
CONSTRAINING LOVE | *J. Gresham Machen, 1881-1937*

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

2 Cor. 5:14–15¹

In these great verses Paul speaks of love as a constraining force. Love, he says, hems us in. There are certain things which love prevents us from doing.

Earlier in the passage, he has spoken of another restraining force—namely, fear. “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord,” he says, “we persuade men.” Since we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, it behooves us to stand in fear of him; and there are many things which, because we shall stand before his judgment seat, we are afraid to do.

That motive of fear is used in many places in the Bible. It is used in the Old Testament. It is used in the New Testament. It is used with particular insistence in the teaching of Jesus. I think it is one of the strangest of modern aberrations when men say that it is a degrading and sub-Christian thing to tell man to stand in fear of God. Many passages in the Bible might be summarized by the words: “The fear of God constraineth us.”

“THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONSTRAINETH US”

In our text, however, it is something other than fear that is the thing that is said to constrain us or hem us in. It is *love*. “The love of Christ,” Paul says, “constraineth us.”

What then is here meant by the love of Christ? Our first impulse, perhaps, might be to say that it is *our* love of Christ, the love which *we* bear to Christ, the love in our hearts for Christ our Savior. The comparison with verse 11 might perhaps suggest that view. As there the fear which is in our hearts when we think of our standing before the judgment seat of Christ constrains us from doing things that we might otherwise do, so here the love which is in our hearts when we think of what Christ has done for us might seem to be the second constraining force of which Paul speaks.

Now if that is the right interpretation, the verse tells us something that is certainly true. It is certainly true, and eminently in accordance with Paul’s teaching elsewhere, that the love of Christ which we have in our hearts restrains us from doing things which otherwise we might do. We refrain from doing those things not only because we are afraid to do them, but also

¹ This sermon was preached at the communion service that preceded the Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America (renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1939) on November 12, 1936. It appeared in the *Presbyterian Guardian* (December 12, 1936.) Dr. Machen died on January 1, 1937. Copyright © 2008, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. All Rights Reserved.

because we love Christ too much to do them. Ah, how powerful a restraining force in the Christian's life is the love he bears to Christ, his Savior! That love in the Christian's heart is a restraining force even more powerful than any fear.

As a matter of fact, however, that is *not* Paul's meaning here. The love of Christ which he here says constrains us is not our love for Christ, but it is *Christ's love for us*. We are restrained from doing evil things, Paul says, by that unspeakable love which Christ manifested when he died for us on the cross.

“BECAUSE WE HAVE THUS JUDGED”

Well, then, if it is Christ's love for us which constrains us, according to this verse, how does Christ's love for us produce that constraining effect in our lives?

The following words give the answer. “The love of Christ constraineth us,” Paul says, “because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.” I do not think that the translation “because we thus judge,” though it appears in both the Authorized and in the Revised Version, is strictly accurate. It ought rather to be “because we *have* thus judged.” The great conviction that Christ died for all and that therefore all died is not formed again and again in Paul's mind as though it were a new conviction, but it has already been formed. It is one of the basic convictions underlying all Paul's Christian life. “The love of Christ constraineth us,” Paul says, “because we formed the conviction long ago that Christ died for all and that therefore all died.” Those who have that conviction, as Paul had, already formed in their minds are restrained ever after from doing certain things which otherwise they might do. Since they are convinced that Christ died for them, they cannot thereafter do the things that are displeasing to him—to him who by his death for them showed that he loved them with such a wonderful love. Once they are convinced that Christ's death was a death for them, their gratitude to the one who died hems them in, restrains them from evil, more effectively than they could have been restrained by prison bars.

That much, I think, is certainly in this passage. We have here a true scriptural basis for the great hymn of Isaac Watts:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

The overpowering love of Christ for us, manifested when he died for us on the cross, calls forth our all in response. Nothing can be so precious to us that we should not give it up to him who gave himself there for us on the tree.

But although that is no doubt taught or implied in the passage, a great deal more is taught. There are great depths of additional meaning in the passage, and we must try to explore those depths just a little further before we sit at the table of the Lord.

