

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Five Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy" (Part 1)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/1/2010

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“Knit Together in Love”

At the end of our last message, I made a statement, and I suspect that that statement may have been disturbing to some people who were listening. This is what I said. I said that the time may come when you will need to stand up and point out the fact that your church is going in the 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 church. The time may come when it will be your personal duty to point out the fact that there is apostasy in your church – that there is a departure from the true faith.

And then I asked a question. I said, “Why will you need to do these things? Why will you need to stand up and point out these problems?” And I said that it will be because of the imperative of *agape* love. The imperative of *agape* love. It will be because Jesus Christ is precious to you, and I certainly hope that He is. It will be because those around you in the church, your fellow believers, are precious to you, and I hope they are. It will be because those people are precious to God, and I hope you understand that they certainly 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 on the line by pointing out error within the church. Now, I also said that if you are called upon to do that,

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you will need to do that in the proper way. In a respectful way. In a Christ-honoring way. In an Biblical way. But never in a way that compromises God's truth.

In our study of the book of Colossians, we've recognized that the theme of the book is the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact that Jesus Christ is to have first place in everything. And the subject we're talking about right now is one of the places where a Christian needs to prove that you really believe this – you really, truly mean it, when you say that Jesus Christ is to have first place in your life, and in the life of the church.

Right now in our study of Colossians, we're dealing with the four pillars of Christian unity that we find in Colossians 2:1-3. I want to read those verses for you again as we begin today. 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.

We're focusing right now in particular on the phrase that we find in verse two: the church is to be "knit together [that is, united together, everyone holding the same beliefs together] *in love*." That is the second pillar of Christian unity.

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And as you know, if you've been following these messages, the Greek word for love in that verse is *agape* love. And we have seen that two things are true of *agape* love, genuine Christian love. And those two things are the *motivation* of *agape* love and the *demonstration* of *agape* love.

The motivation of *agape* love is 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.

A Critical Issue for Today's Church: Its Weak Response to Apostasy

We're also focusing right now on a particular aspect of *agape* love that we find in the Word of God, and we looked at this last time especially in First John chapter three, verses 10 through 24. The particular aspect of *agape* love that we focused on is the fact that demonstrating *agape* love in the church may require you to make the self-sacrifice of putting your reputation on the line by pointing out apostasy, sounding the alarm about apostasy, in the church.

This is an extremely critical issue today. It is an issue on which the church of Jesus Christ has become exceedingly weak. If there is one thing that characterizes most of the Evangelical church today, most of the Reformed church today, it is the fact that there is a tremendous degree of tolerance of apostasy in the church. We talked last time about some of the ways in which this is manifesting itself in the church. And we saw that there is clear and abundant evidence on every hand.

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So many people who are sitting in churches week after week, and so many men who are preaching from the pulpits week after week, simply do not believe what the Bible says. As we said last time, there is abundant evidence based on careful research, that shows us this is true, that much of what is called the Bible-believing church today is actually slipping into apostasy, and the problems are spreading.

The time may come when these things will be true in your own church. Statistically speaking, there is a good chance that these things are already true, already happening in your church.

How did the church get into this sad condition? The main reason is that even when people in the church recognize there is a problem, they don't want to do anything about it. And we saw last time that one thing is underneath of that unwillingness to take action, and that is the widespread influence of postmodernism in our society. Very few people, and even a great many people in Evangelical churches, simply do not believe that there is such a thing as objective truth. Today most people really think that "truth" depends on what feels right to me. So you have your truth, and I have my truth. My church has its truth and the church down the road says it has a different truth. But we all just need to tolerate each other and get along. That is the kind of thinking you find today.

And when you ask people in the Evangelical church why they think this way, the main reason they will give you is this: "Well, the Bible says we're supposed to love one another. The Bible says that we all just need to get along, even if we differ in

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what we believe. And that means that it is not my place to stir up trouble in the church.”

