

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy" (Part 4)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/29/2010

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## **Introduction**

Today we're continuing a series of messages in which we're dealing with "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy." We've been focusing on this subject in connection with our study of the first three verses of Colossians chapter two. The Apostle Paul, writing to the believers of the Colossian church, says this:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you 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.

Right now we're focusing especially on that phrase in verse two: "being knit together in love." *Agape* love. Self-sacrificial love. This is one of the pillars of Christian unity that we find in these verses.

And in particular, we've been considering the fact that the Bible tells us that this *agape* love, when necessary, demonstrates itself by a Christian being willing to put your reputation on the line, by taking the difficult step of exposing false teaching or apostasy within the church, and being willing to face the possibility that other people are going to criticize you and perhaps even persecute you for taking that stand for the truth.

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## **A Test Many Christians Now Face – Or Soon Will**

In our last message, we began considering a particular scenario that is becoming more and more common in the church today. The question we're considering is this: What would you do if you found yourself in this situation? You discover false teaching or even outright apostasy in your church. But others in the church – perhaps even your own pastor and church leadership – tell you to keep quiet about it, and they quote Scripture to back up their demand.

Now let me remind you again that this is not some far-fetched scenario. It is very real. Many people in Evangelical and Reformed churches are facing this challenge today.

As I mentioned in our last message, over the past several years I have had the privilege of ministering to many people, literally from around the world, who are dealing with this kind of a situation. Many of them have asked for my advice, because they know that I have faced this kind of situation myself. I wrote a book about that situation and that experience. And by God's grace I can say to you that I am thoroughly convinced that we who were involved in exposing apostasy in that situation, dealt with that situation in a manner that was thoroughly Biblical.

And I emphasize that it was by God's grace, not by any special skill or cunning on the part of those of us who were involved. We were, plainly and simply, by God's grace, resolved and determined to be true to His Word. We saw that God's Word made our duty plain to us. We did not know what God was going to do. We

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did not know how He was going to work in that situation. But we knew what the Bible told us *we* had to do.

And years later, the situation in that particular denomination that many of us left is still unfolding in the providence of God. And I believe that God is still working it out – on the one hand, to the blessing and protection of those who took a stand and left, and on the other hand, to the shame and even the condemnation of the larger number who remained and still remain in that apostate environment, and refused to take a stand.

### **How Will You Respond to the Scripture-Twisters?**

I must tell you that in counseling with people who come to me, or call me, or write to me for advice, I always point these dear people in the same direction: What does God's Word tell you to do? How are you going to respond when other people twist Scripture to try to keep you from doing what the Word of God commands you to do, when you have found false teaching and even outright apostasy within your church?

Will you be ready to respond in a Biblical way? Will you be ready to say, "Wait a minute. Let's make sure that we understand what the Bible really says about these matters. Let's make sure our motive is the right motive. Let's make sure we are not twisting Scripture to say what we want it to say, instead of what it really says." God wants you to be equipped to respond in that way. God's Word reminds us, over and over again, that *truth* is the issue – not people, not

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personalities, not traditions, not man-made mission statements, not anything else. Truth is the issue. We must speak the truth in love.

Now last time I told you what is likely to happen if you make the effort to expose and confront apostasy within the church. Before very long, you will probably hear people quoting Scripture to you.

People may quote Scripture to accuse you of being judgmental. They will quote, for example, Matthew 7, "Judge not, that you be not judged" – or Romans 14, "Why do you judge your brother?" – or, perhaps First Corinthians 4, "Judge nothing before the time."

Or, they may quote Scripture to accuse you of being unloving. And so they'll quote First Corinthians 13, "Love bears all things...[love] endures all things" – or First Peter 4, "Love covers a multitude of sins."

Or, they may quote Scripture to accuse you of being unreasonable, not being willing to listen. And so they will quote a passage like Isaiah chapter 1, "Come now and let us reason together."

