

Consecrated, Not Constrained

by Dean Taylor

The Church needs to return to the spirit of the apostolic times, speaking decisively to the world without losing its first love.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 23:17, John 13:34, Acts 2:46, Romans 8:36, Philippians 1:27, Revelation 2:5

Topics: "Self Denial", "Sacrificial Love"

Description

Dean Taylor preaches on the importance of self-denial and consecration in the Christian life, using the story of David's men fetching water for him as an offering to the Lord as an example. He emphasizes the need for the Church to demonstrate sacrificial love and unity, contrasting it with the self-gratifying culture of today. Taylor highlights the power of self-sacrificing love demonstrated by Jesus and the early church, urging believers to seek God's direction and act decisively without losing their first love.

Transcript

Wearied by the continual battles with the Philistine armies, exasperated by the heat of the harvest-time sun, David's army waited in the caves outside Bethlehem, observing the Philistine army down below them. David, surveying his occupied homeland, let out a cry, "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem." Hearing this cry, three of David's favorite and strongest men broke through the Philistine army, fought their way to the well, drew the precious chalice of water, and made their way back to their arid king. David, astounded by this extravagant display of loyalty, devotion and honor, took the precious gift and poured it out as an offering to the Lord saying, "Be it far from me, O LORD, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?" (2 Sam 23:17)

Nothing constrained David to perform this curious oblation. To David, it was a sanctified drink offering to the Lord. Even though the reason for this act of devotion was apparently motivated by his concern for the safety and well-being of his dearest men, he did not feel coerced to offer the cup. He was consecrated, not constrained.

Today, in our self-gratifying culture, the act of denying oneself for the sake of someone else is seldom seen. More than just out of fashion, self-denial is in some ways seen as suspect, being looked at as weak, indecisive or compromising. I can remember hearing snappy commercial slogans very early in my life such as "grab the gusto," "you deserve a break today," or even "because you're worth it." These slogans, buried in my subconscious, compete with the teachings of Jesus in determining my direction and behavior. Without the grace of God, I would have long since been turned over to these ideas.

Our nation's venerated desire for "the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" has paradoxically brought in just the opposite. This pursuit of life has produced the unprecedented killing of millions of unborn babies; this liberty has brought the nation to crisis levels of prison overcapacity; and this pursuit of happiness has led to more money expended per year on anti-depressant medications than probably half of the world's average yearly income.

Death to Self

Christianity teaches that self-denial and death brings life. Biblical teachings such as, "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Rom. 8:36), and "Behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3), do not promise a worldly advantage. Certainly, they do not echo the agonizing grasp for life attempted by the world. Paul proclaimed this truth in I Cor. 1:18, "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

The testing ground for true self-denial is usually best manifested in our interaction with others. The perfect example of this life of sacrifice was demonstrated by Jesus. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11). God ordained that the ultimate living witness of this love and selfless life be demonstrated in His church here on earth. Jesus commanded the Church, "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 13:34-35).

The early church joined themselves in self-sacrificing love, to unanimously commit to seek God for His promised blessing. Acts tells us that they "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:15). God was faithful and poured out his Spirit on His expecting bride. Strengthened by the Pentecostal outpouring, the Church was mighty. Led by the Spirit, they were "continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). This church was powerful, directed, unified and confident. It is written that this church effectually "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

By and large, the Church today has lost this unified voice. Jesus prayed that we would "all be one." It would appear by this prayer that one of the main reasons Jesus wanted us to be united is so that we would demonstrate a clear testimony to the world. Jesus went on to pray "that the world may know that thou hast sent me" (John 17:23). Tainted by Catholic ecumenism, modern evangelical relativism, and secular humanism, Christian unity within a Bible-believing church today must navigate a tenuous and unpopular path.

