

“True Love in a Fake News World”

Romans 12:9-21

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I took a risk and ventured a sermon title today. But the one that’s now in the bulletin is a change from earlier in the week. The original title was “True Christians in a Fake News World.” The first thing that prompted the change was a fierce debate with an epistemologist, who also happens to be a middle schooler living in my house.

8th grader: “That’s a terrible sermon title.”

Me: “I think it’s kind of clever, myself.”

8th grader: “It’s just so arrogant of you to think *you* get to say who is a *true* Christian.”

Me: “It’s not me saying it. It’s the Apostle Paul.”

8th grader: “Well, then, it’s arrogant of Paul.”

Me: “But isn’t it arrogant of you to say you know more about what it means to be a Christian than the Apostle Paul?”

8th grader: “Why do Christians always think they have to exclude people to make themselves right? I get tired of Christians saying they have the truth and nobody else does. It’s hypocritical.”

Me: “I’m not saying nobody else has truth. But don’t we *have* to say that some things are clearly outside the bounds of what it means to be Christian? Charlottesville is a case in point. Some of those neo-Nazis are using Christian symbols to claim higher ground for their hate. Can’t we say clearly that to be a Christian means to reject white supremacy? That there’s no place in our faith for that? In fact, don’t we have a moral responsibility to say unequivocally that if you’re spewing that kind of hate you are not a Christian?”

8th grader: “Are you telling me you need Paul to condemn that? Dad, please.”

The 8th grader was finished with the conversation but it continued all week in my head. If we’re so reluctant to exclude some ideas and ideologies from what it means to be a Christian, then what does the word even mean?

Isn’t that failure to distinguish opinion from truth part of the crisis that we are in right now as a nation? A crisis that has created the conditions whereby a sitting President can claim a moral equivalence between white supremacists and anti-racist protestors. A crisis where scientific evidence can be dismissed as partisanship while falsity is recast as fact. A crisis that leaves a great swath of the church hesitant to say anything definitive such as you can’t call yourself a follower of Jesus and affirm white supremacy. The two are incompatible. Isn’t the church’s failure to define the boundaries of Christian identity and behavior part of the problem?

Sometimes the most important way to define what the Christian faith is, is by declaring what it’s not. The confessing churches in South Africa certainly believed

so when they affirmed together in the Belhar Confession, “we reject any doctrine which. . . sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.” “We believe that any teaching which attempts to legitimate. . . forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his colleagues who resisted the rise of Nazism in the German Church took a similar stance in 1934 when they gathered together to oppose the German Christians – the Nazi takeover of the churches. So many brown-shirted Nazis were bused in to the church’s convention that previous fall that it had come to be known as “The Brown Synod.”¹ “Jesus Christ is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death,” those faithful resisters wrote in their declarative moment. “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation. . . . We reject the false doctrine, as though the state could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church’s vocation as well.”

So, yes, I say to the epistemologists reluctant to say what is truth and what is not, sometimes Paul and Jesus and Moses do state clearly what counts as Christian and what doesn’t. Like these words from the letter to the Roman Church - “The Marks of the True Christian” - as my Bible titles it. A true Christian hates what is evil and holds fast to what is good. True Christians love each other with affection, outdoing each other with respect. A true Christian doesn’t lose the flame of hope but rejoices in the power of the Spirit even when we suffer. A true Christian is patient in suffering, perseveres with prayer, is generous when there is need, offers hospitality to strangers. A true Christian doesn’t look down on anyone but associates with people who have been left out, persecuted, hated. A true Christian resists violence with non-violence, trusting that even when violence prevails for a time, no one can outrun the long arm of God’s justice. A true Christian doesn’t even have enemies – not for long.

By Thursday night, I was sure I had won the argument with the 8th grade epistemologist living now inside my head. And then a bunch of self-proclaimed evangelical Christians released a statement declaring that anyone who believes that being gay or lesbian is anything other than sin cannot be a faithful Christian.² That

¹ “80% of the delegates wore the brown shirts of the Nazi uniform. . . . It was less like a Synod than a Nazi rally.” In reaction to the Brown Synod, Bonhoeffer and others birthed the Pastors’ Emergency League which led to the Confessing Church movement, the authors of the Barmen Declaration. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 2010, pp. 187 – 191.

² WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness. WE DENY that

anyone who seeks to understand the challenges that transgender people face instead of excluding them from Christian fellowship is apostate. It was exactly what the epistemologist had warned about. The Bible, drawn out like a sword to separate people from each other all because a bunch a part of the Christian family thought that during a devastating hurricane, only weeks after Charlottesville, the most important crisis before the church is queer people. The statement wasn't that different from the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar Confession in structure or style. The only difference is that instead of defending those historically on the losing side of power, it doubled down on them.

