

A PERSONAL CONFESSION – A PUBLIC CHALLENGE

By Our Love Shall All People Know We Are His Disciples

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Shortly before His betrayal, Jesus gathered His disciples around him and said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By (your love for one another) all people will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34-35).

On July 4th, 2009, Baptist pastor Rick Warren spoke at the 2009 Islamic Society of North America Conference in our nation’s capital. Over 40,000 Islamic believers gathered in Washington, D.C., for this conference, considered to be the largest annual gathering of Muslim Americans. Pastor Warren challenged the gathered Muslims to join Christians in modeling for the world what it means to:

- **First**, *respect the dignity of every person* by not merely tolerating people but valuing them.
- **Second**, *restore civility to civilization* by disagreeing without being disagreeable.
- **Third**, *reinforce the protection of the freedoms of speech and religion* for every individual within our respective cultures.

Warren proposed that, in this very diverse world, when Christians and Muslims model this mutual respect and love for each other while protecting the freedoms of the individual, an even greater common good will arise: *peace*. Warren pointed to the 60,000 different kinds of beetles as evidence that the God of all peace loves diversity. As for me, I believe that God’s love for diversity is irrefutably proven by the 60,000 different kinds of Baptists whom God has created.

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Rick Warren – a family friend since the late 1970’s, when he attended Southcliff Baptist Church, a church which at the time was pastored by my father – acquitted himself and all evangelicals quite well in his speech before those 40,000 Muslims. Some Baptists have expressed surprise that the Muslims issued Rick an invitation to speak. Other Baptists have expressed regret that he accepted. My disappointment is that the different kinds of Baptists – like those of us represented here at the New Baptist Covenant Conference and others who are not here – were not in the audience in Washington, D.C., to hear the speech ourselves.

For it seems to me that we Baptists can never really value Muslims, treat them with civility, or grant them the freedom to speak and believe as they see fit until we first learn to treat our different kinds of Baptist brothers and sisters around the world in the same manner. In other words, until I can treat all of my Baptist friends with dignity, value them as people, and respect their views – particularly and especially those Baptists who disagree with me – it will be

impossible for me to treat Muslims in the same manner. Likewise, until my liberal or moderate Baptist friends experience Christ's love in their hearts for me, a theologically conservative Baptist, and until they value my personhood, respect my views, and work with me toward a greater common good, it will be impossible for them to do the same for Muslims. The greatest barometer of how well we Baptists understand the importance of *agape* love, which Scriptures call the distinguishing mark of followers of Jesus Christ, is our treatment of each other.

Loving Each Other as Jesus Loves Us

This evening, I would like to make a personal confession to you, my Baptist brothers and sisters, who do not see eye-to-eye with me either theologically, socially, morally, spiritually, or politically. I come from a long line of Baptist preachers. The Burleson family settled in Texas, with one ancestor, Dr. Rufus Burleson, becoming the first president of Baylor University. My branch of the Burlesons moved to Oklahoma at the turn of the 20th century, and several of the Burlesons would eventually become pastors or missionaries. We like to talk about the Baptists in our family, but we don't often mention the Burleson who is the only person to ever escape from Alcatraz!

I have served two terms as president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, and now I pastor a large church in northwestern Oklahoma. Tonight I speak for myself only. My confession and corresponding repentance is personal, spoken with a heart that genuinely desires to do my part to build bridges between all Baptists who name Christ as Lord.

The people I pastor know what kind of Baptist I am: Calvinistic in my soteriology, partial-preterist in my eschatology, open communion in my ecclesiology, conservative in my theology, inerrantist in my bibliology, and continuationist in my pneumatology. I realize that these sound like a medical diagnosis, but they are the proper labels for my theological views. I held these views when I began pastoring over a quarter of a century ago, and I still hold to them today. I have not changed what I believe, but I myself have changed in one very critical area over the past few years.

I now believe deep in my heart that *Jesus is more concerned with how we Baptists treat each other than He is with what we Baptists teach each other*. The people loved by Christ – particularly those who differ with me – are to be far more precious to me than any finer point of theology believed by me. Jesus did not tell me that it would be by my *truth* that all people would know that I am one of His followers, but by my *love*. The only description ever given of our Lord was that He was a person "full of grace and truth." Word order is important in Scripture. Grace should not just *precede* truth – it should *permeate* it. Or, as our host Jimmy Allen so brilliantly puts it: "Our love should reach beyond our theology."