“THEREFORE ALL DIED”

“The love of Christ constraineth us,” Paul says, “because we have thus judged, that one died for all, *therefore all died*.” Those are rather strange words, when you come to think of it—“One died for all, therefore all died.” How does the second of these two propositions follow

from the former? Why should we draw from the fact that one died for all the inference that therefore all died? A very different inference might conceivably be drawn. It might be said with more apparent show of reason: "One died for all, therefore all did *not* die; one died for all, therefore all lived." When one man dies for others, the usual purpose of his dying is that those others may not have to die; he dies that those others may live.

Yet here we have it said that one died for all and then all died. Apparently the death of Christ did no good to those for whom he died. Apparently he did not succeed in rescuing them from death. Apparently they had to die after all.

It might look at least as though Paul ought to have recognized the contradiction. It might look as though he ought to have said: "One died for all, *nevertheless* all died." But he does not recognize the contradiction at all. He puts the death of Christ not as something that might conceivably prevent the death of others, but as something that actually brought with it the death of others. He says not: "One died for all, nevertheless all died," but: "One died for all, *therefore* all died."

The thing might seem strange to the unbeliever; it might seem strange to the man who should come to this passage without having read the rest of the Bible and in particular the rest of the Epistles of Paul. But it does not seem at all strange to the Christian; it does not seem at all strange to the man who reads it in connection with the great central teaching of the Word of God regarding the Cross of Christ.

Christ died for all, therefore all died—of course, that is so because Christ was the representative of all when he died. The death that he died on the cross was in itself the death of all. Since Christ was the representative of all, therefore all may have been said to have died there on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem when Christ died.

We may imagine a dialogue between the law of God and a sinful man.

"Man," says the law of God, "have you obeyed my commands?"

"No," says the sinner, "I have transgressed them in thought, word, and deed."

"Well, then, sinner," says the law, "have you paid the penalty which I have pronounced upon those who have disobeyed? Have you died in the sense that I meant when I said, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die'?"

"Yes," says the sinner, "I have died. That penalty that you pronounced upon my sin has been paid."

"What do you mean," says the law, "by saying that you have died? You do not look as though you had died. You look as though you were very much alive."

"Yes," says the sinner, "I have died. I died there on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem; for Jesus died there as my representative and my substitute. I died there, so far as the penalty of the law was concerned."

"You say Christ is your representative and substitute," says the law. "Then I have indeed no further claim of penalty against you. The curse which I pronounced against your sin has indeed been fulfilled. My threatenings are very terrible, but I have nothing to say against those for whom Christ died."

That, my friends, is what Paul means by the tremendous "therefore," when he says: "One died for all, *therefore* all died." On that "therefore" hangs all our hope for time and for eternity.

FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?

But what does he mean by “all”? “One died for *all*,” he says, “therefore all died.” He seems to lay considerable emphasis upon that word “all.” What does he mean by it?

Well, I suppose our Christian brethren in other churches, our Christian brethren who are opposed to the Reformed faith, might be tempted to make that word “all” mean, in this passage, “all men”; they might be tempted to make it refer to the whole human race. They might be tempted to interpret the words “Christ died for all” to mean “Christ died for all men everywhere, whether Christian or not.”

But if they are tempted to make it mean that, they ought to resist the temptation, since this passage is really a very dangerous passage for them to lay stress on in support of their view.

In the first place, the context is dead against it. It is rather strongly against the view that “Christ died for all men.” All through this passage, Paul is speaking not of the relation of Christ to all men, but of the relation of Christ to the church.

In the second place, the view that “Christ died for all” means “Christ died for all men” proves too much. The things that Paul says in this passage about those for whom Christ died do not fit those who merely have the gospel offered to them; they fit only those who accept the gospel for the salvation of their soul. Can it be said of all men, including those who reject the gospel or have never heard it, that they died when Christ died on the cross; can it be said of them that they no longer live unto themselves but unto the Christ who died for them? Surely these things cannot be said of all men, and therefore the word “all” does not mean “all men.”

Perhaps, indeed, it will be said that Paul is speaking only of the purpose of Christ in dying for all men, without implying that that purpose was accomplished. Perhaps, it will be said, he means only that Christ died for them, without at all implying how many of those for whom Christ died actually accomplished that purpose by living in that way.

Well—quite aside from the difficulty of supposing that God’s purpose ever fails—I can only say that if that meaning is to be attributed to the passage, the force of the passage is, to say the least, seriously impaired. Did Christ upon the cross die merely to make *possible* my salvation? Did he die merely for the great mass of humanity and then leave it to the decision of individuals in that mass whether they would make any use of what Christ purchased for them at such cost? Was I, in the thought of the Son of God when he died there on Calvary, merely one in the great mass of persons who might possibly at some future time accept the benefits of his death?

