

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 1 of 12

Introduction

Today we're continuing our focus on Colossians chapter two, verses one through three, where the Apostle Paul gives us instruction on the basis of genuine unity within the Christian church. Let me read those verses once more as we begin:

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.

Our focus at the present time is on the phrase we find in verse two, "being knit together in love." Paul is speaking of the church being united and of one mind about the truth as it is found in Jesus Christ and in His Word alone. And, Paul is speaking of the fact that *agape* love, self-sacrificial love, must motivate and characterize that unity.

Five Keys

We have been dealing with the fact that *agape* love sometimes requires a believer to take a stand against apostasy in the church. And so we have been dealing with some very practical matters in that connection. We have been considering "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy." In our messages up to this point we have covered the first four of them.

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 2 of 12

Key number one is this: Make sure that what you're dealing with is really apostasy according to Scripture. Scripture is your sole and absolute authority.

Key number two: Be absolutely clear in your mind about the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy. The motivation of that response must be genuine Christian love – *agape* love, and nothing else. And, the standard of that response must be truth – Biblical truth, and nothing else.

Key number three: Make sure that you understand that there is only one Biblical response to apostasy, and that is to confront it. The Bible makes this very clear in a positive way, and it also makes it very clear in the negative as well – that any other response to apostasy is the wrong response.

Key number four: You need to equip yourself to deal with people who will twist Scripture to try to avoid their own clear duty, and to try to discourage or prevent you from doing your duty. And as we saw last time, the big issue here is that people so often take a few Bible verses or even a snippet of a single verse completely out of context, and misuse it and misapply it, and you need to be prepared to deal with that.

This now brings us to the fifth key to a Biblically loving response to apostasy: You need to understand the steps that God's Word tells you to follow when you find apostasy in the church. And we're going to see that the Bible is very clear about this. There is no guesswork involved. The Bible tells you exactly and precisely what to do. The Bible sets forth a clear process.

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 3 of 12

Implementing Key 5: Three Vital Principles

Now before we consider the process itself, I want to emphasize once again three very important principles. We've discussed them before but they are well worth repeating because they relate directly to this process.

First, love must be your motivation in confronting apostasy. If you have in mind any motivation other than the preciousness of Christ, the preciousness of His truth, and the preciousness of His true church, then you need to think twice. Now, I don't say that to discourage you from doing what the Bible says you must do. Your duty is clear. But you must constantly, continually check your motivation and make sure that by God's grace you keep it pure. And that motivation must be love for Christ, and His church, and His truth.

Second, self-sacrifice must be this love's demonstration. Confronting false teaching and apostasy is not the easy thing to do. Let me speak to you from experience. If you find that God has put you in the place of having to confront false teaching, you will find that it is going to be exceedingly time-consuming. It will take much prayer. It will take much effort. It will require you to spend much time in God's Word. You will find yourself spending much time in dealing with people on both sides of the issue – people who are for the truth and people who are against the truth. It will take much discipline to stay the course. You will need the whole armor of God. This is a spiritual battle of the most intense kind. Once again, I say this not by way of discouragement. Your duty is clear. But you must constantly, continually rely upon the Word of God as your

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 4 of 12

authority and the Spirit of God as your teacher, and guide, and strength during the entire process. You will need to constantly check yourself for any danger signs that you are operating in the flesh. Remember that God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Remember that the work is done "not by might nor by power but by My Spirit saith the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6).

The third principle I want to reiterate is this: Biblical truth is the issue. We are to speak the truth in love. The issue in confronting apostasy is always God's truth. The issue is not persons, or personalities, or reputations, or creeds, or confessions, or anything else. Do not let any of these other things become the issue. Don't do that yourself, and don't let anyone else do it. If anyone tries to do that, you must endeavor to bring the focus back to the issue of truth and error. The Lord Jesus Christ said in John chapter 17 that God's truth is that which sanctifies. It is truth that sets the genuine believer apart from the imposter. It is God's truth that separates false teachers from the faithful ones.

The Process: Matthew 18:15-17

So let me now come to the process itself. We find the process for dealing with apostasy, in fact for dealing with offenses of all kinds, given to us in Matthew 18:15-17. We find there a process set forth by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Jesus said this:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that "by the mouth of two or three

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 5 of 12

witnesses every word may be established.” And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17)

Here we find a four-step process:

- First, go to your brother alone and make his offense known. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. The force of the original language is that if your brother will pay attention to what you are saying and will repent, you have helped your brother to escape from evil.
- Second, if he will not hear you, take one or two others with you and speak to him again.
- Third, if he still refuses to hear, bring the matter before the church as a body.
- Fourth, if he refuses even to hear the church, then treat him not as your brother, but as an unbeliever.

