

Something Old, Something New

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John 13:31-35

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

Movement 1 – The Church's "Great" Reputation

We don't have a very good reputation. We aren't seen by many people as decent, clean, or upstanding. We don't have a very good reputation. I'm not just speaking about this church in particular, but of most churches. I'm not just speaking of you as a group of Christians, but of Christianity overall. We don't have a very good reputation.

Churches tend to be known as places where there is in-fighting, places where there is conflict, and places where people tend to be shallow and petty. Churches are known as institutions that still practice segregation, places that still exclude people and places that put self-interest over the interests of others. We have a bad reputation.

When a Christian on the national or the global level makes a mistake, a negative statement, or a scene, it affects all of us. Think of the time that Pat Robertson said the town of Dover, PA would suffer God's wrath because they decided to teach the theory of evolution as a possible explanation of the complexity of life. Because of Robertson's comments we as Christians could be seen as people who didn't look at differing views and options, and that (and this is the one that irks me) we believe that God will punish those who do not teach the divine will, as we understand it. From one person's comments our reputation is effected.

Or think of the actions of Ted Haggard. Here was a man who for years was living a secret life, seeing a male prostitute and taking Meth. Yet he was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, he pushed for a high degree of morals and pietism, had political power in the White House, and was the pastor of a very large and conservative leaning church. When the public found out that Haggard was leading dual lives, many just saw it as another example of Christianity's two faced, hypocritical living. It did not help our reputation. And when, three weeks later, he declared that he was completely healed, it only seemed to tarnish our reputation that much more (who heals from three or more years of addictive behavior in three weeks?).

We don't have a very good reputation. We are still struggling from our reputation over the crusades, from our role, or lack of, with the Holocaust, and from our action and inaction with slavery. The church is seen as a cause or major player in many wars, in injustices, in the separation between the rich and the poor, and in the building up of the powers that be. The author Aldous Huxley said in his classic book *Brave New World*, "At least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity, idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political idols."

When I was hiking the Appalachian Trail, I met a person who was an earnest and wholesome individual. He was generous with his supplies, he was friendly, and he seemed to be a decent human being. When we were talking I mentioned that I was in seminary at the time, and I was planning to go and serve a church. He looked at me and said, with a straight face, "I believe that God is good, and that spirituality is good, but I believe that religion is evil." He saw many hypocritical, shallow, selfish churches and that turned him off from religion. He knew of to

many two-faced, doubling speaking Christians and he could not see the good in religion. He did not trust the institution, and did not want to trust the institutions. We have a bad reputation.

The early Christians, the ones who would have been hearing this gospel for the first time were struggling with their reputation. They were not a people in power, they were known as people who met in secret, and many assumed they performed acts of cannibalism. Many thought that Christians ate bodies and drank blood, and because they were still new as a movement they did not have any other reputation to rest upon. They were struggling with their reputation.

We are a part of that institution, that movement which walks with a scarred reputation. We carry the negative tones and the blemishing marks. And maybe you are aware of it when you tell people you are a Christian. Maybe you hold back in sharing your faith because you know that Christians are not always seen in the best light. Maybe you understand that you will receive the brunt of negative projections, when you claim to follow Christ (say nothing of claiming to be a Baptist). We do not have a very good reputation.

Movement 2 – Bandaging up the Ego-wounds

What can we do to change our reputation? What can we do to show the world that we are not a bunch of shallow and selfish individuals? How do we show the world that we are still relevant, and that we are still important for the community?

Many have tried to change the reputation of the church. Many have tried to show that the church is different, and a good place to gather and worship God. Yet I would argue that many of our attempts to improve our reputation have been weak. Churches have tried to change, to improve, and even to reject their reputation with a total and complete makeover. Some churches have adopted the approach that Oldsmobile did, when that company claimed, “this isn’t your father’s Oldsmobile” churches have tried to say that we are not longer that kind of institution which carries the baggage and the poor reputation. Some churches have adopted a different style of worship, hoping that different instrumentation, different format, and a screen in the front will divorce them from the reputation of being a place of petty infighting, surface squabbles and selfish egotism. Many churches have hoped that these surface changes would remove the blemishes, and place band-aids over the wounds of poor reputation and negative projections that are wrapped around the house of Christ.

