us talk to each other as we keep our distinctives.

But in a day like ours let us keep the hierarchy of things in their proper place. The real chasm is not between the Presbyterians and everybody else; it is not between the Lutherans and everybody else. The real chasm is between those who have bowed to the living God and to the verbal, propositional communication of God's Word, the Scripture, and those who have not.

As a Bible-believing Presbyterian I feel very close to you. I feel no separation in Christ. I come here and I shake your hand and I speak as though I have known you forever. If we got down to certain points of doctrine we would differ, but the things I have spoken are not rooted in Presbyterianism or Lutheranism; they are rooted in historic Christianity and the scriptural faith. I feel close to you as Bible-believing Lutherans, but I have no closeness to those who are non-Bible-believing Presbyterians. This is where the division lies. In a day like ours, when the world is on fire, let us be careful to keep things in proper order. Let us find ways to show the world that while we do not minimize, and we maintain our distinctives, yet that we who have bowed before God's verbalized, propositional communication — the Bible — are brothers in Christ. This we must do in the face of liberal theology.

The oneness does not need to be *organizational*. As a matter of fact, I am sick of organizations trying to bring oneness by organization. Yet there must be an observable and real oneness before God, before the elect angels, before the demonic hosts, before the watching liberals and before the watching world.

And in conclusion let us return to where we began: One of the basic things we have in common as true Christians is the task to exhibit simultaneously the love of God and the holiness of God, and, among other things, the exhibition of the holiness of God means the practice of the principle of the purity of the visible church.