

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "The Second Pillar of Christian Unity: *Agape Love*"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of July 11, 2010

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## **Christian Unity: A Sound Structure**

Today we're continuing our focus on the important issue of Christian unity. We're looking in particular at what God's Word tells us in Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. In this passage we find what we may properly call the *Biblical structure* of genuine Christian unity.

Now, the same principle that applies to every *physical* structure also applies to the *invisible* structure of the church. Every building, whether it's your house, or a skyscraper in New York City – every building has to have a strong superstructure, and that superstructure has to be built on a rock-solid foundation. If the structure is going to stand up against the forces of nature – wind, rain, snow, ice, and even tornados and earthquakes in some parts of the world – then that structure has to rest firmly upon its foundation, and the supporting columns or pillars that rise from that foundation have to be strong and durable.

This is the kind of structure that we find here in Colossians for the unity of the church – the unity of the invisible body of all believers, under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a structure that will withstand all the forces of Satan. Here is what we find: The structure of genuine Christian unity consists of four strong pillars, and these four pillars are erected upon an absolutely firm foundation.

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## **Christ the Foundation**

So, the first question we need to answer is, "What is the foundation?" We saw the foundation of Christian unity as we studied Colossians chapter one. The foundation is the inspired, infallible, inerrant written Word of God, and the Word of God made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians chapter one that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the church. Beginning at chapter one, verse thirteen, Paul tells us that God the Father

has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things [that is He is before all things chronologically – He is eternal], and in Him all things consist [literally all things hang together]. And He is the head of the body, the church, Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (Colossians 1:13-18)

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In Matthew chapter sixteen, we read that Peter made the great public confession of faith. He said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (verse 16). And Jesus answered, "Upon this rock" – upon this fact, that I am the Christ, the Son of the Living God – "upon this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (verse 18).

On the night before He went to the cross, the genuine unity of all believers was the central focus of Jesus' prayer to the Father in John chapter seventeen. It was the thing that was foremost in His heart. John tells us that Jesus was praying not only for His disciples then and there. He was also praying for all the believers who would come to saving faith in Christ down through the centuries. In other words, there in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was praying for you and me. He was praying for the church today. John seventeen tells us that Jesus said this: He said, I pray, Father –

for those who will believe in Me through their word [that is, through the Scriptures] that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect [or complete, or mature] in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. (John 17:21-23)

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The Word of God, and the person and work of Jesus Christ, are the foundation of Christian unity. In First Corinthians chapter three, verse eleven, Paul declares that "no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus."

In Isaiah chapter twenty-eight and verse sixteen, we read this prophecy concerning the Lord Jesus Christ: "Therefore thus saith the Lord God, 'Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation...'"

Peter in his declaration to the Jewish rulers in Acts chapter four said this: "This [Jesus] is 'the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

And in Second Timothy chapter two, verse nineteen Paul says this: "The solid foundation of God stands, having this seal [in other words, having this symbol of authentication]: the Lord knows those who are His."

That is the foundation. There is no true Christian unity apart from belief in the Word of God. There is no true Christian unity apart from personal saving faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone to redeem sinners.

### **Building on Another Foundation**

But in our time, many people in the visible church are trying to promote unity on some other basis. Within the past year, there has been a series of major conferences held around the world, to promote what is called Christian unity. But the unity that is

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being promoted by these groups is a false unity. Many of the people who have been leading these unity conferences have demonstrated by their own words and their own actions that they do not believe the Bible, they do not submit to the Bible as their sole authority, and they really have no idea what the genuine Christian Gospel is.

And because the genuine Biblical Gospel of salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in the finished work of God the Son, Jesus Christ alone – because that genuine Gospel is offensive to some people, the unity that these groups are trying to promote is a unity that is based on a false gospel, based on a broad appeal, and it is based on human authority and not on God's authority in Christ.

But the saddest thing in all of this is that some leading Evangelical men, even some men who would be identified as conservatives, have fallen into the ecumenical trap. They are participating in these conferences. They're joining hands with these other men who aren't even Christians, and they're helping to promote a false unity that is not based on God's sure foundation.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul said that he feared when he wrote his second letter to the church at Corinth, after they had gone astray from the true foundation. He said this, in Second Corinthians chapter eleven, beginning at verse two:

For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who

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comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it! (2 Corinthians 11:2-4)

And that is exactly what is happening in many places today.

Dear Christian friend, you need to make sure that you yourself are seeking after the right kind of unity. You need to make sure that you are in the right kind of church, and under the right kind of leadership, Biblical leadership that seeks after and promotes the right kind of unity – genuine Christian unity.

### **Paul's Great Desire**

That is what Paul is speaking of here in Colossians chapter two, verses one through three, where he says this:

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you [Colossians] and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

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## **Four Pillars of Genuine Christian Unity**

Paul is talking here about the basis of Christian unity. And as we looked at this passage last time, we saw that Paul emphasizes four things in these verses. These four things as the four pillars of Christian unity – the four pillars of genuine unity in Christ.

First, Christian unity is based on facts, not feelings. Second, Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism. Third, Christian unity is a matter of full assurance of understanding, but it is not a matter of trying to grasp after something that is not fully defined. Fourth, Christian unity is a matter of knowledge of the mystery of God, both the Father and Christ, but it is a matter of knowing and understanding mysteries that have been revealed, and revealed not just to a select few individuals, but to every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Pillar Number One: Facts, Not Feelings**

The last time we looked at this passage, we focused on the first pillar of Christian unity. Christian unity is based on facts, not feelings. Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. Paul says that he labors in the ministry of the Word, he engages in spiritual conflict on behalf of the saints, so “that their hearts may be encouraged” – so that their innermost beings may be established and confirmed in the facts of the faith. Christian unity is first of all a matter of settled assurance in your innermost being, a settled assurance of the truth, that is based on

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nothing less than the authority of God's inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word, and on the person and work of Jesus Christ as it is taught in the Bible.

