

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS

Part XIII: Preparing for Resistance

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But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will (II Tim. 2:23-26).

Avoid foolish and unlearned questions. This does not mean that you have any obligation to avoid wise and learned questions, but you must approach them wisely and learnedly. That is, you must be prepared to defend your actions with wise words based on a comprehensive knowledge of the Bible's teaching on the topic at hand. You need cogent answers.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing (I Peter 3:15-17).

Paul's injunction applies to the avoidance of strife with people who are in the clutches of Satan. There are lots of Christians who are not in the clutches of the devil, covenantally speaking, but who will enthusiastically give the dedicated reformer a lot of trouble. Why? Because they are in sympathy with some teaching or practice that the devil finds useful in deflecting covenant-keepers from keeping the judicial and moral terms of the full-orbed covenant they profess.

What Is Strife?

The Greek word translated as "strife" can be translated "scourge." Examples are these: "But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues" (Matt. 10:17). "And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again" (Matt. 20:19). It also refers to public confrontations. Stephen described the two Israelites who fought together until Moses intervened: "And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?" (Acts 7:26). James warned: "Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have,

and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2).

Paul's warning against strife is not a prohibition on theological disputation. It is a prohibition on disagreements that escalate beyond theological discussion to a such a level of confrontation that the reputation of the church is threatened. In the language of modern politics, strife occurs when "push comes to shove." Pushing is not universally prohibited; there are times to push people out of the church, but this pressure is appropriate only in matters that legitimately should become judicatory. Short of bringing others before a church tribunal (we still use the old Roman terminology), teachers are commanded to be patient with those who hold different beliefs.

Strife is an illegitimate alternative to two things: peace and a formal trial. Anyone who is unwilling to seek the second should seek the first.

Cutting Strife Short

If the level of confrontation has escalated to the point of church court action, but neither participant is willing to bring a formal accusation against the other, both are commanded by Paul to cease the confrontation. A debate has become strife. Strife must be settled. Any confrontation that is not worth settling judicially should not be allowed to escalate to the point of creating divisions in the church: one vs. one, faction vs. faction.

When someone approaches a pastor with a warning about someone else in the church, the pastor may be wise to listen. But when he perceives that the tale-bearer is trying to recruit him to act as his personal agent of informal condemnation, the pastor should take out a notebook and ask the tale-bearer to repeat his statement, just in case the complaint should go to a trial. This will normally silence the tale-bearer, who is not interested in a trial. (I am reminded of Anita Hill's 1991 tale about Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. She did not volunteer to testify publicly under oath. She consented to do so only after the story she told to Senate staffers was leaked to the press.)

We must learn to think judicially. This is not easy for modern Christians. They have been taught to be antinomians. They do not think in terms of legal categories. They prefer to talk about "relationships" rather than law, as if covenantally established relationships were not law-bound. The word "relationship" has become a code word that means "not under biblical law."

The trouble is, such relationships keep winding up on the front page of the local newspaper: "Pastor Admits Adultery,

Asks Forgiveness." Somewhere in the article will be a paragraph on his employment status. "Forgiveness" in such a context has also become a code word. It means: "will not be asked to resign." That is, he wants to evade and avoid negative sanctions. He assumes that there are no negative sanctions attached to his transgression, other than embarrassment.

The problem is, many, many congregations will keep the adulterer on the payroll in order to avoid strife. The scandal is public, but the congregation pretends that strife can be avoided by ignoring the required sanctions. It refuses to press charges. This frequently leads to an exodus of the morally outraged faction. There can be legitimate forgiveness in the settling of strife, but only by the victims, and the victims can insist on restitution. If the husband of the adulteress says "fire him," he should be fired. Even if a victim refuses to press charges, the church must, as the victimized institution. The man is no longer blameless; he is no longer eligible for the pastorate (1 Tim. 3:1-2).

Becoming the Victim by Avoiding Strife

Peter wrote: "For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing." It is better to become the victim of one seeking to create strife than to be the initiator of strife.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is a very powerful doctrine. It creates opportunities for strife. It blows things up; for example, Old Covenant Israel. Modern Christians have sought to limit the devastation by narrowly defining the Great Commission as strictly the salvation of souls. But this is not what the text says: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (v. 19). Baptize nations – whole peoples: this is a huge assignment. It means that nations are to be brought under the comprehensive covenant of God, which alone offers comprehensive redemption.

When someone who reads and believes Kenneth Gentry's book, *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (ICE, 1990), begins to discuss its thesis of comprehensive redemption in a typical evangelical church, he will meet opposition. The doctrine of comprehensive redemption – the whole of sin's realm progressively subdued by God through His church – is too divisive today. It announces the comprehensive responsibility of Christians. Christians are not willing to accept this degree of responsibility, so they seek ways to avoid the implications of the Great Commission. One way is to attack the interpretation given to Christ's words by the one who has presented the gospel's comprehensive claims. This challenge becomes an opportunity for strife.

The best way to avoid strife in this case is for the defender of comprehensive redemption to present his case initially through deeds rather than words. He begins a charitable project or other worthwhile project. He acts as a steward over the project. When he recruits people in the church to work with him, he speaks about all the good that the project will accomplish, and all the spiritual benefits to those participating as co-workers. He should stress benefits: to the beneficiaries (the word reveals its origins) and also to the participants. He does not talk theology; he practices theology.

Then, if he is asked what his motivation is, he can direct

the discussion back to the Great Commission. The person who publicly rejects his interpretation is put in a bad light: as someone who wants to avoid any responsibility for contributing to the project. He does want to evade responsibility, although perhaps not for this project. But his rejection of the theological motivation of the doer of the word will be seen as grounded in a hidden agenda: avoiding responsibility.

A Defensive Shield

The worthwhile nature of the project, coupled with the sacrifice of the project's initiator, forms a shield around the theology of social transformation. The agenda of the initiator is visible: the project. The agenda of the critic is implied: avoiding commitment to the project. Both agendas are grounded in a theology. But most Christians care little for theology. They share this attitude with non-Christians. What most people do care about is making the world a little better for the decent people of the world, including the underprivileged. This caring attitude is an important aspect of common grace. It helps soften the resistance to the gospel:

But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day. Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? (Deut. 4:4-8).

James wrote: "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18). He who defends himself based on his works alone is doomed. But he is not interested in hearing of saving faith from someone whose works are non-existent. The "hook" is the presence of good works. The good works do not supplement saving faith; they confirm saving faith. Works are an aspect of testimony.

Conclusion

Rather than go on the offensive verbally, the reformer must go on the offensive charitably. He begins a project that is clearly worth doing. He bootstraps it. This effort will be seen as a work of righteousness. This work will tend to undermine workers of unrighteousness in the community outside the church and non-workers inside the church.

Resistance will eventually come because the Great Commission offends the culturally defensive. But for those who plan ahead, resistance is more easily overcome. The best defense is a good offense: a visible work of charity. Action does not speak louder than words, but it testifies to the character and commitment of the one who speaks the words. It verifies the message. The message then penetrates skepticism more readily.

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