

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy" (Part 2)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/8/2010

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## **Introduction – Where We've Come in Our Study**

We are continuing today in our consideration of a very vital topic for believers. We're looking at five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy. This is part of our study of the book of Colossians, and right now we are at the beginning of chapter two.

Let me take a moment to remind you where we are in our study. We are dealing with Paul's great statement on the subject of Christian unity in Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. As we come to our consideration of these verses, let me read them for you once again. Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. 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.

Let me remind you that we have seen that there are four pillars of Christian unity given to us in these verses. 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.

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Fourth, Christian unity is a matter of knowledge of the mystery of God, but it is a matter of knowing and understanding mysteries that have been revealed, and revealed not only to a select few individuals, but to every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Right now we are focusing on pillar number two, the fact that genuine Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism. It is what the Greek of the original text calls *agape* love. We're focusing right now in particular on the phrase that we find in Colossians chapter two, verse two, which tells us that the church is to be "knit together [that is, united together, everyone holding the same beliefs together] in love" – *agape* love.

### **A Reminder: The Unique Nature of *Agape* Love**

Now we have also seen that *agape* love is a special term for love in the Bible. It is unlike any other term for love. *Agape* love is a love that is characterized by two things in particular. First of all, *agape* love has a unique motivation. It is motivated by an appreciation of the preciousness of the person or persons who are the object of that love. God loves us because we are precious to Him. We, in response, love God because He becomes precious to us as our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Because Christ is precious, He must be preeminent. That is the overall theme of the book of Colossians. And then *agape* love is also to be characterized by this motivation – that our fellow believers in Christ should become precious to us, because they are precious to God. That is the unique motivation behind *agape* love.

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And then secondly, we also saw that *agape* love has a unique manner of demonstration. *Agape* love demonstrates itself in self-sacrifice. We saw that Paul tells us, in Second Corinthians 5:14, that “the love of Christ constrains” or compels us to demonstrate self-sacrificial love, *agape* love, toward our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And as we have been considering this matter of *agape* love as the second pillar of Christian unity, we have looked at a parallel passage in First John chapter three, beginning at verse ten. And as we looked at that passage, we saw that the demonstration of *agape* love has six very unique characteristics. And I want to list those for you once again.

First, *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself. We’ve already looked at that.

Second, the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again. We’ve also already looked at that in some detail.

Third, the exercise of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of others – but never in the eyes of God. That is where we are right now in our study, and I’ll come back to that in a moment. And in future studies we’re going to consider three other characteristics of the demonstration of *agape* love within the church –

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Fourth, the exercise of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your worldly goods, but never without reward.

Number five, God Himself provides every resource that you need in order to exercise and exhibit *agape* love within the body of Christ.

And number six, the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ is not an option, it is a commandment.

### ***Agape* Love Self-Sacrificially Confronts Apostasy in the Church**

So now let's come back once again to the third point, that the exercise of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of others – but never in the eyes of God. We've been addressing the fact that exercising *agape* love in the church may well place you in a position as a believer where you will have to call attention to apostasy within the church. Apostasy is a tremendous problem in the church today. Small-scale doctrinal compromises can lead to large-scale disasters. We need to remember that God's Word commands all believers to deal with apostasy, not just the leadership.

We also saw that there is only one proper motivation for dealing with apostasy, and that is the imperative of *agape* love. If Jesus Christ is precious to you, and I certainly hope that He is, then you need to stand up for the truth of His Word. If your fellow believers in the church are precious to you, and I certainly hope they are, then it will be your duty to seek to protect them from apostasy.

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## **5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy**

Now based on that motivation, you may be called upon to demonstrate your *agape* love, by making the self-sacrifice of putting your reputation on the line by pointing out error within the church. And so last time, we began looking at five things that need to be absolutely clear in your mind as a believer. These five things constitute the five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy.

Number one, we said that you need to be able to define and identify apostasy. If you're going to put your reputation on the line by lovingly exposing apostasy in the church, first of all you need to make sure what you're dealing with meets the Bible's definition of apostasy. And so we went into that in some detail last time.

Number two, you need to be absolutely clear about the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy. We are going to find today that it is a response that is based upon genuine Christian love – *agape* love. And the standard of the response is truth – God's truth as we find it only in His Word.

Number three, you need to understand why any other response to apostasy is a wrong response. And once again, we're going to find that this has to do with the Biblical definition of Christian love. Many people refuse to deal with apostasy because they say it is not the loving thing to do. The problem is that what those people call Christian love is really a counterfeit. It is not *agape* love at all.

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Number four, you need to be able to deal with objections that people raise to try to keep from doing their duty, and to try to keep you from doing yours. What you will often find is that people twist Scripture to try to avoid responsibility. We're going to deal with six passages of Scripture that people often bring up as an excuse for not doing the right thing when there is apostasy in the church. And we're going to see that in each case they are twisting Scripture to make excuses for their sin.

And number five, you need to understand the steps, the process, that God's Word tells you to follow, acting with *agape* love, when you find apostasy in the church. And we're going to see that the Bible is very clear on this.

### **Key Number 2: The Biblical Motivation is Love**

So we're going to begin our focus today on key number two: You need to be absolutely clear about the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy. The proper response, the Biblical response, is based upon genuine Christian love – *agape* love. We've already talked about this, so I don't want to belabor it. But I think it is important to emphasize that the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy must be the fact that you love Jesus Christ, and that you love Christ's people. If Jesus Christ is not precious to you, if His Word is not precious to you, if the faith is not precious to you, if the true faith is not something that you believe must be defended because of your love for Christ and for the body of Christ, then you are setting off on the wrong foot in sounding the alarm about apostasy, and you will stumble and fall.

