

A New Commandment (John 13:31 b-35)

By James L. Pleitz

James L. Pleitz, 54, is pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Tex. Formerly he was pastor of churches in Arkansas and Florida. His education includes B.A. from Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Ark.; B.D., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.; and honorary Doctor of Divinity from Ouachita Baptist University and Stetson University, DeLand, Fla.

A NEW COMMANDMENT John 13:31b-35

There are more than ten commandments in the Bible. Not all of the commandments are found in the 20th chapter of Exodus. When mention is made of the commandments, we usually think of the ten beginning with "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." But there are more than ten commandments in the Bible.

The most important commandment is not found in the Old Testament, but in the New. It was given by Jesus Christ to his disciples just prior to his death on the cross. Jesus did not write his new commandment on a table of stone, but on the hearts of men. Christ said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

The call to love God was not new. Twice daily the pious Jews recited the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5). "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

The call to love others was not new. In the 19th chapter of Leviticus the Lord instructed Moses regarding how the people were to relate to each other. The climax comes in the 18th verse, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 18:19).

When a lawyer asked Jesus the question, "What is the great commandment in the law?" (Matt. 22:36), he expected Christ to answer by quoting one of the ten. Instead, Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22:37-39).

It is clear that the call to love was not new, nor was the call to love others, but rather there was a *new demonstration* and a *new quality* of love to which Christ called them and a *new resource* available to them for loving one another. Jesus said, "Love one another—as I have loved you!" This is the strongest statement in the entire Bible about love. It was the way Jesus had loved those disciples that demonstrated most clearly how they were to love one another. And it was his love for them that would be the *enabling source* for their love. Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Jesus furnishes his disciples both *the model and the power* for loving one another.

Jesus went on to say that the most convincing evidence that we are indeed his disciples is that we love one another. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). There is no greater proof of our discipleship, not the performance of miracles or the speaking with gifted tongues or moving mountains, but love.

Many of us have been blessed by the books of Creath Davis. He writes, "The greatest proof of the presence of the living Christ within us is not that we think alike—but that we love one another like Christ loved us. Love reflects the reality of the life of God in us more clearly than any other single factor."

The apostle John says it in this way, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God;

for God is love . . . beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . if a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: For he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 John 4:7-8, 11-12, 20-21).

This means that true orthodoxy, from a biblical perspective, must first have an orthodoxy of spirit—which is love—before it can truly have an orthodoxy of belief. The first test of our orthodoxy is in reality the test of love!

The Bible makes it clear in I Corinthians 13 that there is nothing we can do, however good in itself, and however good in its consequences, which cannot be perverted if it's not done in love.

In his play, *Murder In The Cathedral*, T. S. Elliot has as his hero Thomas Becket. Becket dies as a martyr for his faith but not before he is sorely tempted to die for a number of selfish motives. However, in the end he dies for the right motive—the love of God. Perhaps you read the play and perhaps you remember this line:

This then is the greatest treason

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

That line has haunted me. "The right deed for the wrong reason."

The people who heard Jesus tell the parable of the good Samaritan would, in all likelihood, never have questioned the orthodoxy of the priest or the Levite but they would have felt strongly that the Samaritan was a heretic. But the whole point of Jesus' story was that the Samaritan had something all-important that both the priest and the Levite missed—love.

We are living in a day of many medical marvels including the use of an artificial heart. Recently a young child wrote Dr. Debaquey, the famous heart surgeon in Houston, and asked, "Dr. Debaquey, is there any love in an artificial heart?"

I am not sure about love in an artificial heart, but one thing is certain, there is a lot of love in the heart that has been touched and changed by Jesus Christ.