Scriptural Vision

Many Old Testament saints prophesied of this powerful, unified, world-changing gathering called the Church. In Jeremiah 32:38-39, God says the following concerning those who would some day become partakers of the New Covenant, "They shall be my people, and I will be their God. And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever, for the good of them, and of their children after them." Many New Testament verses echo Christ's command of unity and brotherly self-sacrifice:

"Let your conduct be as it becometh the gospel of Christ, that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Philippians 2:2).

"There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all, and in all put on love, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also ye are called in one body" (Colossians 3:11, 14-15).

"Be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous, not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, but on the contrary, blessing, knowing that ye are called to this, that ye should inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:8-9).

All that said, just how does the Bible prescribe unity among the Church today, particularly within a local body? How does a church, while both protecting liberty of conscience and guarding against secular assimilation, move together decidedly with a clear voice to a very ambiguous world? I believe the answer is the same today as it was in apostolic times; the Church needs to once again come together unanimously, seeking the promises of God with just as much simplicity and tenacity of heart as they did in the Book of Acts. Then, strengthened by the grace and blessing of God, allow God to motivate and quicken the Church into brotherly self-denial and action. It was just such a spirit that motivated David to pour out that precious cup of Bethlehemic water. The church needs what David had, and that is a spirit that is consecrated, but not constrained.

You're Not Heavy--

You're My Brother

Perhaps we should all take a time of some serious self-examination. All too often, the Church more likely resembles a dysfunctional marriage than a unified one. This is a marriage where the husband and wife both stubbornly wait for the other spouse to bend to them before there will be any peace in the home--and of course, there is no peace in such a home. A dysfunctional church is much like this, often typified by a gathering of strong individualists, all stubbornly waiting for the rest of the church to agree with their particular perspective or agenda, and of course, this also never happens. Unfortunately, the focus of carnal churches tends to be on the satisfaction of the individual. In contrast, Paul said to the Church at Rome, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself..." (Roman 15:1-3).

The word translated here as "ought" (bastazo) is a precious word in the Greek. It means "to be a debtor". Paul uses the same word in Romans 1:14, "I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the barbarians." So in other words, here in Romans 15, it is saying that our debt is "to bear the infirmities of the weak." This word is used more than twenty-five times in the New Testament. Interestingly, it does not communicate the idea of tolerating someone's inadequacy, rather, it refers to carrying someone's load--of shouldering his burden.

There is an old battlefield story that very poignantly illustrates this picture. Two brothers were in the Army together in a foreign war. They were on maneuvers, traveling through a field, when they suddenly came under enemy attack. One of the men was severely shot and wounded, and he falls to the ground, most likely to die. The other brother, who was almost out of range of the gunfire by now, saw his fallen brother and turns back, risking his own life to try to rescue him. The wounded man yelled at his brother that he was too heavy. To this, the other brother simply replied, "You're not heavy...you're my brother!"

An Unhealthy Fear of Direction

Unfortunately, the idea of a decided agreement among a church body, particularly an agreement about real, practical issues that pertain to our everyday lives, can often conjure up all kinds of bad experiences from the past. Memories of unrealistic solutions and damaging, arbitrary judgments, can lead a person to abandon any kind of church direction and "throw out the baby with the bathwater", so to speak. Some feel that the only kind of unity requested in the prayer of Jesus, found in John 17, was concerning theological issues. However, while theological unity is important, if the main reason for unity is, "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me," then it is obvious that our Lord had something more in mind than mere mental agreement.

The world doesn't really care if we can tell the difference between "predestination" and "free will"--or whether we are "pre-trib" or "post-trib." However, they can see if we are united, if we demonstrate love for our enemies, if we stand against materialism, if we are unmoved by the styles and fashions of the day, and if we boldly proclaim these truths on their street corners and in their work places. As Leonard Ravenhill put it, "the world is not looking for a new definition of Christianity, they're looking for a new demonstration of Christianity." Without question, the Church of Jesus Christ today must speak decisively, unambiguously and authoritatively to the world around us.

