

**READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH**  
**Fidelity to the Truth and the Unity of the Body No. 3**  
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*Introduction*

After a pause of three weeks, we return now to the subject of this summer series on “Reading the Bible for All It’s Worth.” Remember what we have said so far. It is characteristic of the Bible to put its teaching in the form of polarities, a dialectic, if you will. We said that *dialectic* refers to the setting side by side and the interaction of what seem to be conflicting ideas. In the Bible, of course, the ideas do not actually conflict, but they are difficult for us to harmonize. They produce a tension between themselves that is uncomfortable for us to live with. Our tendency is to relax the tension by breaking off one of the poles, or, at least, by ignoring one of the poles. We pointed out that there is hardly a teaching in Holy Scripture that is not presented that way: divine sovereignty and human freedom, and justification by faith and the judgment according to works are just two prominent examples. In fact, virtually all of the Bible’s teaching of any theme has this dialectical quality to it.

The Christian life thus becomes a matter of holding in mind and then in our living two ideas, two truths, two realities that seem to want to fly apart from one another but must be held together; both must be served at the same time. And this is a true in Christian ethics – or behavior – as it is in Christian theology – or belief. The happy result of this way of reading the Bible is that we take *everything* from the Bible and lose nothing. We are champions of sovereign grace *and* human freedom, of justification by faith alone *and* the absolute necessity of good works, of the complete security of the believer in Christ *and* the very real danger of apostasy, of the complete equality of men and women in Christ and of the significance that the Bible attaches to gender distinctions, of the absolute obligation to turn the other cheek and to forgive seventy times seven *and* the need to take care not to cast our pearls before swine, and on and on as it goes.

Now, in succeeding Sunday evenings I want to explore this way of looking at the teaching of the Bible and reading the Bible and preaching the Bible by placing examples of this dialectic before you, some theological, some ethical. Tonight I want to begin with an ethical matter, a matter of Christian behavior. I thought to begin with it because it has been so much in our minds as we have observed the life of the church recently – whether our own *Presbyterian Church in America* or other churches. I am speaking of the tension produced in the Bible’s teaching between the opposite poles of fidelity to the truth on the one hand and on the other, the preservation of the unity of the church of Christ, the biblical dialectic of fidelity to the faith once delivered to the saints, as one pole, and charity and a spirit of love and grace toward those with whom we disagree as the other pole.

I chose this subject also because it serves as such a splendid example of the way in which our own personal and ecclesiastical history shapes our view of biblical teaching, especially by rendering us very susceptible to certain emphases and quite resistant to others. Once again our natural tendency is to resolve the tension we find in biblical teaching by finding a way to approve of one pole while ignoring the other.

There is no doubt that both purity and charity are emphatically required of Christians and of

churches in Holy Scripture.

I cut my teeth on the biblical demonstration of the obligation to remain pure in doctrine and faithful at all costs to the faith once delivered to the saints.

1. Paul in his letter to the Galatians uses the strongest conceivable language to abominate those who tamper with the gospel of Christ. Let them be accursed! And let there be no misunderstanding here. Paul was condemning so stridently views that have long circulated as the official teaching of Christian churches --[RC and Arminian]-- or have silently surfaced as the actual belief of many supposedly evangelical Christians and churches.
2. In 2 Corinthians 6 he requires Christians to remain separate from entangling associations with unbelievers and in 1 Corinthians 5, he tells them not to associate with professing Christians who are unfaithful in doctrine or in life.
3. In many texts we are commanded, as Jude has it, "to contend for the faith" and this means, in one place, driving out or giving no entrance to false teachers, in another place disciplining those who have entertained false doctrine, and in another place publicizing the errors of those whose doctrinal declension is troubling the church.
4. Everywhere we have warnings against false doctrine and false living and we are put on guard lest these find a foothold in the church: "Do you not know: a little leaven leavens the whole lump!"
5. Throughout the history of Israel we are given to see the prophets condemning the people of God for their accommodations -- in doctrine and in life and worship -- with the world round about them. Later we see Paul actually shaking the dust off his feet against members of the church (the Jews) who would not embrace the true teaching of Christ.

But, at the same time, we have another set of very emphatic texts that create a tension with the emphasis on purity of doctrine and life.