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If you have any other motivation – if your motivation is self-promotion; if your motivation is pride; if your motivation is vengeance; if your motivation is anything of self, anything of the flesh – then you are acting on the basis of the wrong motivation. You must expose apostasy, you must sound the alarm, by putting your reputation on the line. You must be willing to leave the outcome in God's hands. You must be willing for other people to think evil of you, for the sake of Christ. What did Jesus say, in Matthew 5:11-12? He said this: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Notice two things in particular in what Jesus said. He said, "Blessed are you when they shall revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you" – *and say it falsely*. You must not give them a reason to revile you. And acting based on the wrong motive, on a prideful motive, on a fleshly motive, that will give them a reason to speak evil of you. Don't give them that reason. Confront apostasy with the right motivation, with *agape* love. Love for Christ and His truth. Love for Christ and His church.

And notice also that Jesus says that suffering the ridicule of others because you acted on the basis of the right motivation is suffering *for His sake*. Suffering for Christ's sake. Christ is the issue. His truth is the issue. That is a vital element in making the right response, the Biblically loving response, to apostasy.

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## **The Biblical Standard is Truth**

There is only one right motivation for responding to apostasy, and there is only one proper *standard* for responding to apostasy, and that is the standard of Truth. The standard of God's Word. The only standard for identifying apostasy, and the only standard for confronting apostasy, is God's Word. What God's Word actually says, not necessarily what some person or group *says* that it says.

In Isaiah chapter 8, the Lord challenged the apostate house of Judah with these words: He said, "Go 'to the law and to the testimony! If anyone does not speak according to this Word, it is because there is no light in him.' " In other words, "Go to the Word of God alone as your authority – nothing else. If anyone does not want to be subject to the authority of the Word of God alone, it is because there is no light in him."

The idea in the original language in that passage in Isaiah is quite graphic. It means that in the mind of such a person, who does not want to be subject to God's Word, dawn hasn't come yet. Light hasn't come yet. In other words, if someone consistently does not want to be subject to the authority of the Word of God alone, you have every reason to think that such a person is not truly a believer. Being willing to be subject to God's Word is essential evidence of saving faith in Christ. Lack of that willingness is evidence that someone does not have saving faith in Christ. Now those are strong words. But this is God's Word.

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In First Thessalonians chapter two, the Apostle Paul commended the church at Thessalonica with these words, beginning at verse 13: "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe." They welcomed the Word of God. Light had come to their souls.

Scripture-driven Christians are committed to the authority of the Word of God. And it is a commitment that comes only because there is light in the soul. Commitment to the authority of the Word of God is the church's starting point for everything. The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church are committed to Scripture alone as their authority. It is their sole and final authority. They are truly "People of the Book."

### **Truth, Not People or Personalities, Is the Issue**

If you are going to respond in a proper, loving way to apostasy within the church, then Truth must be the issue. Truth – what the Word of God says – must be the focus, not persons or personalities. Don't let pride get in the way. The Lord condemns pride. Don't let any desire that you might have for vengeance get in the way. The Lord says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." He is the One who decides how and when an apostate's sins will be dealt with, if a person persists in apostasy. In other words, don't let "you" become the issue. Don't let persons or personalities become the issue. Truth must be the issue. God's Word must be the issue.

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So the first of the five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy is to properly identify apostasy, and the second of the five keys is to have the right basis for your response, and that basis is love for Christ and His church, and the infallible standard of the truth of God's Word.

### **Key Number 3: Why All Other Responses to Apostasy are Wrong**

So that brings us to the third of the five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy. You need to understand why other responses to apostasy in the church are wrong responses. And once again, this has to do with the Biblical definition of Christian love. What many people call Christian love is really a counterfeit. It is not *agape* love at all.

It is a wrong response to apostasy to think that it is not your job to deal with it. That is not a loving response to apostasy. It is an un-loving response. The Apostle Paul writes this to the church at Ephesus, in Ephesians chapter five, beginning at verse six:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.

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And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Ephesians 5:6-17)

Saying nothing is an un-loving response to apostasy. Tolerance is an un-loving response to apostasy. Giving in to the myth of neutrality – thinking that you don't need to take sides – is an un-loving response to apostasy. These are all un-loving responses to apostasy because they are not based on the motivation and demonstration of *agape* love. They are not motivated by love for Christ and for His people. They are not demonstrations of self-sacrifice.

At the end of the day, these things are rooted in pride. They are rooted in self-protection. They are rooted in a mindset that says this: "I do not love Christ and His Word and His people enough – Christ and His Word and His people are not precious enough to me – so that I am willing to demonstrate the genuineness of my love for Christ and His Word and His people, by putting my reputation on the line, risking suffering persecution for His sake, by exposing apostasy in the church, and leaving the results in Christ's hands."

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Well dear friends, once again we've reached the end of our time for this message with still much more to say on this vital subject. So we'll pick up in our next message with a consideration of the two remaining keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy. Number four, you need to be able to deal with objections that people raise to try to keep from doing their duty, and to try to keep you from doing yours. And, number five, you need to know the steps that the Word of God gives us, the process that Scripture gives us, for dealing with apostasy in the church. So I hope you'll join us next time as we continue.

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