

The Mark of a Christian

Excerpts from “The Mark of the Christian” by Francis Schaeffer

Christians have not always presented a pretty picture to the world. Too often they have failed to show the beauty of love, the beauty of Christ, the holiness of God, and the world has turned away. Is there then no way to make the world look again—this time at true Christianity? Must Christians continue to stand with arms folded, presenting to men and women a tarnished image of God—a shattered body of Christ? How should we show the world that we are Christians?

Through the centuries, people have displayed many different symbols intended to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, and even had special haircuts. But there is a much better sign — 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 made clear what was to be the distinguishing mark of the Christian until His return: A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:33-35)

Notice that what He says here is not a statement or a fact. It is a command which includes a condition: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. And if this is involved, if you obey, you will wear the badge that Christ gave. But since this is a command, it can be violated. The point: while it is possible to be a Christian without showing the mark; if we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians, we must show the mark. Speaking to the church some years later, the same John who wrote the account above says: This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.(1 John 3:11) John in effect says: Don't forget this... don't forget this! This command was given to us by Christ while He was still on earth. This is to be your mark.

Loving Our Brothers and Sisters

If Jesus had commanded so strongly that we love all people as our neighbors, then how important it is especially to love our fellow Christians. If we are told to love all people as our neighbors then surely we can understand how overwhelmingly important it is that all men and women be able to see an observable love for those with whom we have these special ties. The apostle Paul makes the double obligation clear in Galatians 6:10: Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. He does not negate the command to do good to all people. But it is still not meaningless to add, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. 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.

The Quality of Our Love

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 have loved you. [Jesus says] The love he exhibited is to be our standard. We are to love all true Christians as Christ has loved us. When we consider this, either of two things can happen: We can just say, “I see! I see!” and we can make a little banner and write on it, “We Love All Christians!” and show it off when anyone looks at us. How ugly. Or we can find something exceedingly more profound — something that will take a great deal of time to cultivate; a great deal of thinking and praying about it.

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 people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another. In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present 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 they show to all true 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 what they say is true. And if it is, then they have a right to have said it.

Dealing With Our 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), 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. 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 a vital one. 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 mark which, if the world does not see, allows them to conclude, “This person 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.

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.

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.

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.

In short, we are to practice and exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God, for without this we grieve the Holy Spirit. Love—and the unity it attests to—is the mark Christ gave Christians have to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father. But each one should be careful how he

builds.

Relevant Scripture

Mark 12:29-30
Romans 5:8
Romans 12:17-21
1 John 4:10

Questions for Discussion

- What aspects of the excerpt surprised you, encouraged you, or challenged you?
- God is the source of love. With this understanding, is there anything in your life that need to change in order to better connect with God? The more specific the more dynamic.
- Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-7. What areas do you need to on in your relationship so that you can better live a life of love, as reflected in these verses? How can you do this?
- How can you be accountable to live a life of love right now? Can you think of anyone who could hold you accountable?
- Ask yourself often, "what do I do and who do I do it for?"