How a church goes about attempting to accomplish this great task usually serves as the touchstone which distinguishes between different methods of church government: i.e. century old, unalterable standards on the one side--liberty, license and purposed ambiguity on the other. Adherents to each position usually hold their to view with ardent tenacity.

A Biblical Example

A good look at how the early apostolic church lived out their decisions on practical issues affecting church life is essential. In the apostolic church, there were deliberate efforts to allow for insignificant differences. On the other hand, they were not afraid to make clear applications when they heard from the Holy Spirit. In both cases, whether it was purposed liberty or a discerned direction, the Church was encouraged to walk through all decisions in unity. Paul gave clear warnings against both extremes of church government. When responding to the intolerant Judaizers who were coming from outside of the congregation and stirring up the brethren to obey the Jewish law to be saved, Paul said, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: ... Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men" (Col 2:16-22)? On the other hand, when rebuking the Corinthian church for having a decisive spirit among themselves and falling into different cliques and parties he said, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the

same judgment" (I Cor 1:10). What's most notable about this verse is the way Paul includes both mind and judgment. What he's saying here, is that he wants this indecisive and factious church not only to agree in their theology (mind), but also in how this theology was to be carried out (judgment). The rest of the epistle further illustrates this directive.

Bad Testimonies

In my life, I have seen abuses on both sides of church administration. From rigid legalism to licensed licentiousness, both extremes have worked to dishonor the name of Christ. Without a doubt, I have never seen a more conspicuous display of both these abuses than right here in Lancaster County. On any given drive home from church, both extremes are painfully demonstrated. As I look to my left, I must be careful to dodge the scores of bicycling, conservative young men and women, zooming past my van, after their lightning fast uniform change in their church basement. Fleeing the church house with hockey sticks, baseball bats and fishing poles, or just congregating at some obviously inappropriate and unsanctioned youth gathering, it doesn't appear that they received much from the Sunday service.

I'll never forget one particularly sad Sunday that stands out in my mind. While driving home from church, a group of about 15 "conservative" boys had congregated right in front of the covered bridge and began shouting obscenities into my van as I passed. I took it as an opportunity, parked the van, grabbed my Bible, and got out to preach to them, as my wife and children watched and prayed. As I did, they were all heckling me in Pennsylvania Dutch. But every now and then they would say something in English like, "Why are you preaching to us? We went to church today!" Others would say something like, "Why preach? We are obviously Christians--just look at us!"

Then at other heartbreaking times, behind the closed doors of the counseling rooms, I hear the horrible confessions from boys just like these--their stories break my heart. Boys from seemingly good homes, often confessing sins to me that I never even knew the world would commit. Most of the testimonies are all painfully similar. They nearly all say that they looked good on the outside, but inside they were as lost as the Devil. Hearing it all, I cry, I question, I groan, and then I ask the Lord--I beg the Lord for the answer...why?

However, just when I am tempted to completely throw out this "plain" or conservative approach to Church life, I begin look to my right, as I pass an Evangelical church with an advertisement on their church sign for a "Youth Pajama Party" night service. Next, I am told of the foot washing service our friends attended in Texas where, instead of washing feet, they decided to manicure one another's toe nails, posting the theme verse on the wall, "How Beautiful Are the Feet of Them..." I am reminded of the divorce, lawsuits, licentiousness and war-loving attitudes that permeate this approach to Christianity. I think of the recent failures of the big preachers in Colorado, and countless others, and it makes my heart sink. These recent failures cause me to recall the litany of fallen evangelists and preachers that have scandalized the Church throughout my lifetime.

Thinking back, I remember being there with them. Remorsefully, I recall how all too often, from the pastor to the pews we all, by and large, "drank in iniquity like water." Talking to the Christians in these circles today is very depressing. As I talk to them, their testimonies are also very similar. They usually all see their salvation as sure, only on the basis that they once said a "sinner's prayer", and as far as they are concerned, that should just about do it. Not surprisingly, they are all usually well versed in the doctrines of Christian liberty, and the dangers of judging your brother. But sadly, they are feeble and given over to all

manner of lusts and worldly pursuits, and to their shame, often in excesses which commonly even surpass the world around them. It has become a common known fact, for example, that the divorce rate among professing Christians now exceeds that of the world.