Private Versus Public Situations

Before we go into specific cases, I want to make some comments about the application of these verses.

If a man says something once that is in error doctrinally, you may find that he simply made an honest mistake. The preacher or teacher is a human being. You have every right to question him about it in a respectful and loving way. And you may well

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 6 of 12

find that it was in fact simply an honest mistake. Perhaps he wasn't careful about the way he said something, or perhaps he didn't mean to say what he said. Perhaps he didn't even realize at the time that he had said something that was quite wrong. Now if you find that this is the case, and if he gives evidence of the fact that he knows it was wrong, and if he demonstrates that attitude by being willing to make it right – for example, if it was said in a public meeting, he is willing to make a public correction – if such things are the case, let that be the end of it. And I have known men who were very glad that someone came to them and pointed out that kind of a mistake, so that the man could correct it.

That is probably the happiest case you could have. But then there are other situations that become more difficult. If it becomes obvious that the man has said something that is heresy, and you confront him privately about it, and he is unrepentant, then you need to go to step two, and if necessary, steps three and four, as we find them in Matthew 18.

A second point I want to make is this: You need to make a distinction between private matters and public matters. The Biblical principle is that private sins need to be confronted privately, but public sins need to be confronted publicly. We find a number of examples of this in Scripture. For example, we find in the epistle of Third John that the Apostle John said he was going to publicly confront Diotrephes, the pastor of a local church, about his falsehoods. And we find, as we have seen before, that the Apostle Paul publicly confronted the Apostle Peter at Antioch when Peter publicly strayed from the one true Gospel into legalism. If someone has persisted in false

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 7 of 12

teaching from the pulpit, or in a Sunday school class, or in a home Bible study, or has persistently written false teaching in books or other publications, this is a public matter. It is not a private sin. And so it immediately becomes a matter to be dealt with by the church as a body, and not on a private basis. And that is because there is more than the spiritual welfare of one individual or a even handful of individuals at stake. The spiritual welfare of the entire church is at stake.

Man Often Complicates the Process

Now let me say one other thing at this point, and I'm speaking now from personal experience. I've been involved in bringing a charge of heresy against an individual on one occasion. And on other occasions I've been placed in the position of having to consider the evidence and to take part in adjudicating the guilt or innocence of individuals. And I've also heard from many other people about experiences that are common today in the church. The sum of it is that in the church today we find some unpleasant situations, and I need to talk with you about some of them today.

Now, the process that we find in Matthew 18 is not complicated. But most of the problems in confronting apostasy come when human beings complicate the process. Some churches have written thick books of procedure that are supposed to be instruction manuals for carrying out the Biblical process. But in many cases, in a very real sense these books of procedure add man-made regulations to the Word of God. And far too often, the focus is on the man-made procedures and not on the simplicity of Scripture.

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 8 of 12

Three Main Possible Outcomes of the Process

Now, having said these things, let me take up some specific cases. When someone brings a charge of false teaching against an individual, there are three main possible outcomes:

Outcome number one is the case in which the individual is found to be innocent of the charge of heresy, on sound Biblical grounds.

Outcome number two is the case in which the individual is proved to be guilty of false teaching, and he realizes his sin, and he repents.

Outcome number three is the case in which the individual is clearly guilty of heresy, but he refuses to admit his sin, and he will not repent.

Now within this third possible outcome, we find that the church may respond in three different ways.

The first and of course the most desirable possibility is that the church will act Biblically. The church will do the thing that the Lord Jesus tells us to do. It treats the false teacher as an unbeliever. It puts him out of the church. But sadly in our postmodern time this is becoming increasingly rare. Everyone wants to find excuses for not doing it. We need to praise God, and we need to commend a church and its leadership, when a church has the spiritual fortitude to do the right thing, to do the only thing Scripture says we are permitted to do, and that is to reject the false teacher, have

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 9 of 12

no fellowship with him, and treat him as an unbeliever who needs to be evangelized and come to repentance and faith.

