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Two Bad, One Good
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Introduction

Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. (June 1, 1924 – April 12, 2006) was an American liberal Christian clergyman and long-time peace activist. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church, and served as the Chaplain of Yale University, from 1958 until 1975. Coffin used his pulpits “as a platform for like-minded crusaders” including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. In 1977, he became senior minister at the Riverside Church—an interdenominational congregation, one of the most prominent churches in New York City.

Coffin said: “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, and one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.”

- Uncritical lovers
- Loveless critics
- Lover’s quarrel

His words caught my attention because not long ago I went to a mandatory denominational meeting. My Reformed Church calls it a “classis” meeting; Presbyterians call it a “presbytery” meeting. We had a speaker named Roger, who gave a rapid-fire presentation on conflict resolution, and remembering to “Speak the truth in love”. I thought his points were rather simplistic, but I **remember** three things he said, maybe because they were so simple.

1. Love without truth is a lie.
2. Truth without love is cruel.
3. In any situation, seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

His points and Rev. Coffin’s explanation of patriots matched so well. There are 3 kinds of patriots and 3 things to consider when living as a Christian in America in 2010.

We can be “**uncritical lovers**”. Uncritical lovers live without truth. Uncritical lovers think everything is fine just the way it is, or at least they pretend that everything is acceptable. If our relationships with our children or spouse or friends are based on being nice, tolerant and being accepting, we will never have an honest relationship. We might not have any conflict, but we will be liars. The same holds true with our relationship to our country.

If we hold back and simply accept what happens in our local or extended world, if we base our citizenship on the idea that our nation is perfect, if our bumper sticker reads: “***USA, love it or leave it!***” we are hiding from the truth.

To paraphrase I John 1: “If we say our country is perfect we deceive ourselves and we are liars”. We might love our country but we are liars, none the less.

When the prophet Isaiah was challenging God’s people about bad laws and inappropriate commitments, Isaiah said: “We have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.” God’s response was: “I will make justice the measuring line and

righteousness the plumb line; hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie, and water will overflow your hiding place" (Isaiah 28:15-17). We can't hide from God when we choose to ignore justice. God requires us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. Justice requires truth and it's the work of Christians. Psalm 66 reminds us that God's eyes are on the nations.

I doubt many of us are uncritical lovers. Some people I know are just the opposite.

They are "**loveless critics**". People who feel they have the right to say the truth in any or all circumstances, are simply cruel. I appreciated that affirmation from the speaker at my meeting. Because of conflict in the church I was a member of before I came here, people became downright mean to each other. It became a family critical and without love, and it was too painful to be there. As Kenny Chesney sings: "I've been there, that's why I'm here."

The same with our relationship with our country, if our bumper sticker reads :"**Vote for NOBODY, "cause NOBODY cares and NOBODY will fix what's wrong!"**" we are loveless, and I suppose maybe hopeless critics.

Early on in the "Sound of Music" young Brigitta tells the new governess, Maria: "Your dress is the ugliest one I ever saw". Later in the play/movie she speaks more gently, and yet still truthfully when she points out the love she sees blooming between Maria and her formerly stern father. When you love with someone, you find gentle but honest ways to express your opinion, especially when it's a differing one.

Jesus was known to be loving, but also truthful. Sometime look in your concordance at how many times Jesus said "I tell you the truth".

Truth. "We hold these truths to be self-evident." We value truth. That's why the United States of America is still a great place to live. We can love our country **and** disagree with things that happen. We can speak what we believe is the truth, and not fear imprisonment or persecution. We can love this land and still be critical of its leaders and law-makers and enforcers.

The Biblical mandate about honest communication is usually quoted from Ephesians 4:14-16: So we are to "no longer tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

The objective in honesty is maturity and understanding, not winning some battle. Sometimes we are critical simply because we can be. But we don't have to be!

So instead of being uncritical lovers or loveless critics, Rev. Coffin suggests we enter into a "**lover's quarrel**" with our government. The most heartfelt quarrels are those between people that really care for one another. I hope we can believe that our United States government loves us and wants the best for us. I believe most of us love our

United States, “our home, sweet home”, and want what’s best for it. So can I infer that we are in some respects, able to have a lover’s quarrel with our nation?

If we are going to be effective in our communication and lover’s quarreling we must remember my seminar presenter’s third catchy phrase, borrowed from St. Francis of Assisi.

“O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek To be consoled as to console, **To be understood as to understand**, To be loved as to love.”

We need to “seek to understand before seeking to be understood”. It means that it is appropriate to challenge wars or policies or laws or taxes *if* we do our home-work and know the implications. We can not speak first and ask questions later. In our homes and our church, as in our nation, we Christian Americans are to seek “things that make for unity, purity and peace”. “Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.”

Warren Cole Smith, the associate publisher of *WORLD Magazine*, the nation’s largest Christian news magazine, has written a book entitled: “A Lover’s Quarrel With The Evangelical Church” The introduction explains his thinking this way:

“I call it a lover’s quarrel with the evangelical church because I believe it is important to speak the truth with love, as Scripture commands, but also to speak it as two lovers would. In a marriage, two become one. When a husband cuts his wife, he injures himself. So it is with the church. We are all members of the body of Christ. When one hurts, we all hurt. There is a unity and oneness to the body. Therefore, it is not the goal of this book to destroy, but to encourage, sharpen, and build. Looking deeply into the very nature of things, and then rightly naming those things, is at the very heart of what it means to be human. It should be at the very center of any quest for the truth.” I Peter 2:9-10 says: “ You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” We are God’s people. We are God’s people planted here in this country.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves” - we are called to search for the truth, and that’s the work of all of us, not just the elected officials.

As people of God we are in another lover’s quarrel. A constant quarrel between us and God. We quarrel because: “God loves us the way we are, but too much to leave us that way” (Leighton Ford). And as God works in us, we have been given the right, as children of God, to confront God, and to quarrel with God with our distresses- if you don’t believe me turn to the Psalms!

Do we love our nation enough to restore its health? Do we try to encourage, sharpen and build it up? Dr. Bill Coffin suggested that we keep a "Politically Engaged Spirituality". That we hold onto HOPE! Coffin wrote: "Hope is a state of mind, independent of the state of the world. If your heart's full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So (he said) while I'm not optimistic, I'm always hopeful."

So maybe our bumper sticker should say "**Hope dies last**".

Brian Doerksen has written several familiar modern Christian songs. Here's one for today.

Jesus hope of the nations, Jesus comfort for all who mourn
You are the source of Heaven's hope on earth.
Jesus light in the darkness, Jesus truth in each circumstance
You are the source of Heaven's light on earth.
In history You lived and died
You broke the chains You rose to life.
You are the hope living in us
You are the rock in Whom we trust You are the light,
Shining for all the world to see .
You rose from the dead conquering fear
Our Prince of Peace drawing us near
Jesus our hope living for all who will receive.
Lord we believe !

Amen