I tell you, my friends, if I thought that—if, in other words, I became a consistent Arminian instead of a Calvinist—I should feel almost as though the light had forever gone out of my soul. No, indeed, my friends, Christ did not die there on Calvary merely to make possible our salvation. He died to *save* us. He died not merely to provide a general benefit for the human race from which we might at some future time draw, as from some general fund, what is needed for the salvation of our souls. No, thank God, he died there on the cross for us individually. He called us, when he died for us, by our names. He loved us not as infinitesimal particles in the mass of the human race, but he loved us every one.

Do you ask how that could be? Do you ask how Christ, when he died, could have in his mind and heart every one of the millions of those who had been saved under the old dispensation and who were to be saved in the long centuries that were to come? I will tell you how it

could be. It could be because Christ is God. Being God, he knows us every one, with an intimacy that is far greater than the intimacy of the tenderest mother's love.

People say that Calvinism is a dour, hard creed. How broad and comforting, they say, is the doctrine of a universal atonement, the doctrine that Christ died equally for all men there upon the cross! How narrow and harsh, they say, is this Calvinistic doctrine—one of the “five points” of Calvinism—this doctrine of the “limited atonement,” this doctrine that Christ died for the elect of God in a sense in which he did not die for the unsaved!

But do you know, my friends, it is surprising that men say that. It is surprising that they regard the doctrine of a universal atonement as being a comforting doctrine. In reality it is a very gloomy doctrine indeed. Ah, if it were only a doctrine of a universal salvation, instead of a doctrine of a universal atonement, then it would no doubt be a very comforting doctrine; then no doubt it would conform wonderfully well to what we in our puny wisdom might have thought the course of the world should have been. But a universal atonement without a universal salvation is a cold, gloomy doctrine indeed. To say that Christ died for all men alike and that then not all men are saved, to say that Christ died for humanity simply in the mass, and that the choice of those who out of that mass are saved depends upon the greater receptivity of some as compared with others—that is a doctrine that takes from the gospel much of its sweetness and much of its joy. From the cold universalism of that Arminian creed we turn ever again with a new thankfulness to the warm and tender individualism of our Reformed faith, which we believe to be in accord with God's holy Word. Thank God we can say, every one, as we contemplate Christ upon the cross, not just: “He died for the mass of humanity, and how glad I am that I am amid that mass,” but: “He loved *me* and gave himself *for me*; *my name* was written from all eternity upon his heart, and when he hung and suffered there on the cross, he thought of *me, even me*, as one for whom in his grace he was willing to die.”

“SHOULD NOT HENCEFORTH LIVE UNTO THEMSELVES”

That is what Paul means when he says, “One died for all, therefore all died.” But is that all that Paul says? No, he says something more; and we must consider briefly that something more, before we turn away from this marvelous passage.

“All of us died,” Paul says, “since it was as our representative that Christ died.” But what then? What becomes afterwards of those who have thus died to the curse of the law? Are they free thereafter to live as they please, because the penalty of their sins has been paid?

Paul gives the answer in no uncertain terms. “One died for all,” he says, “therefore all died, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

Some people upon this earth, he says, have passed through a wonderful thing! They have died. That is, Christ died for them as their representative. They have died so far as concerns the death which the law of God pronounces as the penalty of sin. They died there on Calvary in the person of Christ their Savior. But what of them now? Look at them, and you might think, if you were a very superficial observer, that they are living very much as before. They are subject to all the petty limitations of human life. They are walking the streets of Corinth or of Philadelphia. They are going about their daily tasks. They might seem to be very much the same. Ah, but, says Paul, they are not really the same; a great change has taken place in them. They are living upon this earth. Yes, that is granted. They are living in the flesh. Very true. But their lives—their humdrum, working lives upon this earth—have now an entirely

new direction. Formerly they were living unto themselves; now they are living unto Christ. What greater change could there possibly be than that?

Christ had that change definitely in view, Paul says, when he died for them on the cross. He did not die for them on the cross in order that they might live with impunity in sin. He did not die for them on the cross in order that they might continue to live for themselves. He died that they might live for him.