A few years ago, Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell held the hand of her 7-year-old son Taylor as she walked through the picket lines that had formed outside Calvary Baptist Church, Waco, Texas. The picketers, Baptists from surrounding churches, were there protesting Julie's call to become the pastor of Calvary. As she walked through the picket line, her little boy squeezed her hand, pulled his mother down where she could hear, and then asked, "*Mommy, who is Jezebel and why are they calling you that?*"

It has been said that, when the old Irish immersed a babe at baptism, they would leave out the babe's right arm so that it would remain "pagan for good fighting." I have sometimes wondered if it is our custom as Baptists to plunge all but the convert's mouth into the baptismal waters to

keep the Baptist tongue “pagan for good fighting.” I confess that, in years past, it has been easier for me to stand behind a principle and say something negative about the character of those who disagree with me than to simply love my fellow Baptists who do not see eye-to-eye with me theologically.

I have not changed what I believe, nor have I moved away from a conservative view of the infallible sacred text, but what *has* changed is the need to point out that people who disagree with me in interpretations of the Bible are less Christian, less “spiritual,” less loved by God than I. This is simply not true. The love of God for His people never changes or wanes, regardless of our actual or imagined theological unfaithfulness. Or perhaps I should state it more precisely: God’s love for His people never wanes or abates, regardless of my fellow Baptists’ actual or imagined theological unfaithfulness. Jesus warned us that we tend to focus – on the speck in our brother’s eye while ignoring the plank in our own.

I am now committed to follow the commandment of my Lord and to display total and unconditional grace, kindness, and love to all of my Baptist brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of our theological differences. You are more important to me – moreso than even my principles—and this is both biblical and Christian. To me, this is the peculiar mark of real, genuine Christianity.

Speaking Out Against Injustice

This, of course, does not mean that we should not speak out when we perceive an injustice against God’s people. It is often the wise and prudent course to graciously keep silent when we hear fellow Christians voice interpretations of Scripture that are contrary to our own interpretations, knowing that we are fallible people dealing with a sacred text. But when a fellow human being, ESPECIALLY a believer in Christ, is personally being abused or mistreated, our silence or non-action can never be justified or condoned by Christ and His sacred command to love one another. Those who risk everything to correct injustices against Christ’s people, who diligently protect the powerless in God’s kingdom, who defend the downtrodden in this world, who rescue the abused, and who care for the needy are expressing the love that Christ mentions as the peculiar mark of His followers.

It has come to my attention these past few years that my sisters in Christ within the Baptist faith are often in need of such defense. The parallels between the modern American Baptist woman and the 19th-century American Baptist black are numerous. To defend a gifted Baptist woman today is considered by some Baptist men as an unbiblical act. To call any mistreatment of Baptist women today “un-Christian” is tantamount to treason – in the eyes of some Baptist leaders. Many Baptists believe, particularly in the Southern Baptist Convention, that to defend Baptist women and to attempt to set them free to serve to the full extent of God’s call and giftedness in their lives is a denial of the faith. But I propose that any action taken to prevent the mistreatment of Baptist women in ministry is the most loving thing that can be done to both the victim and the one who is oppressing. In my opinion, the protection of a Baptist woman who ministers is the fulfillment of Christ’s biblical command to love each other as Christ has loved us.

In 2004, Dr. Sheri Klouda was terminated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary’s faculty as the distinguished professor of Hebrew, because the seminary’s new male administration held to a principle that a “woman should never teach a man.” Sheri was released from the job of her dreams and forced to relocate to Indiana, taking a far less-paying position at a Christian college. Sheri’s husband, Pinky, whom the administration knew was suffering from

critical cardiac problems at the time, had to leave his medical care in Fort Worth because of the forced relocation. Sheri's daughter also had to leave her much beloved high school, from which she was to graduate the very next year. Sheri and her family were forced from a house in Fort Worth, which they had purchased just a few months earlier – all because of the administration following a perceived "theological principle."

When our church contacted Sheri a few months after her termination, we discovered that she was selling pints of her own blood to help meet medical expenses for her husband. Regardless of one's views regarding women "teaching" men at Baptist seminaries, the question that each Baptist faces is whether or not the treatment of Sheri Klouda fulfills Christ's commandment that we love one another as Christ has loved us. If it does not, then something must be done. The God who shed his blood for us would not want us turning a blind eye to His people having to sell their own blood for the sake of others. Over several months, our church helped raise over \$20,000 for the Klouda family. Christ's command to love one another precludes silence or indifference when injustices occur. We are not even allowed by our Lord to hide behind our principles when it comes to loving His people. Our love should reach beyond our theology.

For this reason, it seems to me that if we Baptists are serious about loving one another in the manner in which Christ has loved us, then we cannot, we must not, remain quiet or silent when we see our Baptist sisters in Christ suffer. Baptist women in ministry, believers like Sarah Stewart, from whom we heard a testimony tonight, are women we are called to love, support, and protect.

