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# The Church at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

by Francis Schaeffer

Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts. Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of this, if one that has not been thought up just as a matter of expediency, for use on some special occasion or in some specific era. It is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church till Jesus comes back.

What is this mark?

At the close of his ministry, Jesus looks forward to his death on the cross, the open tomb and the ascension. Knowing that he is about to leave, Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to come. It is here that he makes clear what will be the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

*Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:33-35)*

This passage reveals the mark that Jesus gives to label a Christian not just in one era or in one locality but at all times and all places until Jesus returns. Notice that what he says here is not a description of a fact. It is a command, which includes a condition: *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another.”* If you obey, you will wear the badge Christ gave. But since this is a command, it can be violated.

The point is that it is possible to be a Christian without showing the mark, but if we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians, we must show the mark.

## **Men and Brothers**

The command at this point is to love our fellow Christians, our brothers. But, of course, we must strike a balance and not forget the other side of Jesus' teaching: We are to love our fellowmen, to love *all* men, in fact, as neighbors.

All men bear the image of God. They have value, not because they are redeemed, but because they are God's creation in God's image. Modern man, who has rejected this, has no clue as to who he is, and because of this he can find no real value for himself or for other men. Hence, he downgrades the value of other men and produces the horrible thing we face today—a sick culture in which men treat men as inhuman, as machines. As Christians, however, we know the value of men.

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All men are our neighbors, and we are to love them as ourselves. We are to do this on the basis of creation, even if they are not redeemed, for all men have value because they are made in the image of God. Therefore they are to be loved even at great cost. This is, of course, the whole point of Jesus' story of the good Samaritan: Because a man is a man, he is to be loved at all cost.

So, when Jesus gives the special command to love our Christian brothers, it does not negate the other command. The two are not antithetical. We are not to choose between loving all men as ourselves and loving the Christian in a special way. The two commands reinforce each other.

If Jesus has commanded so strongly that we love all men as our neighbors, then how important it is especially to love our fellow Christians? If we are told to love all men as our neighbors – as ourselves – then surely, when it comes to those with whom we have the special bonds as fellow Christians—having one Father through one Jesus Christ and being indwelt by one Spirit – we can understand how overwhelmingly important it is that all men be able to see an observable love for those with whom we have these special ties. Paul makes the double obligation clear in Galatians 6:10: “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” He does not negate the command to do good to all men. But it is still not meaningless to add, “especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” This dual goal should be our Christian mentality, the set of our minds; we should be consciously thinking about it and what it means in our one–moment–at–a–time lives. It should be the attitude that governs our outward observable actions.

Very often the true Bible – believing Christian, in his emphasis on two humanities – one lost, one saved – one still standing in rebellion against God, the other having returned to God through Christ – has given a picture of exclusiveness which is ugly.

There are two humanities. That is true. Some men made in the image of God still stand in rebellion against him; some, by the grace of God, have cast themselves upon God's solution.

Nonetheless, there is, in another very important sense, only one humanity. All men derive from one origin. By creation all men bear the image of God. In this sense all men are of one flesh, one blood. Hence, the exclusiveness of the two humanities is under girded by the unity of all men. And Christians are not to love their believing brothers to the exclusion of their non–believing fellowmen. That is ugly. We are to have the example of the good Samaritan consciously in mind at all times.

### **A Delicate Balance**

The first commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second commandment bears the universal command to love men. Notice that the second commandment is not just to love Christians. It is far wider than this. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. 1 Thessalonians 3:2 carries the same double emphasis:

“And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another,  
and toward all men, even as we do toward you.”

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Here the order is reversed. First of all, we are to have love one toward all men, but that does not change the double emphasis. Rather, it points up the delicate balance – a balance that is not in practice automatically maintained.

In 1 John 3:11 (written later than the gospel that bears his name) John says,

“For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

Years after Christ’s death, John, in writing the epistle, calls us back to Christ’s original command in John 13. Speaking to the church, John in effect says, “Don’t forget this. This command was given to us by Christ while he was still on the earth. This is to be your mark.”

### **For True Christians Only**

If we look again at the command in John 13, we will notice some important things. First of all, this is a command to have a special love to all true Christians, all born-again Christians. From the scriptural viewpoint, not all who call themselves Christians are Christians, and that is especially true in our generation. The meaning of the word *Christian* has been so devalued unless it is the word of God itself. Central to semantics is the idea that a word as a symbol has no meaning until content is put into it. This is quite correct. Because the word *Christian* as a symbol has been made to mean everything and nothing.

Jesus, however, is talking about loving all true Christians. And this is a command that has two cutting edges, for it means that we must both distinguish true Christians from all pretenders and be sure that we leave no true Christians outside of our consideration. In other words, mere humanists and liberal theologians who continue to use the Christian label or mere church members whose Christian designation is only a formality are not to be accounted true.

But we must be careful of the opposite error. We must include *everyone* who stands in the historic-biblical faith whether or not he is a member of our own party or our own group.

But even if a man is not among the true Christians, we still have the responsibility to love him as our neighbor. So we cannot say, “Now here’s somebody that, as far as I can tell, does not stand among the group of true Christians, and therefore I don’t have to think of him any more; I can just slough him off.” Not at all. He is covered by the second commandment.