1. There are texts, the Lord's great prayer in John 17 chief among them, that teach us that maintaining the unity of the church is to be a supreme interest of Christians because it is of God himself and because that unity is one of the principle means of demonstrating the reality of the incarnation and the truth of the Gospel.
2. We have the Apostle Paul's lengthy instruction to the effect that a large number of differences of opinion between Christians are to be born charitably and cannot be made the basis of separation from the brethren. Indeed, those who maintain one position must often bend over so far backward to accommodate the different opinions of other brethren as virtually to leave the impression that they are in agreement, not disagreement with the other view.
3. Paul himself says that he became all things to all men -- overlooking even such issues as the very different and controversial views of the law of God that obtained in the first century

church -- in order not to let differences of viewpoint interfere with his gospel witness. Why, Paul was anyone's doormat on issues where he felt he could be flexible, even when those issues were clearly often matters concerning which Paul felt one position was right and another was wrong. In this spirit, John Calvin, for example, wrote that though he disagreed with the Lutherans touching matters of Christian worship, he did not regard those matters as sufficient to justify a separation. Those were matters of some importance and certainly of sharp controversy -- views of the Lord's Supper, the presence of images in the church, the continuation of certain features of the Roman mass --, but Calvin did not feel it right to separate on the basis of them.

Now I grew up in a spiritual culture in which the first set of texts was considered much more often than the second and in which doctrinal purity was a virtue clearly superior to Christian unity. Indeed, schism was a sin so far down on the order of transgressions, something akin to driving 60 in a 55 mph zone, that we did not imagine, could not really imagine, that we were openly defying God's Word, which, of course, we were.

And the result in our circles and in all circles like them, was too often a proud, censorious, schismatic spirit. I can say that because that is my past, my tradition, my church. But I can say it as well because some important voices who were representatives of that movement have said it before me with much more authority and much more right.

1. Dr. Schaeffer used to say that the great sin of the separatists in 1936 -- of which he was one -- was that they did not leave the *Presbyterian Church USA* in tears. He did not doubt, and I do not doubt that that separation was necessary. The Scot theologian and pastor, John Brown of Haddington, once wrote, "Providence often points out the duty of separation by permitting some faithful ministers to be tyrannously thrust out of [a church's] communion." So it was in 1936. Those faithful men didn't leave; they were thrown out. But that fact did not mean that, even in that moment, the other pole of Christian faith and duty did not have to be served. I would put it this way, in terms of the dialectical teaching of Holy Scripture: the sin was that we had little thought to the opposite pole of Scripture teaching -- the unity of Christ's body -- as we triumphantly wrapped ourselves around the other pole -- the purity of doctrine and life.
2. Still more interesting, the late Dr. Buswell, longtime professor of theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, acknowledged later in his life that the second division, the split that occurred a year later, in 1937, the split that divided the conservative Presbyterians from one another, was not only sinful, but a major catastrophe to the cause of biblical Presbyterianism in modern America. That separation was over such issues as whether the church should be teetotaling and anti-smoking, what particular eschatological position should be preferred, and what view should be taken on the question -- the very arcane question -- of apologetic method (were we to be followers of Prof. Van Til or Prof. Warfield). Dr. Buswell's verdict on the entire affair, in which he had unfortunately played a pivotal role, expressed years later was simply: "After the death of Dr. Machen, the church fell into the hands of lesser men."
3. But, let me give you a still clearer example of the imbalance that results from preferring one

pole of biblical truth to another, from failing to see that God intended for us to care deeply about two things at the same time, even if those two things are not easily reconciled to one another.

Many of you know the name A.W. Pink. Many of you are, no doubt, familiar with this man's writings if you may not know much about his personal life. He was born in England in 1886, the son of a Christian home, though not converted himself until his teens. He studied briefly at Moody Bible Institute, and began preaching and pastoring in the USA while still a very young man. During this early period he wrote his famous book *The Sovereignty of God*, which has perhaps made more Calvinists of Arminians than any single book in the 20th century. Early on he also began what was to become his life's work, the monthly magazine "Studies in the Scriptures," of which he was the editor **and sole contributor** from its inception in 1922 to its completion one year after his death in 1952. Most of the Pink titles you may be familiar with and that are still in print today, or have been recently, -- his commentary on John; his volumes on David and Elijah -- are simply the publication of material that appeared originally month by month in the magazine.

