

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Christian Love: Real & Counterfeit" (Part 2)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of July 25, 2010

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Introduction

As we begin today I want to read, once again, the verses we're considering, from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter two, verses one through three. Paul writes this to the Colossian church:

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.

In these verses we find four pillars of Christian unity. These pillars rise from the foundation of the written Word of God, and from the person and work of the Word of God made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. And those four pillars of Christian unity in Colossians chapter two, verses one through three, are these:

Number one, we find in these verses that Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but it is a matter of facts and not arbitrary feelings.

Number two, we find in these verses that Christian unity is founded on what the New Testament calls *agape* love, self-sacrificial love.

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Number three, we find in these verses that Christian unity is a matter of possessing full assurance based on a concrete understanding of doctrine that is well defined, not something nebulous or undefined.

And number four, in these verses we find that Christian unity is a matter of possessing knowledge of mysteries – but they are mysteries that have been revealed, and those mysteries have not just been revealed to a few elite people within the body of Christ, but to every believer.

In a previous message we considered pillar number one – the fact that Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but that the heart-issue is an issue of facts, and not just feelings.

The Definition of Agape Love

At present we're considering the second pillar – the fact that Christian unity is founded on what the original Greek of the New Testament calls *agape* love. Now, thus far in our consideration of *agape* love, we've seen several things. We've considered the definition of *agape* love. We've seen that there can be many different kinds of love, but only one of them is *agape* love. In the language of the Greek New Testament, *agape* love is characterized mainly by two things. There is something in particular that motivates it, and there is something else in particular that demonstrates it – something in particular that characterizes how it works itself out, how *agape* love puts itself into action.

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The motivation of *agape* love is an appreciation for the preciousness of the person who is the object of that love. An appreciation for the preciousness of the person who is the object of that love.

The demonstration or the out-working of *agape* love is self-sacrifice. *Agape* love is put into action in self-sacrifice.

Now last time, we looked at a parallel passage on *agape* love in First John chapter three. And there we found six key characteristics of the *agape* love, the self-sacrificial love, which is to be practiced and exercised by every believer within the body of Christ. These are the characteristics of the love that Paul in Colossians chapter two, verse two, says is to knit us together within the body of Christ. And I want to repeat those characteristics for you as we take them up again today.

Key Characteristics of Agape Love

First, the motivation of *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself.

Second, the demonstration of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again.

Third, the demonstration of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of the world – but never in the eyes of God.

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

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

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

The Three Steps of Agape Love

Now, last time we looked at the first two of these characteristics – number one, that the motivation of *agape* love is rooted in the person and work of Christ Himself; and number two, that the demonstration of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again. Before we go on, I want to remind you of something that I said last time regarding those two points, and I want to expand upon it just a bit as preparation for our consideration of characteristic number three.

We saw last time that Christian unity is based on what I referred to as the three steps of *agape* love. The three steps of *agape* love. The first step, the Bible says, is God's *agape* love for us. God has *agape* love for sinners, John 3:16 tells us. God so loved the world. God so loved His creation. God so loved sinners.

God's creation is precious to Him. Sinners are precious to Him. That is the motivation of God's *agape* love for us. In spite of the depth of our sin, in spite of our complete depravity, we are precious to God because He created us. He created us for

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fellowship with Him. Sin has broken that fellowship. Restoring that fellowship with those who are precious to Him is the motivation of God's *agape* love.

And what is the demonstration of God's *agape* love? John 3:16 goes on to tell us: God had such *agape* love for the world, that the demonstration, the out-working of that *agape* love was that He gave His only begotten Son to go to the cross and take the death penalty that we deserve for our sins. In spite of our rebellion, in spite of the depth of our corruption, in spite of the deep stain of sin in every part of our beings, we were precious in God's sight. In Jeremiah chapter forty-three, the Lord says this, to the rebellious house of Israel, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by My name, you are mine...I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you...Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory" (Jeremiah 43:1-7). That's the first step of *agape* love – God's love for sinners.

The second step of *agape* love is the response of the believing sinner to God. The response of the believing sinner to God. The Apostle John puts it this way: "We love Him, because He first loved us" (First John 4:19). Because of what God has done for us, God becomes precious to us. Peter puts it this way in First Peter chapter two: "Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone [Jesus Christ], elect, [and] precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.' Therefore, to you who believe He [Jesus] is precious" (First Peter 1:6-7).

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When you truly place your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, He becomes precious to you. That is the work of the Holy Spirit of God as He indwells you, and as you study God's Word and the Spirit illuminates God's Word for you. Christ becomes more and more precious to you. And the building up of that motivation within you has the effect, or the outworking, of a growing desire to exhibit self-sacrificial love toward God. As John the Baptist put it, speaking of the Lord Jesus, he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). That is the second step of *agape* love. Step one is God's love for sinners through Christ. Step two is the redeemed sinner's love for God because of Christ.

But then we also said there is a step three, and this is where *agape* love comes into focus as one of the pillars of Christian unity. Every other believer in Christ within the true church, within the body of Christ, should be precious to you, because every other believer in Christ within the body of Christ is precious to God. That is the motivation of *agape* love within the body of Christ. In his greeting at the beginning of his second epistle, Peter says this: he says we have all obtained "like precious faith...by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Second Peter 1:1).

Love Without Hypocrisy

Paul says, in Romans chapter twelve, verse nine, "Let love be without hypocrisy." Let your *agape* love be undisguised, let it be genuine, let it be sincere. Let it be real, and not a counterfeit. And the only way that you can have genuine *agape* love for other believers, is if you are truly a believer yourself. That's why the Apostle John

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says that the demonstration of *agape* love within the body of Christ is a key indicator that someone has in fact been born again. First John chapter three, verse ten: "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother." *Agape* love is part of the evidence of saving faith in Christ.