And I had to face the fact that maybe I'm just not smarter than an 8th grader. Because she is absolutely right about the risk. If you define the truth by a process of exclusion, you risk just using the Bible, using the Good News to elevate yourself by standing on someone else. You risk excluding the wrong things. You risk harming other people when you are wrong.

Only then did I discover that the title the interpreters gave to this section of text – “The Marks of the True Christian - that might be off. There's no verb in the first verse that makes up this section of Scripture. It's just the words “love” and “genuine.” There's no verb. So what our Bible translates as “let love be genuine” can also be translated “Genuine love is:” Genuine love is abhorring evil. Genuine love is clinging to the good. Genuine love is being affectionate to one another. Genuine love is outdoing one another in honor. Genuine love doesn't burn out because its fueled by God's Spirit, serving the Lord. Genuine love is rejoicing in hope, persevering in affliction, being devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, pursuing hospitality.

And then I realized, the argument that Paul is making isn't an argument primarily to define Christians, as if our identity is at the root of his concern.³ It's an attempt to define God's love. To show what God's love is like. How God's love can be known and experienced. How God's love stays real and relevant, powerful and active in a time where frightened followers of Jesus are wondering where God is. Are wondering, how can God be trusted when so many different people seem to assert their claims are superior? How God's love never includes violence because it's the opposite of violence. How God's love doesn't give up when the going gets tough but sticks with people and communities and their struggles with patience over time. How God's love overcomes.

That's the argument that Paul seems to make to the church. Not because his primary objective is to distinguish Christians from those who are not, but so the world can know what God's love really looks like. So the world can distinguish love

the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

³ Paul, in fact, never uses the term “Christian” in the New Testament Epistles which he authored. Some scholars believe the term “Christian” was first used derisively by those outside the church. Later, the church adopted the term. Paul more often uses terms such as “saints” or “believers,” or “assembly,” or “brothers and sisters.”

from raw power cloaked in religious language. So the world can celebrate God's love, engage it, practice it, experience it, trust it.

And here's the hard conclusion that I've come to in a world that calls facts fake news, and perpetuates lies as truth: there's no way for anyone to avoid making a truth claim that might be wrong. What we say about God in the church might be wrong. What Paul says about God in the Bible – it could be wrong. No human being, no human institution has the power of ultimate verification. There's no way around it. Everytime you wake up in the morning and decide how to spend your day you are making decisions about what is real and what is not. You are making decisions about what is important and what is not. You are making a decision about which of the gods this world worships you are going to follow that day. The only difference between Paul and some of us in that regard is that Paul is transparent about his truth claims. He lays it out there for anyone to see.

And while I wish there was a way to ensure that no truth claim could ever hurt another person, I can't come up with a way to make that desire anything more than a wish. You cannot say anything of importance without the risk of being wrong. You cannot make any significant choice about what is real, where you are going to spend your life, or whom you will serve without the possibility of living a lie. There is no failsafe way to live into truth.⁴

To live a life focused on the right things is to risk living it for the wrong things. Two things I can say from Paul's Gospel. The first is that everything must be measured against the grace and justice of Jesus Christ. Knowing what you know about Jesus and our time, where do you think Jesus is most active? Fighting white supremacists or LGBTQ people? Alleviating suffering in Houston or piling it on in Nashville?⁵

And second, the church doesn't win any of its truth claims by appeals that it makes to Scripture from the sidelines. None of the truth claims from Jesus, from Paul, from Bonhoeffer or from South Africa – none of those claims are made from a safe distance.

These truth claims are made by people willing to bear the cost of their truth-telling. Willing to suffer because they think the truth is worth it. Willing to die in the truth because living a lie is already its own kind of death.

It's why I will always trust words that seek to define the Gospel from anti-apartheid activists in South Africa or Nazi resisters in Germany more than from mostly white, privileged evangelicals condemning minority groups from Nashville. True love, according to Paul is being affectionate to one another. True love is outdoing one another in honor. True love doesn't burn out because its fueled by God's Spirit, serving the Lord. True love is rejoicing in hope, persevering in

⁴ For a deeper dive into the postmodern challenges of asserting truth without external means of verification see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press), 1994, especially "The Possibility of Truth: theology as testimony," pp. 372 – 377.

⁵ "The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ" says The Confession of 1967. Note that Scripture's role here is a functional one. The Bible is not the object of our worship. It rather points us to God, whom we come to know and worship in Christ *through* Scripture.

affliction, being devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, pursuing hospitality. That's what God's love looks like, if you believe Paul. That's what God's love looks like, if you believe the Bible. I'm willing to take a risk that they are right.