Vision

Needless to say, something, somewhere has gone terribly wrong. On the one hand, well-meaning, conservative Christians have missed something in the propagation of the faith and, as a result, have lost their first love. On the other hand, the opposite extreme of Christian independence has reduced the vast majority of the Church today to a voiceless, directionless, social club, all in the name of Christian liberty.

I find myself between two extremes. As a conservative Christian brotherhood, I feel we have got to find our place in the midst of it all. There is no doubt that the enemy has come in like a flood. And we, as a church, must count on God's promise to raise up a standard against it. Jesus promised, "I will build my Church..." Do we believe Him? Can the Church once again return to the spirit of the apostolic times, speaking decisively to the world without losing its first love?

A Blueprint

The 15th Chapter of Acts provides an interesting glimpse at the manner in which the early Church dealt with a very sticky situation that was threatening the unity of the Church at that time. They had to decide which Jewish laws were going to be held on the Gentile believers. Obvious laws like murder and theft were not even mentioned. However, they felt that some of the gray areas like circumcision needed to be addressed.

Several things can be discerned from their dialogue. First of all, we can see that they had real discrepancies, differing opinions and even debates. This does not mean that they were not a Spirit-filled church, it only means that they were real men, just like we are today. Another thing we can glean from this council is that it was not some mystical voice from heaven that spoke to them there. They each shared their heart freely. The impressive part is that finally, once all views were fairly represented--once all the disputing, debating, and dialoguing was done--the Holy Spirit placed it on the heart of the brotherhood to agree on a clear direction for the church. I would recommend that everyone read through this chapter and just study it a bit. This really is a very insightful account.

Nevertheless, the end result of their council was that the Gentiles were only going to maintain the four sojourner/holiness laws from Lev. 17 and 18, "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:19).

Advocates of Christian license often quote Acts Chapter 15 as a justification that all outward restrictions and practices were abolished by the Jerusalem council through this pronouncement. As impressive as this pronouncement is, if we are not careful, we could miss one of the most important parts of the council. Verses 8 and 9 go on to say, "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."

If the four things listed by the council (i.e. pollutions of idols, fornication, things strangled, and blood) were the only things that they felt that God would speak to the Church about, then there would have been

absolutely no justification for Paul to have spoken so dogmatically on subjects such as marriage, divorce, modesty, head coverings, gossip, war and nonresistance, submission to authority, idolatry, covetousness, etc., etc.

The key to this passage is not so much that the Jerusalem church was taking away things that the Gentile churches should be concerned about, but rather, that they were proclaiming their confidence that a Spirit-led brotherhood has the power to discern these things. Be it Jewish or Gentile, a real New Testament church has the Holy Spirit to speak to them, teach them and practically guide them through all parts of life. The Jerusalem church said here that the whole reason that they were able to take away the Jewish law from the Gentiles was because they were given the Holy Ghost. They knew that Jesus had promised that He would send the Comforter, and that He would lead them into all truth. They proclaimed that this was as true for the Gentiles as it was for the Jews. Apparently, they trusted that all the issues that would come up in the Gentile brotherhood could be handled by the Holy Spirit speaking to their brotherhood and guiding them.

Can We Hear From God Like That Today?

In Revelation Chapter 2 Jesus is mentioned, walking amidst the churches--amidst the candle stands: "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks."