Some Christians have tried to reject the negative reputation that flies at them from the corners of society. They want to show that we are not pious and stuffy. We assume that our most unwanted reputation is that we are seen as someone who doesn’t have any fun of any kind. We don’t want to be seen as the straight-laced Christian Flanders family from *The Simpsons*, so we try to compensate in any way possible. I have seen pastors wear leather jackets thinking that would portray a different picture of who they are and reject any negative reputation that may be lurking. I know youth groups that, in an effort to show they are just as fun as any other group, play paint ball or laser tag, never thinking that it may be seen as hypocritical for Christians to shoot each other, when Christ says, “blessed are the peace makers.” I know Christians who overcompensate by cussing and drinking more than is appropriate. The band-aids over the wounds of reputation are ones that only cover the cuts, but the cuts still remain.

Think of the main character, Gatsby, in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. This was an individual who came from little means, and acquired great wealth through organized crime. He tried to portray himself as someone of high class, he wanted to impress Daisy, so he got a makeover, he changed his image and tried to build up his reputation.

Yet if you have ever seen any of the makeover shows, or moments on the talk shows, you know that changing one's hair, clothing, and make-up can only go so deep. A make over can only change so much, and if the person was a jerk before, than the person will still be a jerk.

A church can change its image, its music, its style of worship, it can try to tell people that it is young and hip. But a young and hip church that is embroiled in arguments is still a church that is embroiled in arguments. The changes we are called to embrace, the changes we try to endure are only surface, only go so deep.

We can try to change our image. We can try to change the way we pray, the way we sing, the way to talk to others, but our surface changes will not go deep enough to truly respond to the negative reputation we live with. We can try, but our attempts will be weak and empty.

Movement 3 – Looking for Glory in all the Wrong Places

We need to remember the reason that we gather. We need to return to our focus, our center. We need to remember the reason we gather. We don't gather because of the music. We don't gather because of the preaching. We don't gather because this is a place where we are seen as important, or a place where it is popular to gather. We don't gather because it is politically expedient or worthwhile. We don't gather because of our history or our legacy. We gather because of Christ.

The scripture reading for today starts out with this reminder. The scripture calls the followers of Jesus, the disciples and us to remember why it is that we are here. The glory that pulls us and guides us and brings us together is the glory of the Lord, it is the glory of Christ. We gather because of Christ. Maybe you hear the words of scripture as cryptic, complex and confusing. Maybe you hear the words of God being glorified in Jesus, and Jesus glorifying God, and Jesus being glorified by God. What Christ is saying, is that he is God's glory revealed, and he is moving God's glory from beyond the present to the eternal. The late biblical scholar, C.K. Barrett says that in Jesus' temporal act God's glory is revealed in the present and the eternal. In Christ's actions God's glory has shined, is shining and will shine. God's glory is revealed through Christ, and that is why we gather.

This is what we need to remember when we worry about our reputation and our standing in the world. Because when we worry about our reputation, we should begin to question our reasons for gathering, and instead of focusing on the surface things, the preaching, the worship, or the music in hope that these surface things will remind us of why we belong to such a community, we are called to look to Christ, through whom the glory of God shines. All of these other things can help lift us up in God's glory, or can become distractions. It would be like inviting someone to church and trying to impress them with good food and not showing them Jesus. Food is not the reason one should go to church. One does not follow Jesus because the people are fun, or pious. One does not follow Jesus because the food tastes good. One does not follow Jesus because the music is uplifting. One follows Jesus, because in Jesus the glory of the Lord is revealed and in that glory we find hope and we find life.

The disciples needed to be reminded of this as they were struggling with their reputation. They needed to be reminded that they do not walk with Jesus for the fame, or the power, but because through Jesus the glory of the Lord is revealed.

The early church needed to be reminded of this. They were trying to establish themselves as a religious community that was relevant and meaningful. They were competing with and within Jewish communities, with Gnostics, and needed to remember why they called themselves followers of Christ. When they were cast out of the synagogues, when they were disowned by

their families, when they were falsely accused of acts of ill repute, they needed to remember why it was they endured such a negative reputation. It was for the glory of Christ.

