

Light and Darkness

The Church is an utterly distinctive creature in the world, and she has been created by God to have this distinction. Distinct means that she is like no other, that there is no one else that can compare to her. She is unique and exceptional, without peer or equal. Some may try at times to imitate or duplicate certain facets of her beauty and nature, but it is impossible to truly replicate the Church.

Some try to worship like her...yet the imitation lacks the conviction of the Church's worship. Some try to preach like her...yet the imitation lacks the authority of the Church's preaching. Some try to demonstrate like her...yet the imitation lacks the Church's sincerity and power. Some put on her clothes and try to put on her ways, yet they always find themselves back to this fact: the Church is distinct. There is nothing like her.

She is not beautiful in any conventional sense of the word. When the world looks at the Church the world considers her strange. The Church always seems to be out of place in the world...almost as if she were never quite at home. Her conduct isn't in step with the world...her character is foreign to those who live around her. Her appearance is as distinctive as her conduct, and reveals outwardly the inward holiness of her character.

The Church is so different as to be considered strange. That makes sense. The command of God Himself was, "Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing..." (2 Corinthians 6:17) She *is* separate. She *is* holy. She *is* distinct. Her Bridegroom doesn't want her to be like everyone else. He doesn't want Her to blend in. He doesn't want her to fit with the world. She is in the world, but not *of* it.

Different? Yes. Distinct? Yes. God wants her to be these things, but He also wants her to be attractive. How is this possible? How can someone so different than all the rest be attractive? For two reasons:

First of all, she is attractive because she *is* different. In a world where all denominations are becoming more and more identical in belief and practice, the Church stands out. At some point people grow tired of each church and preacher presenting the same tepid gruel in the same tepid way. At some point people will realize the emptiness that's in a so-called Christian life that is in truth the same as the world's. And when they grow tired, they'll be looking for something different.

Second of all, she is attractive because she is possessed of a Beautiful Spirit. In a world that is cold, she is compassionate. In a world that is hardhearted, she is merciful. In a world that is harsh, she is forgiving. In a

world that is sensual, she is modest. In a world that is polluted, she is pure. In a word, she has love.

But not just any love, it's God's love. It's the nature of God Himself that has been poured extravagantly through every room of her heart. In His love for her, He has emptied His Spirit into her in such a measure that it cannot be contained. Instead, this Beautiful Spirit, this Love flows out of her to all around her. Love empties from her with every word she speaks, with every act she performs. All she touches leaves behind a residue of love.

Love is attractive. "By this will all men know that ye are my disciples, in that ye have love one to another."

Every age and every generation has an ideal of beauty. To each age and generation there are certain characteristics that have greater appeal than others, and those possessing those characteristics are thought of as being beautiful. Recently the National Post published a list of what the Canadian public thought were the world's most beautiful women, and there was a remarkable similarity among those at the top of the list. The same features, the same hair, the same eyes...allowing for the fact that they were different people from different gene pools, they were yet very much the same.

However, in every age and in each generation there is an exception. This exception is a woman whose features cannot be categorized in the same broad class as the conventionally beautiful. She may have a nose that's a little too big, an imperfect gap between her teeth, she may be a little too skinny or a little too heavy. Her complexion may be too coarse or too sallow, she may be too tall or too short. But in any case, her looks do not fit into the shallow, bland, limited definition of popular opinion.

Yet, there is something about her that draws others to her. While you can't describe her as conventionally beautiful, there is something about her that is more than just lovely. There is an energy, a sparkle, a vitality that springs from within that causes her to be placed in a category all of her own. And it is this special something that serves as the source for her attractiveness. She is more than just lovely because this life springs from her.

Such is the beauty of the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ cannot be considered beautiful in the conventional meaning of the word. Oh yes, it's true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and when Jesus looks at the Church He sees His own true love. Yet what the world sees when it looks at the Church is not beautiful in the typical sense.

To the world, beauty would involve self-will...yet the Church is called to live self-surrendered. To the world, beauty would involve self-indulgence...yet

the Church is called to live self-sacrificing. To the world, beauty would involve pride...yet the Church is called to live in humility. To the world, beauty would involve sensuality...yet the Church is called to be modest. To the world, beauty would involve blending in...yet the Church is called to live separately and distinctly.

Knowing what He has called us to be, knowing what He expects of us, and knowing what Heaven's beauty requires, how then does He expect us to reach our world? If we do not act like everyone else, if we don't look like everyone else, if we are to be so different from the rest that we stand out, how is the world supposed to find the Church attractive?

The answer is love. Love is the something about her that draws others to her. Love is the something that makes her more than just lovely. Love is the energy, the sparkle, the vitality that springs from within that causes her to be placed in a category all of her own. Love is the special something that serves as the source for her attractiveness. She is more than just lovely because God's love springs from her.

Body:

These are the words of the Master Himself in John 13:35; "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." This was Jesus' new commandment: "that ye love one another as I have loved you." This love of God, flooded extravagantly through our hearts by the Holy Ghost, is what Heaven declares to be God's best witness. Love is what validates the exercise of spiritual gifts, love is the first product of the Holy Ghost in a believer's life. Our grand emotional experiences are only worthwhile if love results from them. Our enthusiastic and ecstatic experiences make us love or they cannot be of the Holy Ghost...for the fruit of the Spirit is manifested in love.

The Scriptures make it obvious that there can be no demonstration of power that is independent of a demonstration of love. The same Spirit that we ask to perform miracles will make our hearts love, and will not do one without the other. The first Epistle of John makes a clear connection between the presence of God and the presence of love in a believer's life. But as plain as the Scripture is, we struggle with love.