I've heard these and similar verses quoted many, many times, in these kinds of situations. But dear friend, let me remind you of something that we observed in our last message. Just because someone quotes Scripture, it does not make him right. Just because someone quotes Scripture, it does not mean he is telling the

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truth. False teachers quote Scripture. Apostates quote Scripture. Even Satan quotes Scripture.

The fact is that in today's church, many people are twisting Scripture to avoid obeying God's clear commands, and to try to discourage or even prevent other people from taking a firm stand for the truth.

### **Answering Scripture-Twisters Who Accuse You of Schism**

But what about the passages of Scripture that these people use? Well, here is the thing that you find, and you will find it to be the case quite consistently: You will find that they are misinterpreting these passages, they are taking them out of context, and they are applying them improperly to the situation. What I want to do in the remainder of this message is to address some of those often-abused Scripture passages.

One verse that is commonly twisted to avoid confronting apostasy is Psalm 133, verse 1: "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." But in commenting on this verse, the 17th century preacher Joseph Caryl, who faced persecution for exposing apostasy himself, said this: The imperative is for brethren to be "of one mind in the truth." "It is a blessed thing," he said, "to see them joining together in their duty... in turning from evil, and putting iniquity far from them; in praying for the pardon of sin." That is the point. That is the goal. Not a unity that shirks our duty, but a unity in *doing* our duty. Not a unity on any basis we choose, but unity based on the truth as we find it only in God's Word.

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And in conjunction with this verse, sometimes you will hear people who want to twist Scripture to avoid confronting apostasy quote Ephesians chapter 4, verses 2 and 3: "...with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Keep the peace, they say. Peace at any price. But you must say this: Yes, but look at the context! Here the Apostle Paul is talking about men who are gifted to the church by Jesus Christ for the church's edification and proper instruction in the truth.

Look especially at verses 13 through 15: "...till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ."

The church is nothing without the truth. There can be no true peace in the church without purity of doctrine. There can be no unity in the church unless it is unity in the truth. Anything else is a false peace, and a counterfeit unity.

### **Answering Scripture-Twisters Who Accuse You of Being Judgmental**

Another verse that is twisted quite often is Matthew chapter 7, verse 1: "Judge not, that you be not judged." And another of the same kind is John chapter 8, verse 7: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." In both cases, people are

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twisting the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. But dear friend, what you need to be prepared to point out is this: In neither of these cases did the Lord Jesus Christ prohibit all judgment. Both of these passages deal with the issue of hypocrisy in judgment. But they are not anything like a blanket command not to judge. These passages do not teach tolerance of sin.

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus only forbids judging of a certain wrong kind. In fact, He goes on to *encourage* judgment of the proper kind. The key is to keep in mind the whole context of Matthew 7, verses 1 through 5:

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

It is true that Jesus tells the Jews in verse one not to judge. But it is not a blanket prohibition. In verse two, He gives the situation in which they must not judge: the standard they use to judge others is the very same standard that is used to judge them. They must not ignore their own sins while condemning the same sins in others. To do this is to judge with a double standard, to judge with hypocrisy.

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The sin of the two sinners in Jesus' teaching is the same in two key respects. First, it is the same in nature: in both instances it was a piece of wood was in a person's eye. Second, it is the same in that both sins were present-tense sins. The piece of wood, whether large or small, was in both sinners' eye at the same moment. The difference between the two sins is one of magnitude, not kind.

For anyone whose sin is great to condemn a person whose sin of the same kind is small, is hypocritical. For example, a local church that is committing the great sin of failing to deal with false teaching in its denomination at large, or in its seminaries, is guilty of gross hypocrisy if it takes a Sunday school teacher to task for promulgating the same false teaching in the local church.

But then, in verse five of Matthew 7, Jesus gives the situation in which not only must we judge, but then we must also take action in light of that judgment. Jesus sets forth a requirement. After repenting of your own sin, if need be, then point out your brother's sin of the same kind to him, and seek to help him to turn from it. "First remove the plank of wood from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck of wood from your brother's eye."