These women profess a call from God, show real evidence of being set apart by Christ, and have experienced the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified to the world – yet many of them are being subjected to abuse, and that by Baptists. When our Baptist women in ministry experience such personal mistreatment, ridicule, or harm, we are commanded by Christ our Lord to bind up their wounds – and sometimes we must even take the weapon of abuse out of the hands of the perpetrators of those wounds.

An Awakening

In 2004, during the last business session that I moderated at the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, an extraordinary, godly woman from Quail Springs Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, was elected second vice-president. I will never forget the sight from the platform as several men throughout the auditorium stood and literally turned their backs to the platform as they voted "against" the first woman to be elected to general office within the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. That moment was an awakening for me. I realized that any cherished principle that would ever CAUSE a Christian to be uncivil, unkind, or unloving toward a sister in Christ is a principle that should be thrown out for the sake of obedience to the command of Christ to love one another. I am not offended by those who wish to argue with me over this point – for your argument is not ultimately with me, but with Jesus Christ. It is His command, not mine.

History will one day look back on how we Baptists in the 21st century treated our women who were called by God to minister. It is my prayer that conservative, Bible-believing men will not make the same mistake that our Southern Baptist forefathers made when they remained quiet 2 centuries ago, as another minority experienced abuse. The ground at the foot of the cross is level so that there is no supremacy of whites, no supremacy of males, and no supremacy of the rich – the wall of partition has been removed, and we are called to love every believer in Christ the way that Christ loves us.

I will never forget the email I received from one of the young ladies in our Baptist seminaries who wrote me, confiding that she typed with tears in her eyes, having just come from her “preaching class” where the professor allowed all the “men and boys” in the class to remove themselves from the room so they would not be *subjected* to hearing a woman teach the Word of God. The young lady found herself preaching to the walls and wondered whether or not she had a place in Baptist life. I reminded the young lady that she was not preaching to the walls, but to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit who were One in her midst as she preached. The prophet declares that God sings over His people with joy (*Zephaniah 3:17*), and I guaranteed her that the Father sings all the louder over a woman who unashamedly and boldly declares the glories of His Son!

One of these days, we Baptists will get to the place where we realize that publicly censoring women preachers like Julie Pennington-Russell, firing Baptist women professors like Sheri Klouda, walking out on women preachers like that young seminary student, or turning our back on women Baptist leaders – acting as if women don’t have a place in the kingdom of God – says more about our lack of love and grace toward all followers of Jesus Christ and our own disobedience to Christ’s great commandment than it does our “love for truth.”

My Dream

Last week, National Public Radio religion editor Barbara Bradley-Hagerty interviewed me for a piece she was doing, entitled “Baptist Leaders Face Challenge On Women’s Roles.” She quotes me in the radio interview as saying “Jesus treated women as equals” and that I believe “there is a quiet underground movement within the convention to rethink women’s roles.”

After my quote, you can hear slow laughing from a deep voice in the background – “Ha, Ha, Ha . . .” It was the voice of the director of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission in Washington, D.C. He then tells the radio audience, “Burleson is dreaming.” I reflected on the director’s statement. He is a brilliant man, capable of playing three-dimensional chess and formulating his rationale with cogent logic. He, like I, believes in an inerrant Bible. Upon reflection on his statement that I was dreaming, I came to the conclusion that he is right – “I have a dream . . .”

I have a dream that a woman like Wendy Norvelle, former acting vice president of the International Mission Board, will be promoted to a permanent position of leadership among Baptists because of her qualifications and gifts – and not barred from promotion because of her gender. I have a dream that a Southern Baptist woman like Major Paige Heard, the regimental Army chaplain at the historic West Point Military Academy, will be heard preaching the gospel at 10:30 a.m. every Sunday at the historic Cadet Chapel, and we Baptists will all know and believe that Major Heard is honoring Christ in her proclamation of the gospel and be proud to call her one of our Baptist chaplains. I have a dream that Baptists will one day make much over the gospel that women like Sarah Stewart preach and absolutely nothing over the gender they possess. I have a dream that, unlike their attitudes toward slavery in the 1800’s, Baptists in the south will realize that the Bible speaks against patriarchal homes where wives are slaves to their husbands, autocratic churches where women are servants to leaders, and authoritarian societies where women are subservient to men. I have a dream that young women in our Baptist conventions can follow great women missionaries of the past and travel overseas to share the gospel with both men and women, baptizing converts in the name of Jesus Christ and nurturing them in the ways of Scripture – just as Lottie Moon did over 150 years ago.