We struggle with love because we don't love because we don't want to feel. We struggle with love because we don't want to hurt. We struggle with love because it's easier to live emotionally disconnected. Love is risky. Love can mean pain. So we isolate ourselves one from another and try to live among each other without truly loving each other. But a child of God who tries to live without loving is denying the work of the Spirit in his life and is denying the world the most powerful witness of Jesus.

So, how does it begin? How does someone who struggles with loving others begin to love? How does someone who keeps everyone at arms length begin to love? How do Christians begin to love each other as Jesus commanded?

It begins with acceptance. We start by accepting each other. Acceptance is the first doorway through which all relationships must pass. Taking one another at face value is where relationships must start. It's the starting point, and not the goal. If we are serious about love, then we must take each other as we are...and not as we wish each other to be.

The common experience of the new birth makes us brothers. Brotherhood is not something that we achieve; it is a fact of birth. In the Church, acceptance must be based on this simple truth; if you've been born again, you're family. And if you're family, I don't need any other reason to accept you. This acceptance doesn't come with conditions attached. You're beliefs and you're behavior do not change the fact of birth. Whether or not we agree, and whether or not I approve of your activities, the fact of birth makes us brethren.

It is the common Fatherhood of God and the Motherhood of the Church that makes us family. We need no other reason to love our brothers and sisters in Christ other than they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Learning to simply accept each other is how we begin to learn how to love each other.

But do you know how we typically try to reach out? By seeking out those who agree with us and are like us. We gravitate toward people who feel like we do on most things, people who are like us in most ways. Listen, agreement is a valuable and important component of a working relationship, for the Scripture says that two cannot "walk together" unless they are agreed. However, you don't have to agree with someone to accept them and love them. We are called upon to accept one another, and to try and understand each other.

We are so different, you and I. While we may share some characteristics, mostly we are very different. We have different likes, different dislikes, and different feelings about different things. And there are reasons why we are different. Do you realize that no two of us will react exactly the same way to the same circumstances? Do you realize that all of life's circumstances up to this point have come together to make you and I what we are? There is no way that we can all be the same! Yet we can seek to understand each other.

The list of the twelve disciples of Jesus reveals a group of people who were as different as they were alike. What did they have in common? Two

things: 1. they were all Jews, and 2. they were all called. Other than that, these were very different people.

For instance, there's no way you can read the Scriptures and get the idea that Peter and Nathaniel were anything alike. Peter is presented as a bold, bluff, sometimes overbearing man. Nathaniel is presented as a thoughtful, studious, and probably quiet man. Then there's Simon Zealotes; translation, Simon the Zealot...and the Zealots were a group of nationalistic Jews who advocated assassinating Romans and Jews who consorted with them. Standing beside Simon Zealotes is Matthew the Publican...a tax collector for the Roman government. You will not find men any more different in thought or feeling than these two. Yet, at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry these same men would stand united on the day of Pentecost, and would go everywhere preaching the same Gospel.

The point is this: it's okay for us to be different. What we need is a good dose of understanding of why we are different.

You see, understanding provides a gateway for grace. When my brother is struggling, understanding will tend to make me merciful. Understanding will make me merciful because I will recognize that my brother's struggle could very easily be my own. This is the spirit behind Paul's injunction in Galatians 6:1 where he writes; "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." While there may be points of weakness that are particular to each of us, we share more weaknesses than we may care to admit. We have humanity in common. Understanding recognizes that the humanity in our brother is our own humanity as well. Struggles and failings are common to us all. Understanding doesn't make allowances or excuses for sin, but it does make room for grace and restoration.

Understanding not only provides a gateway for grace in time of weakness, it also brings appreciation for my brother's strengths and abilities. This appreciation is vital to establishing healthy relationships. We are far too inclined to dismiss the gifted among us as having acquired their abilities with ease...that they could not have possibly worked as hard as we! But when we open ourselves to understanding our brothers, we begin to discover that they have struggled, labored, and battled as much as we. There are no "silver spoons" in the church; each true ministry must endure it's own trial of fire. There are no gifts handed out on "silver platters"; it would be well for all of us to remember that to whom much is given, much is required. Understanding allows us to begin to discover just what our brother's abilities have cost them.

By the same token, we are also apt to be dismissive of those who may not be as openly talented as others. We often ignore those who don't do what we do as well as we do. We tend to look down on people whose strengths may not be as obviously seen. But we've got to understand this: all bring their particular abilities to the Family. One person's strengths are likely to be different from another's. Instead of valuing only those who share our particular giftings, understanding opens the way for us to appreciate each other for what we bring to the Church.

Accepting our brothers and sisters as we find them also opens the door for us to begin to understand the elements that have formed their emotional make up. It's easy to be critical of a someone's personality, manners (or lack of them,) and temperament, if we haven't been close enough to them to understand what makes them "tick". We don't need to psychoanalyze them, but a little understanding goes a long way toward establishing good relationships with those of us who are more prickly than others.

What has made him what he is? What events have transpired in his life to form his personality? What successes have given him confidence, and what failures have scarred him? He was not born into the world as he is now. Each person in his life has exerted influence and helped shape him. Each event, good or bad, molds him more and more. All of these combined have brought him to be as you've found him. Understanding allows you to appreciate the particular strengths that he brings to the Body, while at the same time allowing you to be gracious with his quirks, and merciful with his weaknesses.

Closing:

The Church is so distinctive. We have to be. God has commanded us to be. How can a church that is so distinctive as to seem odd win the very world that is opposed to her on so many levels?

Love is always attractive. Unconditional love always draws. It is this kind of love, revealed in acceptance and understanding, that will make this church more than just lovely. In this world, starved for the very things that Jesus commanded us to show, nothing will be more attractive than people who love one another.