We gather because of the glory of the Lord, and we have seen the glory! We have seen the resurrection; we have seen the life that transcends death, we have seen the glory. Invite people to this community because of that glory. Invite people to be a part of this community because of that hope. We are not to reflect the light of our music or our preaching, but the light of Christ, the resurrected glory of the Lord. Let the glory of Christ be our reputation. Let the glory of the Lord be that which we stand upon. Let us remember why it is that we gather. Let us remember why it is that we come here. We are here to experience and respond to the glory of the Lord.

Movement 4 – The Simple Command of Christ

Yet we are given a command. We are told what to do, and we need to listen to the command of Christ. We are not to just gather and gape with our open mouths, staring at the resurrected Jesus. We are not to just bask in the glory of the Lord. After all, Christ goes before us to prepare for us that place, and calls us to that moment when we are fully with the Lord in glory, but we are not there yet. Christ is leaving the disciples and preparing them for the time when they are on their own so that they may continue his work and show the world his love. We are called to continue Christ's work and show Christ's love. We are not to just sit and wait and watch for the glory, instead we are to go and do. We are to continue the ministry that Christ started.

This is where it gets tricky. This is where it gets difficult, because now we ask what we are supposed to do. What is it that we are supposed to do as we try to tell the world about Christ? What are the rules, what are the expectations and what are the guidelines? Are we to follow the over 600 laws in the Old Testament. Are we to follow the Ten Commandments? Are we to teach the four spiritual laws that many evangelicals teach as a method to bring people to Christ? Are we to study, memorize and live out the Apostles Creed, or the Nicene Creed? Maybe we need to use the Methodist Book of Discipline, or the Presbyterian book of Order. What are we supposed to be the church and the community of Christians that we are called to be? How do we show Christ's glory?

This is where it gets tricky, because there are a lot of ideas; there are a lot of movements and a lot of options to tell us how to be a Christian and how to be a church. We can be "purpose driven," or we can "expand our vision." We can be transformational or revolutionary. We can emerge, or we can be intentional. We can adopt any catchword, follow any new trend that we think might be the best way to show the world who we truly are as a community of Christians. How do we show Christ's glory?

In this passage we are left with a command. In this passage we are left with some guidance and focus to follow. Christ says, "You should love one another, just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is it! These are our instructions. Christ says this is our commandment; this is our rule, our order. It is a commandment like those in the Ten Commandments. These are relational guidelines to follow and live by. But Christ does not give us ten; instead, he gives us one. Have you seen the credit card commercial when a knight shows up with a dragon's head claiming he has killed a dragon? The knight arrives expecting his reward, but the king gives him a long list of stipulations restrictions that he has to follow. It is confusing and complicated. We can get that

way in the church as we try to follow Christ, giving a long list of expectations. Yet Christ offers a simple rule – love each other as he has loved us. In that people will know that we follow Jesus.

We are given a rulebook for our community and it has only one page. Our bylaws are simplified. Our discipline is boiled down to one sentence. Love each other as Christ has loved us. This is all that we have to do. This is all we need to keep to as we follow Christ. This is the command; this is the rule that we are to follow as we gather in the community of Christ.

Movement 5 – Something Old, Something New

This commandment is old, and made new. It is something that we have heard before, and yet there is something different about it. It is something old. Look in Leviticus, and you will find this same commandment. It is a commandment that many have heard before. It is not new. It is similar to the great commandment that you should love your neighbor as yourself, one of the commandments that is known by so many people, Christians and non-Christians. It is not new. So why should Christ point it out? Why should Christ draw our attention to this one of the many rules and commandments which we find in the Bible? Maybe we think that with Christ we should be hearing something new. Maybe we think that with Christ we would be given a new a profound teaching. Yet Jesus gives us an old commandment to live with. Jesus gives us something from an old way of life to consider.

It is like giving someone a 364 computer, or an Apple IIc to work with on the computer. They can do some things, but nothing like the computers of today. What can we do with something that has been tried and used before? As we struggle to try to understand how to show ourselves to the world, Christ gives us something old to work with and to try. We may even claim that we have been trying to love each other, but for some reason we cannot seem to get it right. We have been living with this law for some time, and our reputation is still marked and marred. We need something new, something different to give us the focus and the direction that will set us apart from the reputation that the world has cast upon us. We need something new.