Then there is a second possibility: The church may not act at all, even though it is clear that there is a heretic within the church. And this, sad to say, is the most frequent outcome today. Titus 3:10 gives us clear instruction: "Reject a man who is a heretic after the first and second admonition." Not the fourth or fifth or the tenth or twentieth. God's Word commands us to deal with the issue of heresy decisively and without delay. But in far too many cases today, the church refuses to do this.

And then there is a third possibility: The church does act, but it acts in an un-Biblical way. This is also an increasingly common outcome today. What we often find is that a church does one of the following kinds of things, or it does more than one of them in combination:

First of all, and most commonly in this case, a church will put adherence to a man-made process above adherence to Biblical truth. Let me explain what I mean. The leaders of the church will tell you that you didn't make your case in the right way. You didn't submit your charges against the heretic in the proper form. Your evidence wasn't in the right form. Some of your evidence went back beyond some artificial statute of limitations. And so on. Following a man-made process that the church has created becomes more important than the truth of the Bible. And if you don't follow that process in just the way the church leadership thinks you have to, then it can hide behind that alleged fact and refuse to act against the heretic.

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 10 of 12

Secondly, and this is especially true in denominational churches, I have seen firsthand and I also know of other cases where church leaders have actually destroyed or suppressed evidence in order to protect a heretic. Incriminating details are left out of the minutes of meetings. Incriminating documents are conveniently lost or even altered. Now don't let those things shock you. We need to face the fact that false teachers are often able to operate because they have allies and enablers within the church. And those allies and enablers are not above doing the most sinful kinds of things to protect the heretic.

Thirdly, and this is also especially true in denominational churches, the church will in some cases protect the heretic by declaring that his false teaching is within the bounds of a man-made confessional statement or a denominational pronouncement. One purportedly conservative seminary recently did this in order to justify hiring a professor who is a theistic evolutionist. They defended this by pointing to a study report that their denomination issued ten years ago. The report said that evolutionary interpretations of the book of Genesis are acceptable within the bounds of the church's confession of faith. And therefore the seminary said that it had the right to hire this false teacher. Never mind what God's Word said on the subject, the important thing was what man's word said in a denominational study report. Doctrinal standards are just swept away.

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 11 of 12

How Must You Respond in Each Case?

Now, what I've given you is a very brief practical discussion of some of the things that can happen when you confront apostasy in the church – both the godly outcomes and the ungodly outcomes. And I am sorry that I cannot paint a more favorable picture of the state of many Evangelical and Reformed churches today. But the facts are the facts, and I believe it is my responsibility as a minister of the Gospel to warn you about the kinds of things that are happening today in many, many situations. But all of this brings us to a final consideration, a final question – a question for you personally, as a believer. And that question is this: What are you to do next, in each of these situations, each of these outcomes, that I have described?

How does God's Word say you are to respond in the case where the individual is found, on solid Biblical grounds, to be not guilty of false teaching?

How does God's Word say you are to respond in the case where the individual is proved to be guilty of false teaching, and he admits his sin, and repents of it?

How does God's Word say you are to respond in the case where the individual is found guilty but refuses to repent, and the church acts in a Biblical way by putting the false teacher out of the church? What should you do next?

And finally, how does God's Word say that you are to respond in the case where the false teacher's guilt is clear, but he refuses to admit his sin, he will not repent, and the church acts in an ungodly way by not taking any action against the false teacher at all,

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

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

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/5/2010

Page 12 of 12

or worse yet the church actually protects him and allows his false teaching to gain a stronger foothold and to spread? What are you to do next?

What must you do in each of these situations? Well, that is going to be the subject of our next message, which will be the final one in this study of the "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy." I believe this next message is going to be the most important part of this series, because how you respond, what you do next, in each of the various circumstances we talked about today, affects the purity of the church – it affects the unity of the church in the truth. So I hope you'll join us as we focus on that teaching next time.

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.

The prayers of our listeners and supporters are vital to this ministry. Thank you for praying for us.

The broadcast is supported entirely by the gifts of God's people. If the Lord leads you to help us, you can do so in any of these ways:

- Call us toll-free at 888-804-9655 to give a gift using your credit card
- Give a gift by credit card at our secure website, www.teachingtheword.org
- Mail your contribution to TTW, Box 2533, Westminster, Maryland 21158

TeachingtheWord Ministries is recognized as a tax-exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the U. S. Internal Revenue Code. Your gifts are fully tax deductible.

**May the Lord richly bless your personal study
of His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word.**