After several years in the US, two years in Australia, he returned to England where he found few pulpits open to him because of his emphasis on the sovereignty of grace and the authority of the law of God. He returned to the US eight years later where, again, he spent most of his time without public ministry and in virtual isolation. He returned finally to England and eventually moved to Stornoway, in the Scottish Hebrides, where he and his wife lived the last 12 years of his life, again finding himself unable to associate with any church.

At one point, in the 1930s, Pink wrote to a friend,

"It is now seventeen years since my dear wife and I partook of the Lord's Supper! We feel it keenly, and God means us and all his people to feel the awful character of the times in which we are living, when the departure from the **true** faith is almost universal."

Now Pink was a great man and a sterling Christian in many ways. He was a master student of the Bible. By the time he had been a Christian 25 years he had read the Bible through more than 50 times. He has special importance for us as a champion of Calvinist theology and Puritan spirituality in a day when most of the Christian world had gone over to Arminian fundamentalism.

But, the fact is, Pink's concern was terribly one-sided. He had chosen one pole and virtually ignored the other. He made doctrinal purity the great interest of his life and, for all that he might have said about this, he showed little concern for the unity of Christ's body or even for that spirit of charity toward other believers whose views may have been seriously defective.

And the proof of that is that during those last 12 years in Stornoway, he and his wife lived just streets away from one of the finest Presbyterian/Calvinist pulpits of our day -- that of

Kenneth MacRae, whose diaries Iain Murray edited and published some years ago. This was Calvinism at its best, but it wasn't enough for Pink.

Now, this is an extreme example, surely, but it makes the important point. You cannot be a faithful Christian by being particularly faithful at one point if you are unfaithful at the point counterpoised to it. The Devil is happy to ruin us by our supposed allegiance to the truth. If he can lead us into an imbalance of truths, if he can cause us to relax the tension created by the biblical dialectic by ignoring or slighting of one of the poles on an continuum of truth, he will be delighted to encourage our doctrinal zeal. It serves his purpose as well as open unbelief. The church can topple just as easily by folk within it pushing too hard on one wall only as it can by folk outside of it pulling the walls down.

The Pharisee -- which many came close to being, I think, in the tradition in which I was raised (we really did learn to look down our noses at Christians who couldn't pronounce or wouldn't pronounce our "Shibboleths") -- is just as deadly to the church as the Sadducee (the liberal who subjects supernatural Christianity to his own naturalistic biases). Tolerance in a machine is the allowable deviation from the true. Too little or too much is equally dangerous. Too little and the machine runs hot and finally seizes; too much and it finally shakes itself apart.

The great work on this subject in our Reformed Tradition is the 17th century Scot, James Durham's, *Concerning Scandal*. In it Durham writes,

"although sometimes the fault may be more on one side than another yet seldom is any side free, at least in the manner of prosecution; and therefore often it turneth in the close to the hurt of both. The one side becomes more schismatical and erroneous, at least in many of their members; the other side more cold and secure in the practice of holiness, carnal and formal in pursuing ceremonies and external things, with less affection and life in the main, because the edge of their zeal is bended towards these differences."

"Never," continues Durham in an especially noble passage,

"never did men run to quench fire in a city, lest all should be destroyed, with more diligence than men ought to bestir themselves to quench this in the church; never did mariners use more speed to stop a leak in a ship, lest all should be drowned, than ministers especially, and all Christian men should haste to stop this beginning of the breaking in of these waters of strife, lest thereby the whole church be overwhelmed. And if the many evils which follow thereupon, the many commands whereby union is pressed, yea, the many entreaties and obtestations whereby the Holy Ghost doth so frequently urge this upon all, as a thing most acceptable to Him and profitable to us -- if, I say, these and many other such considerations have not weight to convince of the necessity of this duty to prevent or heal a breach, we cannot tell what can prevail with men that profess reverence to the great and dreadful name of God, conscience of duty, and respect to the edification of the church and to their own peace at the appearance of the Lord in the great day, wherein the Peace-makers shall be blessed, for they shall be called the children of God." [Cited in MacPherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*, pp. 106-107.]