Maybe the early Christians were saying the same thing. Maybe they were wondering how they could differentiate themselves from other religious groups, and began to feel disappointed when they hear Christ's command. This is an old, Leviticus law, what good could come from something old? How would they be seen as different from the Jews if they were using Jewish laws? What good can come from this old, antiquated law?

Christ makes it new. Christ makes the commandment different, alive and new. It is changed by his glory; it is change by his life. It is a new commandment that is transformed by the incarnation. It is made new. Christ is not just calling the disciples to love the world, but is calling them specifically to turn to each other. We here this commandment in the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan, yet in this case Christ's command is said just to the disciples. Christ is setting a standard for the community, a way for the disciples to be in community with each other. This isn't necessarily a commandment that is all inclusive (although Christ does call us to love the world/neighbor), this is a commandment that is for the members of the community specifically. D.C. Dulling reminds us in his book. *The Social World of the New Testament*, that we need to be aware of who Christ is speaking to when he offers his commands. The audience is important, and in this case, the audience is the disciples. This is a rule for the community, for the church, for us to be in fellowship with each other. So we are called to hear the commandment as one which shapes and forms the new community that we are a part of. We are to hear the commandment as one for each other. Christ is calling us to love each other, in the church, just as Christ has loved us. This is the new commandment and the old commandment. We have been

told to love others before, but now we are to show that love in a sacrificing way to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christ makes the commandment new, the incarnation makes the commandment, and the community new. Christ takes something old and makes it new.

Movement 6 – Living our Commandment

We show people that we are Christians. We show people that we have a relationship with Christ. Remember how I started. I started by talking about our reputation. I started by remind all of us that we are seen in a negative light by the world. I started by wondering what we could do to show the world that we are not a people who are focused on bickering, on fighting, on power, or on our own glory. We want people to know that we are focused on the glory of the Lord as revealed through Jesus Christ. We can't do that through any music program, through any amount of worship, through any program. We can't do that through any slogan, through any doctrine or dogma. We can only do it by showing the world our life in Christ.

The theologian, George Lindbeck argues that doctrine should only describe the actions of the church. He argues that doctrine should only come out of the actions, the speech and the behavior of the members of a community. He says that doctrine should not define one's faith, but show ones faith. We could spend time arguing how one understands the incarnation. We could spend time arguing how we are to be in relationship with each other, or we could just do it. We could just try to love each other. We could just try to serve each other, and let the doctrines and dogmas work themselves out.

It is like learning to ride a bike. You can explain it or you can just do it and how you figure it out. Or it is like sharing a great dish of food. You can try to tell someone about the dish, and describe it, or you can show them how good it is. We do not need to tell people about our relationship with Christ, instead we are called to show people our relationship with Christ.

Imagine you are in a foreign country and you don't speak the language. How are you going to share the love of Christ? I remember when I went to Puerto Rico for a mission trip. The first day we were there we went to a prayer service that lasted three hours, and it was all in Spanish. I didn't speak a word of Spanish, I could not communicate with many of the people in that church, yet I knew they were true and honest Christians. Not because of the doctrines they declared, not because of the music they played, not because of the shape or size of the building, but because of the way they treated me. It was because of the way they cared for me, they loved me, and were present for me that I knew they were Christians. They showed me that they were following Jesus through their love.

Lets be that kind of community. Let's be the community that has but one focus, Jesus Christ. Let's be the community that expresses that focus not through creeds, not through declarations of faith, but through actions. Let the projections of the world slide off. Let the negative reputation fall to the side. Let the assumptions roll off our back, as we respond not with words, not with rebuttals of rhetoric, but with action and example. They may call us shallow and selfish, but we will continue to show our love to each other and to the world. They may call us hypocritical and two faced, but we will show them that we are a community that earnestly and honestly tries to be a people of Christ following Christ. Let's work to the place that when people walk by they will not talk about our worship, our music, our building or even our pastor. Instead they will talk about how we are a community that is different, that is caring, that is welcoming, and that loves. Let us not tell the world that we are Christians, but show that we are Christians through our love.

AMEN