In other words, Jesus commands *un-hypocritical* intolerance of sin in the church, whether it is the sin of false teaching or a sin of any other kind.

The passage in Romans 14 that people also twist is of the same nature. Paul says, "Why do you judge your brother?...Let us not therefore judge one another anymore" (Romans 14:10, 13). But once again, look at the context. Paul is dealing

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not with a situation of clear-cut sin, but rather a situation where someone is judging someone else in things that are not specifically prohibited by Scripture. Once again, Scripture is not prohibiting all judgment.

### **Answering Scripture-Twisters Who Accuse You of Being Unloving**

And then you will find that people will twist passages of Scripture that deal with love. They will quote First Corinthians 13:7 – “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” But they conveniently leave out verse six: “[love] does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.” Truth is the issue.

Dr. J. Gresham Machen was a man who was opposed and persecuted by church leaders in the 1920s and 1930s because he stood up and pointed out the apostasy in his own denomination. At one point during that great controversy, a church leader who was refusing to take a stand said that if Machen and those who stood with him would only devote their chief attention to First Corinthians 13, then they could avoid all controversy. But Machen said this, and I’m quoting him now:

In reply, I am bound to say that [this] example was singularly ill-chosen. That hymn to Christian love is in the midst of a great polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had been opposed to controversy with error in the church. It was because his soul was stirred within him by a wrong use of the spiritual gifts that he was able to write that glorious hymn.

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So it is always in the church. Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth.

Let me quickly address some other passages that are frequently twisted in defense of doing nothing about false teaching and apostasy. First Corinthians 4:5 – “Judge nothing before the time.” Once again, you need to answer people who bring up this passage by pointing them to the context. Paul is dealing with the issue of ascribing motive to someone when motive is not clear. Once again, this is not a passage that gives a blanket prohibition against making judgments. In fact, you will not find any such passage in the Word of God.

What you *will* find is this – First John 4:1 – “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

### **Answering Scripture-Twisters Who Accuse You of Being Unreasonable**

Another passage that is often abused is Isaiah 1:18 – “Come now, and let us reason together.” Let’s be reasonable, they say. Let’s talk. Let’s have a dialogue. But look at the context of that passage, and see just what kind of a “dialogue” Jehovah God was having with the rebellious house of Judah. God says this:

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“Hear the word of the LORD... When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts?... I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting... When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear... Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good...

Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 1:10-20)

Isaiah 1:18 is not a passage promoting dialogue about the fundamentals of the faith. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said this about people who twist such a passage to try to make such a point. He said:

To regard a church, or a council of churches, as a forum in which fundamental matters can be debated and discussed...is sheer confusion and muddled thinking... Those who question and query, let alone deny, the great cardinal truths...do not belong to the church, and to regard them as brethren is to betray the truth.... the apostle Paul tells us clearly

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what our attitude to them should be: "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject" (Titus 3:10). They are to be regarded as unbelievers who need to be called to repentance and acceptance of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

To give the impression that they are Christians with whom other Christians disagree about certain matters is to confuse the genuine seeker and enquirer who is outside [and also to confuse those within the church]. But such is the position prevailing today. It is based upon a failure to understand the nature of the New Testament church which is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15)... Failure to realize this constitutes the very essence of the modern confusion.

### **Scripture is the Master, Not the Servant**

Well we could cite many other examples of this kind of Scripture-twisting, and just as easily and authoritatively refute them. The point of it all is this: Scripture must be our sole authority. But you must be the servant of Scripture. You cannot make Scripture your servant, to suit your agenda. That is what these people do, and you must be prepared to bring them to account when they do it.

You must demonstrate to them what real Christian love, real *agape* love, does in the face of false teaching and apostasy. For the sake of our precious Savior, and His precious Word, and His precious people, we must be willing to make the self-

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sacrifice. We must be willing to stand for the truth, no matter what the cost, no matter what the criticism, and no matter where that criticism comes from.

### **About the Broadcast**

*The Scripture-Driven Church* airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to preach the Gospel to the lost, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God's Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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