It is for that reason that Paul says this, in Philippians chapter two, verse two: "Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, [all of you] having the same [*agape*] love, being of one accord, of one mind." And that mind, Paul tells us, is "the mind of Christ" (First Corinthians 2:16). The preciousness of redeemed sinners in the mind of Christ translates into the preciousness of redeemed sinners in the minds of genuine believers in Christ. That is the motivation of *agape* love within the body of Christ.

Demonstrating Agape Love May Cost You Your Reputation

This brings us to the third characteristic of *agape* love within the body of Christ that we find in First John chapter three: The exercise or the demonstration of *agape* love can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of the world – but it will never involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of God. Let me say that again: The exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of the world – but it will never involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of God. Let me explain what I mean.

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Let me begin that explanation by once again calling your attention to some verses in First John chapter three on *agape* love. First John chapter three, beginning at verse thirteen:

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know love, because He [Jesus] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren...My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.
(First John 3:13-19)

***Agape* Love in Action: Confronting Error in the Church**

Dear friends, there may come a time when you have to do some very difficult things in the body of Christ because of the imperative of *agape* love. I want to mention one thing specifically. We live in a time of growing doctrinal error within the church. We live in a time when false teaching about the most fundamental, foundational doctrines of the faith is in some places creeping in, and in other places rushing in. We live in a time when people within the church are less and less connected to the Word of God, and more and more connected to the word of man.

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We live in a time when people within the church are less and less certain of what they actually believe.

We live in a time when less than 15% of Evangelical church members read the Bible even once or twice a week. More than 35% of them never read it at all. And, very few people in our churches are actually reading the Bible systematically. Nearly 40% of Evangelical church members do not believe the Bible is free from error. Over 50% do not believe Satan is real. And 45% do not believe Jesus Christ was sinless while He was on the Earth.

Nearly 60% of Evangelical church members believe that good works help a person gain eternal life. Nearly 60% of Evangelical church members do not believe Jesus Christ is the only Way to eternal life. Over 50% think other religions are equally valid ways to God.

More and more churches are preaching a false gospel. More and more churches are teaching that being baptized and becoming a member of the church is the way you get to Heaven. More and more churches are teaching that what is important is to seek after health, and wealth, and happiness in this life. More and more churches are teaching people who have never come to realize that they are lost sinners, that the most important thing for those people to do is not to repent and to receive Jesus Christ, but to have a higher level of self-esteem, to feel better about themselves.

One church research expert has made this observation: "Among Evangelicals there's been this shift over time — from Bible reading to *feeling* — from knowing

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what Jesus actually had to say to having a "relationship" with a "Jesus" that they know little or nothing about — from actually *reading* the Bible to merely *revering* the Bible...”

Why am I telling you all of these things? Well, here is the reason. The time may come when some or all of these things will be true in your own local church. Statistically speaking, there’s a good chance that these things are already true, already happening in your local church.

What do you need to do if that is the case? Well, this is where *agape* love comes into the picture. The time may come when you will need to stand up and point out the fact that your local church is going in a wrong direction. The time may come when you will need to point out that there is false teaching. The time may come when you will need to point out that the word of man is being substituted for the Word of God. The time may come when you will need to point out that the one true Gospel is being watered down, or a false gospel has taken its place in the teachings of your local church.

And why will you need to do these things? Why will you need to stand up and point out these problems? Because of the imperative of *agape* love. Because of the imperative of *agape* love. Because Jesus Christ is precious to you. Because those around you in the church, your fellow believers, are precious to you, because they are precious to God. And based on that motivation, you may be called upon to demonstrate your *agape* love, by making the self-sacrifice of putting your reputation

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on the line by pointing out error within the church. Now, you need to do that in the proper way. In a respectful way. In a Christ-honoring way. In an Bible-focused way. But never in a spirit that compromises God's truth.

Listen to me carefully. It is a lie to say that the loving thing to do in a situation like that is to keep quiet. That is the un-loving thing to do. To keep silent in the presence of error within the church is the opposite of genuine *agape* love. It is a counterfeit of genuine *agape* love. It is not an expression of genuine love for Christ, and it is not an expression of genuine love for the brethren. To keep silent in the presence of error within the church is disobedience to Christ. To keep silent in the presence of error within the church puts your fellow brethren – it puts the people who are supposed to be precious to you in Christ – it puts those very people in spiritual danger.

Silence or compromise in the face of error is not genuine *agape* love, the second pillar of Christian unity. Paul says, "Let love be without hypocrisy." Silence in the face of error is hypocrisy. It is not love for God's people. It is love for the world. And John says in First John chapter two, verse fifteen, "If anyone loves the world, the love of [God] the Father is not in him." And let me remind you again of what John says later on in chapter three: John says, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him." *Agape* love says that the truth matters. God's truth matters. And truth, not persons or personalities, is the issue.

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Now, there can be several different kinds of reactions when you, motivated by self-sacrificial love, put your own reputation at risk and expose the fact that there is a wrong direction within the church, error within the church, false teaching within the church. And Scripture tells us how to deal with each of those reactions. And that is where we are going to continue in our next message as we continue to examine this third key characteristic of *agape* love – that the exercise of *agape* love within the body of Christ can involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of the world; but it will never involve the sacrifice of your reputation in the eyes of God.

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