This account is given by John as if Jesus were giving an inventory of a few of the early Churches. As He does this, he blesses them for their faithfulness, but He also rebukes them for their lack of discernment and lack of action. Some of the things mentioned are timeless: materialism, lukewarmness and losing our first love. Some things, however, were more specific issues which related particularly to the church of that day. For instance, they were rebuked for not addressing and dealing with problems such as eating meat sacrificed to idols, the Nicolaitan heresy and the adulteress teacher called Jezebel. Sounding throughout the judgment, Jesus repeatedly cries out, "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church!" "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church!"

Can We Hear?

Does Jesus still want a church today that can hear His voice, and act practically and decisively without losing its first love? I believe He does. Yet, we all know the dangers. John warns that if a church continues to turn a deaf ear to Christ, He will eventually remove their lamp stand. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Rev. 2:5).

Are we, in our fellowships, seeking to hear from God like this? Do we hear? Not, do we have a doctrine that we hear, but do we hear? Are we acting on what He is saying to us? There is such a need for churches today that still have a lampstand. There is such a need for real Christian brotherhood today, for a living Christian brotherhood that can hear from God, get a clear direction from the Holy Spirit, and go decisively in a direction--without apology.

What If I Don't Agree?

Any Godly man who has ever walked with any true brotherhood for any length of time has surely faced this dilemma, "What if I don't agree?" Did everyone in Acts Chapter 15 just suddenly come to complete

agreement? It certainly does not appear that they did. What does seem clear is that these men had a true faith in God, one which seems to have enabled them to be Spirit-led, and lay down their own agendas. Remember, in the Christian faith to lose is to win and to die is gain. Herein lies the real test; brotherhood is easy when everyone agrees with me! Brothers, death to self is the key to a successful doctrine of Brotherhood! Of course, this does not mean compromising God's Word. There are times when a brother simply must separate himself. But, too often, the things that separate us are not so fundamental. Sometimes, walking with a brotherhood requires giving up something that is very dear to us. This is where the spirit of David comes in--consecrated, and not constrained. Something that could only be described as heavenly, otherworldly and absolutely spiritual happens when a man truly consecrates an action to God. This solemn act can mysteriously transform the most common act into a Holy oblation.

The Circumcision of Timothy

There has probably never been anyone on the earth who has understood the doctrine of circumcision better than Paul. Receiving a direct revelation from Jesus, Himself, he said to the Galatians, "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Gal 5:6). But even though he knew this, and knew it to be true by divine revelation, look what he did:

Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:1-3)

Knowing full well that circumcision meant nothing, but being keenly aware of the sensitivity of some of his Jewish brethren back home, he took Timothy and he circumcised him! I can't imagine being in Paul's shoes, and explaining to his younger brother, Timothy, that the only reason he was doing this was for the sake of peace, because of where the local Jewish brethren stood on this issue--but that's what he did! Timothy was able to experience real Christian brotherhood on a level that we may never have the opportunity to do. Now, that is consecrated, not constrained! --And we think we have to give up so much!

The Beautiful Sound of Sweet Fellowship

I would like to leave you with this thought to ponder. There is a curious law of musical physics that beautifully illustrates this concept of self-denial in a fellowship. In the early days of musical composition and orchestration, musicians were faced with a very frustrating and precarious phenomenon. When tuning a musical instrument, such as a piano, precisely to each individual note's perfect pitch, they were puzzled to find that this would render playing in some keys painfully out of tune. In an attempt to remedy this dilemma, some instrument makers even invented harpsichords with two cumbersome sets of keys. However, in the 1700's, J.S. Bach realized this problem and ingeniously devised a way to allow the organs and harpsichords to play beautifully in tune in every key. He made the fascinating discovery that if every note were bent just slightly off of its own perfect pitch, then the instruments could be played successfully in every key, with beautiful intonation and harmony!

Brethren, let's remember, Jesus is walking among our churches crying, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Oh, Church, let's listen! Let us hear from God, bow our hearts to one another, and go forward in a spirit that is like that of David and Timothy, a spirit that is consecrated, not constrained!

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments. Like the dew of Hermon, and like the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion, for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore" (Psalm 133).

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