It was a great gift of God to me when I began to encounter Christians, more faithful, more attractive in their Christianity than I was, who did not represent my tradition of American separatist fundamentalism.

And then, over the years, I was, I believe by the Spirit of God, drawn to men through their writings who became my heroes, and whose thinking profoundly shaped my own. One of the chief of these is Alexander Whyte. You know very well how much Whyte has influenced me and how often he makes his way into my sermons. (Church of Scotland Pastor, died in 1921.)

Now Whyte was a Free Church minister and that church, of course, had been born in a great schism, the Disruption of 1843. But Dr. Whyte was only a boy then. In the maturity of his ministry he had come to have a great fear of schism and of, what he called “the inevitable sins of temper” that accompany disputes in the church. Whyte was an expert on sin and he saw schism as both usually a sin itself and always an occasion of sin. He spoke strongly against the spirit of division. This was a great help and a great corrective to me and his emphasis was lent great power by the force, the godliness of his character and his preaching.

But, if I can fault Alexander Whyte for anything it is that he made exactly the same mistake as A.W. Pink, only on the other side. He refused to go to war for the church’s fidelity to the truth. When William Robertson Smith got into trouble in the church for introducing higher criticism into Free Church seminary training, Whyte rose to his defense. He credited Smith with being a better Christian than he was -- a great virtue of Whyte’s character in general, but not here; he was sure that the church would remain steadfast in its loyalty to the Bible even if some taught the new German theories; and he abominated the hard speech that was being used by Free Church men of other Free Church men. He lent his considerable prestige to the side that wished not to make an issue of these things. Whyte himself never embraced the new theories about the Bible, he never surrendered his confidence in the infallibility of the Bible. But, in his zeal for unity, he paved the way for others to do so and made it possible for them to do it while ministers and elders of the church.

Years later, as an old man at the end of his work, Whyte can be found bemoaning what had become of his beloved church. Where did the old loyalties to Scripture and Confession go? But he seemed to the end unaware that he had himself made a major contribution to that doctrinal declension because he was unwilling to fight for the truth at the moment when it was still holding the field but under attack.

Now, you see, what the Lord teaches us to be, what the church’s own welfare and that of the world as well requires us to be is both A.W. Pink and Alexander Whyte **at one and the same time**. And what an adornment of both truths and both virtues it would be to have unity wept for and worked for and loved and admired and treasured by the very one who insists on purity; and to have purity loved and fought for by the very one who loves every Christian, who is so careful neither to act or speak in any way that would unnecessarily rend Christ’s seamless robe.

Think, for example, of John Bunyan. He was sufficiently willing to fight for his convictions that he was imprisoned for them. But, do you know that, in regard to what we might call today his denominational convictions, search Bunyan’s writings -- three very large volumes -- and you will not be able to tell what Christian party Bunyan belonged to. He admits once that he belonged to the

anabaptist party, but the sharpest theological controversy of his ministry was with other baptists because he refused to make one's position on baptism a test of fellowship or of fitness for the Lord's Supper.

Thomas Boston, himself a great example of this living dialectic, said of his father, a covenanter who was once imprisoned for his loyalty to what he saw to be the church's true character and calling: "My father was very tenacious of what he judged truth, while at the same time he could love, esteem, and honour his brethren who differed from him, and very freely hold communion with them."

If we would be such Christians ourselves, it will help to make sure that we do not confine ourselves to our own narrow stream of Christian tradition, but allow ourselves to be reminded that God has his holy ones in many other places than the *Presbyterian Church in America!*

We Reformed often quote this great statement: "In necessariis unitas; in non-necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas." But we were not the first to say it.

As long ago as Gregory I – the first pope he is called – in the early 7th century, we have this: "The holy Church corrects certain things with fervor; she tolerates others with meekness; she closes her eyes on still others and bears them with reflective attention."

But our best men have always thought the same way. Here is Rabbi Duncan of the 19th century Scottish Free Church: "I am first a Christian, next a Catholic, then a Calvinist, fourth a paedobaptist, and fifth a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse this order."

And all of this in and upon our hearts in a day when it may well be necessary for us to fight for the truth of God's Word in the church once again!