"By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Thirty-eight years ago God called me into the ministry. I was educated at a Baptist college. Ouachita in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. I did my seminary work at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. For thirty-eight years I have pastored churches up and down the land. I know hundreds of Baptist preachers, and I can honestly say that I do not know one who does not believe the bible—all of it—to be the word of God. I do not know one who does not believe in the inspiration of the scriptures. I do not know a preacher who does not believe in the virgin birth, the vicarious death, the resurrection, or the second coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In a word we are *orthodoxy*. But I fear that many of us have forgotten the spiritual necessity of loving one another. We must remember that love is not an option but rather an imperative—a command of our Lord!

There is still a lot of talk about the animosity within the convention. When people find out that I am a Southern Baptist they frequently ask, "Which side are you on?" The very question must be offensive to our Lord.

The early church was far from perfect, but there was enough love among those Christians that a pagan world took note of the way they loved each other. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of talk today about how Southern Baptists love each other.

Christ said, "Love one another—as I have loved you . . ."

How has Christ loved us? What does the New Testament say about *how* he loves us?

Starting with our initial experience of God's grace we would have to say that *the love of Christ is a forgiving love*. When we know that we are truly forgiven, truly accepted, truly loved, then we have the freedom to be the people God has called us to be. And to respond to the forgiving love of Christ is to experience the power to forgive one another.

The love of Christ is an *affirming love*. Jesus always looked for the best in people. He saw people not on the basis of simply what they were, but what they could become by the grace of God. The very first time Jesus met Simon Peter, he said to him, "Thou art Simon (which means "Shifting Sand") the son of Jona: Thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, "A Stone" (John 1:42). Christ saw in Peter what Peter could not see in himself—the capacity to become a man of great strength and stability. No wonder Peter followed him. He had never had anyone affirm him so strongly. All of us have weaknesses as human beings, but wouldn't it be marvelous if we cultivated the gift of affirmation—of looking for the best in one another.

The love of Jesus Christ is a *longsuffering, patient love*. What patience he had with his disciples! They misunderstood him again and again, but Christ kept on with them until they learned the truth which he *was* and which he *taught*. In John 14 we have two such examples which occurred near the time of his death. Jesus had spent his entire ministry teaching those disciples the truth about himself being the way to God. He said to them on this occasion "Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know," Thomas saith unto him, 'Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?' " Jesus again patiently responded, "I am the way, the truth and the life: No man cometh unto the Father but by me." Philip still had not gotten the picture and he said, "Lord, show us the Father . . ." Once more Jesus responded, "Have I been so long with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father . . ." Obviously, one characteristic of God being reflected in this very dialogue was patience.

Wouldn't it be fantastic if we learned under the tutelage of Christ how to be patient with one another!

(My big problem is not being patient with the congregation. Oh, I may boil inside, but most of the time they will never know it. My big problem is being patient with my family.)

The love of our Lord is sacrificial. It was because of his great love for us that he endured the cross on our behalf. Those outstretched arms nailed to that cross reveals the most dramatic statement of love that the world has ever witnessed. In his submission to that ghastly deed Jesus was shouting down through the ages to all men everywhere, "I love you this much!"

To be caught up in his great love will eventually make us willing to lay down our lives, in whatever fashion necessary, for one another. The Christian faith has many martyrs. We may not in our country ever have to face physical death for our faith. But we will and we do face the need to die to self and to give ourselves sacrificially, if need be, to enable our brothers in Christ to be all they can be.

Sacrificial love serves! Christ had set the stage for giving his disciples this new commandment by washing the disciples' feet. John writes, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love . . . Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God . . . he wrapped a towel around his waist . . . and began to wash his disciples' feet . . ." (John 13:1b-5).

The situation which prompted the Lord to wash his disciples' feet was the power struggle in which they were engaged. They had been jockeying for position, arguing about who would be number one in the kingdom. They had their eyes on the places of prominence and preeminence. They were on some ego trip when their Lord and Master did for them the thing they could not do for themselves—stoop and serve.

As Baptists, we don't believe in footwashing as such; but if it would help us love each other and teach us the great lesson of servanthood, it would not be a bad idea for us to have such a service in this convention hall.

Christ said, "Love one another as I have loved you."