If some Baptists would say to me that my dream is simply a capitulation to the agenda of radical feminists, I respond with loving, but firm, words: “No, setting Baptist women free to serve is not relenting to societal or cultural pressures but, rather, it is fulfillment of the commandment of Christ Jesus Himself.” Regardless of whether or not my fellow Baptist conservatives agree with what I believe the Bible teaches regarding the real equality of women in Christ’s kingdom, there is no wiggle room when it comes to the commandment of our Lord. Every Baptist is obligated to love our Baptist women as Jesus has loved us.

I do not know of one time when Christ has ever withheld from me any good gift, has stifled my expression of any praise of Him, or shut me up from proclaiming His Word – so, logically, His commandment to love my sisters in Christ as He has loved me should negate any and every attempt to withhold from our faith community a Baptist woman gifted by Christ. Our obedience to His command should preclude any attempt to stifle a Baptist woman compelled to publicly praise Jesus Christ. It should lead us to resist any effort to shut up or censure any Baptist woman called to preach Christ and Him crucified. It is impossible for my Baptist brothers to point to any text – let me repeat this – it is impossible for my Baptist brothers to point to any text, that is properly understood in its context, that ever compels Baptist men to suppress Baptist women in terms of ministry. On the contrary, we are called by our Lord to support and love those women of faith just as our Lord has loved us.

Mission First, Methodology Second

Black Mesa is in the far northwestern edge of Oklahoma’s panhandle. Its summit is 4,972.9 feet above sea level, just under a football field of being 1 mile high. It is the highest point of elevation in Oklahoma. People come from all over the world to observe the stars that “kiss your nose” at night on Black Mesa.

This past June, on a sunny afternoon, I hiked to the top of Black Mesa. As I rested and reflected on the plateau before my descent, my eye caught a passenger jet flying east to west above me. I could clearly see the plane’s fuselage and the long, white crystallized cloud the jet formed as it crossed the blue sky. I thought about the couple of hundred passengers heading west. Then I looked down and saw a Burlington Northern-Santa Fe train snaking its way west as well. Beside the train was a modern state highway where a handful of cars were also heading west. Just a few miles south of the railroad tracks and the highway, easily seen from my position on Black Mesa, was the Old Santa Fe Trail (Cimarron Cutoff). Most travelers and traders heading west in the 1800’s took this trail by horseback, wagon, or foot. As I was thinking about all this, I pulled out my Blackberry Curve and saw that I had missed a couple of calls.

And then it hit me. For the past 200 years, the mission of every person who traversed the land before me was simple – go west. Their mission never changed and was the same – west, west, go west! But the methodology of going west has changed over the years – from foot, to horse, to wagon, to train, to car, to plane! How foolish would it be for someone today to use the same methodology that was being used in the 1820’s to fulfill the mission of heading west.

For Baptists, our mission has not changed for the past 200 years – nay, for the past 2000 years. Our mission is to proclaim Jesus, to preach Jesus, to publicize Jesus, to present Jesus, to give Jesus to a lost and dying world. Our mission is all about the story of Jesus. Men and women of faith are called by the One who commissioned us to support and love one another as we seek to fulfill that mission.

It is time that we Baptists see that the methodology by which we share Jesus must change, or we will die a slow death without ever accomplishing our mission. Whenever an institution crystallizes its methodology rather than its mission, the institution becomes brittle and dies. Jesus commands us to love each other – love those different from us, love those on mission with us, love each and every follower of Jesus. How we fulfill our mission will continually change. The walls are down. Our methodologies should be fluid, but our mission shall never change.

You may not like the fact that women are now being called by God to preach, or called by God to do missions, or called by God to teach. You may even consider it a violation of your principles for a woman to teach a man, or preach Christ to a man, or baptize a man, or lead a man, but there is one thing that you and I cannot – we *must* not – forget: You and I are called to love each and every sister in Christ who feels called to ministry. We are called to affirm the dignity of every Christian woman called to minister. We are commanded to treat them with respect and civility. We are also called to love, respect, and affirm the autonomy of local Baptist congregations and denominations that utilize these gifted women in ministry as they see fit. To censor or censure them, reject them, abuse them, or condemn their character is a sin of the first order.

The principles that Rick Warren gave to the Muslims 1 month ago are just as relevant to all of us Baptists today and for the years to come. The only way that we will ever have peace between Christians and the Muslims in this world is when we Baptists first begin to value the dignity of our sisters in Christ who are called to minister, to respect those churches that call them to serve, and to protect the individual freedoms of our fellow Baptists to think, believe, and act as their conscience leads them in obedience to Christ and His Word. It is only then that we will be able to display the kind of love that Jesus says will distinguish us from the rest of the world.

May the God of all peace give us the grace to live in this manner before all people for Christ's sake. Amen.