### **The Standard of Quality**

The second thing to notice in these verses in John 13 is the quality of the love that is to be our standard. We are to love all Christians “as I,” Jesus says, “have loved you.” Now think of both the quality and the quantity of Jesus’ love toward us. Of course, he is infinite and we are finite; he is God, we are men. Since he is infinite, our love can never be like his, it can never be an infinite love.

Nevertheless, the love he exhibited then and exhibits now is to be our standard. We dare have no lesser standard. We are to love all true Christians as Christ has loved us.

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Now immediately, when we say this, either of two things can happen. We can just say, “I see!” and we can make a little flag and write on it, “We Love All Christians!” You can see us trudging along with little flags-all rolled up – “We Love All Christians!” – and at the appropriate moments, we take off all the rubber bands, unzip the cover, and put it up. We wave it as we carry it along – “We Love All Christians!” How ugly!

It can be either this exceedingly ugly thing, as ugly as anything anyone could imagine, or it can be something as profound as anyone could imagine. And if it is to be the latter, it will take a great deal of time, a great deal of conscious talking and writing about it, a great deal of thinking and praying about it on the part of the Bible-believing Christians.

The church is to be a loving church in a dying culture. How, then, is the dying culture going to consider us? Jesus says, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present dying culture, Jesus is giving a right to the world. Upon his authority he gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians.

That’s pretty frightening. Jesus turns to the world and says, “I’ve something to say to you. On the basis of my authority, I give you a right: You may judge whether or not an individual is a Christian on the basis of the love he shows to all Christians.” In other words, if people come up to us and cast in our teeth the judgment that we are not Christians because we have not shown love toward other Christians, we must understand that they are only exercising a prerogative, which Jesus gave them.

And we must not get angry. If people say, “You don’t love other Christians,” we must go home, get down on our knees and ask God whether or not they are right. And if they are, then they have a right to have said what they said.

### **Failure in Love**

We must be very careful at this point, however. We may be true Christians, really born-again Christians, and yet fail in our love toward other Christians. As a matter of fact, to be completely realistic, it is stronger than this. There will be times (and let us say it with tears), there will be times when we will fail in our love toward each other as Christians. In a fallen world, where there is no such thing as perfection until Jesus comes, we know this will be the case. And, of course, when we fail, we must ask God’s forgiveness. But, Jesus is not here saying that our failure to love all Christians proves that we are not Christians.

Let each of us see this individually for ourselves. If I fail in my love toward Christians, it does not prove I am not a Christian. What Jesus is saying, however, is that, if I do not have the love I should have toward all other Christians, the world has the right to make the judgment that I am not a Christian.

This distinction is imperative. If we fail in our love toward all Christians, we must not tear our heart out as though it were proof that we are lost. No one except Christ himself has ever lived and not failed. If success in love toward our brothers in Christ were to be the standard of whether or not a man is a Christian, then there would be no Christians, because all men have failed. But Jesus gives the world a piece of litmus paper, a reasonable thermometer: There is a

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mark, which, if the world does not see, allows them to conclude, “This man is not a Christian.” Of course, the world may be making a wrong judgment because, if the man is truly a Christian, as far as the reality goes, they made a mistake.

It is true that a non-Christian often hides behind what he sees in Christians and then screams, “Hypocrites!” when in reality he is a sinner who will not face the claims of Christ. But that is not what Jesus is talking about here. Here Jesus is talking about our responsibility as individuals and as groups to so love all other true Christians that the world will have no valid reason for saying that we are not Christians.

### **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 they all may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” In this, his high priestly prayer. Jesus prays, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast 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 men in general. Verse 9 makes this clear: “I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.” 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 21<sup>st</sup> verse, when he prays for oneness, the “they” he is referring to are the true Christians.

Notice, however, that verse 21 says, “That they all may be one . . .” The emphasis, interestingly enough, is exactly the same as in John 13 – not on a part of true Christians, but on 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”* This is the final apologetic.

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 is not a Christian. Here Jesus is stating something else which 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?

Look at it again. Jesus is not saying that Christians should judge each other (as to their being Christian or not) on this basis. Please notice this with tremendous care. The church is to judge whether a man is a Christian on the basis of his doctrine, the prepositional content of his faith, and then his credible profession of faith. When a man comes before a local church that is doing

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its job, he will be quizzed on the content of what he believes. If, for example, a church is conducting a heresy trial (the New Testament indicates there are to be heresy trials in the church of Christ), the question of heresy will turn on the content of the man's doctrine. The church has a right to judge, in fact it is commanded to judge, a man on the content of what he believes and teaches.

But we cannot expect the world to judge that way, because the world cares nothing about doctrine. And that is especially true in the second half of the 20th century when on the basis of their epistemology, men no longer believe even in the possibility of absolute truth. And if we are surrounded by a world which no longer believes in the concept of truth, certainly we cannot expect people to have any interest in whether a man's doctrine is correct or not.

But Jesus did give the mark that will arrest the attention of the world, even the attention of the modern man who says he is just a machine. Because every man is made in the image of God and has, therefore, aspirations for love, there is something that can be in every geographical climate – in every point of time—which cannot fail to arrest his attention.

What is it? The love that true Christians show for each other and not just for their own party.

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