“One died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves”—let us stop just there for a moment to notice that at that point the grand circle is complete. Paul has got back to the assertion with which he began; only now he has shown gloriously how it is that that assertion is true. He began by saying, “The love of Christ constraineth us,” and now he has shown how that constraint has been brought about. “The love of Christ constraineth us; because we have thus judged, that one died for all, therefore all died; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live for themselves.” “Should not henceforth live unto themselves”—that is the constraint of which Paul started out to speak. A man who may not live unto himself is indeed under constraint. All the impulses of fallen man lead him to live unto himself. A hundred selfish passions and appetites crave free course. Yet here are fallen men who check the free course of those selfish passions and appetites. What has caused them to do so? The answer is “Christ’s love.” He loved them. Loving them, he died for them on the cross. Dying for them on the cross, he wiped out the curse of the law against them, that in the new life that they then began by his Spirit to live they might, by thinking on his death, be led to live no longer unto themselves. What a wonderful restraining force was exerted by Christ’s dying love! How many things, freely done by the men of the world, the Christian is restrained by Christ’s love from doing!

Yes, it is indeed true that, if we are real Christians, “the love of Christ constraineth us.” Paul is not afraid to use a very drastic word in this connection. He is not afraid to say: “The love of Christ hems us in, surrounds us on every side as with a barrier or wall.”

The reason why he is not afraid to say that is that he is going to wipe the paradox out in this very same verse: he is going to show his readers at once that the restraint of which he speaks is the most glorious freedom; he is going to make abundantly plain right in this very passage that the Christian life is not a cabined and confined life at all, but a life that is marvelously right and free. The Christian is restrained from doing certain things. True. But he is restrained from doing those things not in order that he may do nothing at all, but in order that he may do other things that are infinitely more worthwhile. He is restrained from doing evil things, that he may do the things that are good; he is restrained from doing things that bring death, in order that he may do things that belong to eternal life.

“BUT UNTO HIM WHICH DIED FOR THEM”

What are those good things in the doing of which Christian freedom is shown? Ah, how wonderfully does Paul sum them up in this glorious verse! Listen to the grand climax with which the sentence ends. “The love of Christ constraineth us,” he says, “because we have thus judged, that one died for all, therefore all died; and that he died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, *but unto him which died for them.*” “But unto him which died for them”—ah, there is the refutation forever of the charge brought by carnal men that the Christian life is a narrow and restricted life, a life hemmed in by “Thou shalt nots,” but without high aspirations or a worthy goal. No, it is not a narrow and restricted life at all.

What sweet and lovely thing in human living may not be included in that one great business of living unto Christ? Art, you say? Is that excluded? No, indeed. Christ made the beauty of the world, and he made men that they might enjoy that beauty and celebrate it unto his praise. Science? All the wonders of the universe are his. He made all, and the true man of science has the privilege of looking just a little way into his glorious works. Every high and worthy human pursuit may be ennobled and enlarged by being consecrated unto Christ. But highest of all is the privilege of bringing other souls to him. That privilege belongs not only to the wise and learned. It belongs to the humblest Christians. To be the instrument in saving a soul from death—what more wonderful adventure can there be than that? No, the Christian life is not a narrow and restricted life. It is a life most wonderfully free. What rich harvest fields it offers, what broad prospects, what glittering mountain heights!

In all that life of high endeavor the Christian thinks always of the One to whom he owes it all, the One who died. Ever does he remember that one died for all, and that therefore all died. What depth of love in the Christian's heart is called forth by that story of the dying love of Christ! What a barrier it is against selfishness and sin, what an incentive to brave and loving deeds! He died for all, and in the true Christian's life the purpose of his dying is indeed fulfilled, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them.

“AND ROSE AGAIN”

We have almost finished. We have read the passage almost to the end. But there is one word that we have so far not touched. It is the very last word. Sadly incomplete would our exposition be if we did not now notice that tremendous word.

“The love of Christ constraineth us; because we have thus judged, that one died for all, therefore all died; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and *rose again*.”

“And *rose again*”—that is the word (it is one word in the Greek) that we must notice at last before we sit down together at the table of our Lord.

How does our thought of the death of Christ restrain us from evil and inspire us to good? Is it merely like the thought of some dear one who has gone? Is it merely the thought of that last smile on a mother's face; is it merely like our thought of the last touch of her vanished hand; is it merely like the memory of those last loving words when she bade us be true and good?