Yes indeed, there are feelings within the true Christian. Genuine Christian faith is not a cold and unfeeling sort of thing. There is a growing desire to please God. There is a disturbed state of mind when we displease God. There are emotions of great gratitude toward God because we have a growing realization of what God has done for us in Christ. But those feelings are not the *basis* of our faith in Christ. Those emotions are not the things that *determine* whether you are in Christ or not.

Our feelings will fluctuate, and our feelings can deceive us because we are sinners. But our authority is not our feelings. Our authority is the Word of God, and the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. We need to judge our feelings *by* the Word of God. Genuine Christian unity is based on facts, not feelings.

### **Pillar Number Two: *Agape Love*, But Not Emotionalism**

We come now to the second pillar of Christian unity: Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism. Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism.

Once again, we need to remember the situation of the Colossian believers at the time this passage was written. Just like us, these believers were surrounded by people who were enemies of the true faith. There were three different groups of people – the pagans, the Gnostics, and the Judaizers. And we said last time that there was one

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common denominator about all three of these groups. That common denominator was a lack of love. These people didn't live on the basis of love. These enemies of the true faith lived on the basis of emotionalism – especially the kind of emotionalism that has its roots in the sins of lust and pride.

The pagan temple worship was filled with lust and sexual immorality. The religious philosophy of the Gnostics was based on pride in false knowledge. The legalism of the Judaizers was rooted in human pride, a pride that said, "I can do something to bring about my own salvation."

The Apostle Paul wanted the Colossian believers to understand that there is no true, Biblical, Christian love in any of these things. The Christian is to live not on the basis of these things, but on the basis of what the original Greek of the New Testament calls *agape* love. That is the word that Paul uses here in Colossians chapter two, verse two: "that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love."

Last time we looked at the definition of *agape* love. We saw that the basis of *agape* love, the basis of Christian love, the basis of the love that is the second pillar of Christian unity – the basis of that love is the loving, pardoning work of God in Christ on behalf of undeserving sinners. True Christian love, true *agape* love, is a love that springs from a sense of the preciousness of the object that is loved. That is something that is inherent in the meaning of the word – it is a love that springs from a sense of the preciousness of the object that is loved.

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Genuine Christian unity begins with God's *agape* love for us. John 3:16 tells us that "God so *loved* the world" – *agape* love, self-sacrificial love, love because even when we were lost, filthy sinners we were precious in the sight of God – "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Genuine Christian unity then involves our response to God's *agape* love for us. Paul says this in Second Corinthians chapter five, beginning at verse fourteen: "For the love of Christ constrains [or compels] us, because we judge thus: that if One [Jesus] died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."

Genuine Christian unity involves Christians responding in self-sacrificial, grateful love toward God for what He has done, recognizing the preciousness of God to us. And genuine Christian unity therefore also involves Christians' exhibiting that same *agape* love of God in our dealings with our fellow believers. Genuine Christian unity recognizes the fact that every believer in Christ is precious to God, and so therefore every one of our fellow believers in Christ should be precious to us.

Now, it's very important for Christians to have a complete and a well-balanced understanding of *agape* love. Sometimes Christians only focus on certain aspects of what the Bible says about love, and therefore Christians develop an unbalanced view, and even a harmful view of what it means to love others in the body of Christ.

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Now we said that the first pillar of genuine Christian unity is that it is a matter of facts, and not mere feelings. It is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere emotion. Emotion is not our authority, God's Word is. And in the same way, there is an emotional element about the second pillar of Christian unity. There is an emotional element in *agape* love – but once again, those emotions, those feelings, are the result of love, not the basis of love. There is a big difference between emotion and *emotionalism*. Christians are not to love simply when they feel like it, or if they feel like it, or on any basis that they feel like. They are to love one another on the basis of how God's Word says to do it.

And so we need to understand what it truly means to have *agape* love, and to demonstrate *agape* love within the body of genuine believers. One of the things we're going to see is that the love that is one of the pillars of genuine Christian unity is often a love that requires doing the difficult thing, in matters of right doctrine and in matters of right living, in order to maintain the right kind of unity – in order to maintain a church unity that is a genuine unity, and not a counterfeit.

That is where we are going to continue in our next message. In preparation for our next message, let me ask you to do just a bit of homework. Let me ask you to read one of the parallel passages of Scripture that we are going to be looking at next time. That passage is in the epistle of First John, chapter three, verses ten through twenty-four. First John, chapter three, verses ten through twenty-four. I would encourage you to read those verses this coming week – read them more than once – and think about them in the light of the things we've said in this message. Think about those

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verses in light of Colossians 2:1-3. Think of them in terms of the fact that genuine Christian love is based on an appreciation of the preciousness of the believer in God's sight. Think of those verses in First John chapter three in light of the fact genuine Christian love is a matter of firm grounding in Scripture, and not a matter of mere emotionalism. And as you read First John chapter three this week, ask yourself this question in preparation for next time: What does this passage tell me about the difference between a counterfeit kind of love that actually can produce *disunity* in the church, and the genuine Christian love, the *agape* love that promotes genuine, Bible-based, Christ-centered unity? In our next message, we're going to focus on that question.

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