Well, we do think of the death of our Lord in some such way as that. We commemorate that death today in the broken bread and the poured-out cup. We think of that simple story in the Gospels which tells how he broke the bread with his disciples, endured mocking of wicked men, was taken outside the walls, and died for the love that he bore to us sinners. And as we think on that story, our hearts melt within us and we are ashamed to offend against such love. We say to ourselves, in the words of the sweet Christian hymn:

O, dearly, dearly has he loved!
 And we must love him too,
 And trust in his redeeming blood,
 And try his works to do.

But is that all? No, it is not all, my friends. It is not all, because that One who there died for us is now alive. He is not dead, but is with us in blessed presence today. He died for all, that they which live should not live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and *rose again*. We do more than commemorate his death when we sit around the table this morning. We rejoice also in his presence. And as we go forth from this place, we must live as those who are ever in his sight. Are we in temptation? Let us remember that he who died for us, and who by his dying love constrains us that we fall not into sin, is with us today, and is grieved if we dishonor him in our lives. It is not to a memory merely that we Christians have dedicated ourselves. It is to the service of a living Savior. Let us remember always that “he died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves but unto him which died for them and *rose again*.”

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA

This morning we, a little branch of his church universal, are gathered for the first time together around his table. We shall go forth from this service into the deliberations of this Assembly and then into the varied work of the church.

If we remember what this service commemorates, there are certain things which we shall be constrained by Christ’s love not to do.

We shall be constrained, for example, not to weaken in the stand which we have taken for the sake of Christ. How many movements have begun bravely like this one, and then have been deceived by Satan—have been deceived by Satan into belittling controversy, condoning sin and error, seeking favor from the world or from a worldly church, substituting a worldly urbanity for Christian love. May Christ’s love indeed constrain us, that we may not thus fall!

We shall be constrained, in the second place, from seeking unworthily our own advantage or preferment, and from being jealous of the advantage or preferment of our brethren. May Christ’s love indeed constrain us, that we fall not into faults such as these!

We shall be constrained, in the third place, from stifling discussion for the sake of peace and from (as has been said) “shelving important issues in moments of silent prayer.” May Christ’s love constrain us from such a misuse of the sacred and blessed privilege of prayer! May Christ’s love prevent us from doing anything to hinder our brethren from giving legitimate expression to the convictions of their minds and hearts!

We shall be constrained, in short, from succumbing to the many dangers which always beset a movement such as this. Christ’s love alone will save us from such dangers.

But Christ’s love will do more than restrain us from evil. It will lead us also into good. It will do more than prevent us from living unto ourselves. It will also lead us to live unto him.

What a wonderful, open door God has placed before the Presbyterian Church of America! A pagan world, weary and sick, often distrusting its own modern gods. A saving gospel strangely entrusted to us unworthy messengers. A divine Book with unused resources of glory and power. Ah, what a marvelous opportunity, my brethren! What a privilege to proclaim not some partial system of truth, but the full, glorious system which God has revealed in his Word, and which is summarized in the wonderful standards of our faith! What a privilege to get those hallowed instruments, in which that truth is summarized, down from the shelf and write them in patient instruction, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, upon the tablets of the children’s hearts! What a privilege to present our historic standards in all their fullness in the pulpit and at the teacher’s desk and in the Christian home! What a privilege to do that for the one reason

that those standards present, not a “man-made creed,” but what God has told us in his holy Word! What a privilege to proclaim that same system of divine truth to the unsaved! What a privilege to carry the message of the Cross, unshackled by compromising associations, to all the world! What a privilege to send it to foreign lands! What a privilege to proclaim it to the souls of people who sit in nominally Christian churches and starve for lack of the bread of life! Oh, yes, what a privilege and what a joy, my brethren! Shall we lose that joy for any selfishness or jealousy; shall we lose it for any of the sins into which every one of us without exception is prone to fall?

Only one thing can prevent us from losing it, my brethren. Only one thing can bestow it upon us in all its fullness. That one thing is the love of Jesus Christ our Savior—the love that we celebrate as we sit this morning around the table of our Lord. That love alone can restrain us from the sins that will, if unchecked, destroy this Church’s life—the sins of the preacher of this morning, the sins of those to whom he preaches. That alone can send us forth rejoicing to live for him who died. As we sit now at his table, and commemorate his dying love, may the blessed words that we have read together this morning sink deep into our minds and hearts and bear fruit in our lives. May it now indeed be true of us that: “The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”