Dear friend, let me tell you something – not on my own authority, but on the authority of the Word of God. This kind of attitude is absolutely the wrong response to apostasy. It is an *un*-loving response to apostasy. This kind of attitude, this kind of wrong thinking, this kind of sinful, evil thinking, is why the Evangelical church is in such terrible shape today.

The Bible says that the true believer’s response to apostasy is to be absolutely different. It is to be 180 degrees opposite from the typical response – or perhaps I should say lack of response – that we see today. I am going to show you where the Bible says that, and why it says it.

Five Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy

And so that brings us to this question: According to the Word of God, what is the loving response to apostasy? To answer that question, we’re going to look at five things that need to be absolutely clear in your mind as a believer. You need to be clear on these five things so that you will be equipped to do what God says you must do, when you find apostasy in the church. These are five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy.

Number one, you need to be able to define and identify apostasy. What is apostasy, and what is *not* apostasy, according to the Bible? If you’re going to put

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your reputation on the line by lovingly exposing apostasy in the church, first of all make sure it's really apostasy.

Number two, you need to be absolutely clear about the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy. And we are going to find that it is a response that is based upon genuine Christian love – *agape* love.

Number three, you need to compare other responses to apostasy – or non-responses to apostasy – against the proper response that you find in the Word of God, the response that God commands. In other words, you need to understand why those other responses are wrong responses. You need to understand why only one response is the right response. We're going to find that it has to do with the Biblical definition of Christian love. And we're going to find that what many people call Christian love is really a counterfeit. It is not *agape* love at all.

Number four, you need to be able to deal with specific objections that people will raise. These are objections that people raise in order to keep from doing the right thing themselves. And they also raise these objections to try to discourage you from doing the right thing, to prevent you from doing the right thing. What you will often find is that people twist Scripture to try to avoid responsibility. We're going to deal briefly 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.

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And number five, you need to understand the steps 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 these matters.

Key Number One: Understand What Apostasy Is – And Is Not

So what is the loving response to apostasy? Number one, you need to be able to define and identify apostasy. You need to understand the boundaries. What is apostasy, and what is *not* apostasy, according to the Bible? Apostasy manifests itself primarily in false teaching. Apostasy manifests itself in a departure from Christ's twofold purpose for the church. And apostasy manifests itself in ungodly living among those who are in the church.

Apostasy is the ride down the slippery slope from the bright mountaintops of Biblical faith into the dark abyss of equivocation and unbelief. That ride down the slippery slope can begin very slowly. It can begin with very subtle and seemingly harmless compromises. Apostasy always begins with some kind of compromise on the Bible. Apostasy begins by saying, perhaps in very subtle ways, that the Bible is not what it says it is – the very Word of God, and not merely the word of man.

It begins by saying that some clear command of the Bible, some clear principle in the Bible, some clear point of doctrine in the Bible, perhaps isn't quite so clear-cut as we thought it was, or, it isn't mandatory for the people of God, or, we can ignore it and go our own way. Apostasy often begins by subtly de-emphasizing the fact that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. Apostasy often begins by

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slowly shifting the emphasis from viewing the Bible as the Word of God to viewing the Bible mainly as the words of men. In other words, taking the focus off of Divine inspiration.

That is where the ride down the slippery slope usually begins. It may take a short time, or it may take years, but sooner or later people start saying that the Bible isn't completely accurate when it speaks about things like matters of science or history or geography. People start saying that maybe parts of the Old Testament are just later versions of ancient stories and myths.

People start saying that the Bible is inspired, but only in such a way that God accommodated Himself to the ignorance of ancient, backward people like the Israelites on things like the origin of the earth and man and the universe, on the Flood, on the Tower of Babel, and the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that the Bible says accompanied Israel in the wilderness for forty years. Maybe these things are just ways of saying things that aren't actual reality; they're just words that God used to express thoughts in ways that ignorant, primitive people could understand. And let me tell you that all such thinking is entirely wrong, for at least two reasons. First, God does not help to perpetuate a worldview that is based on falsehood. And second, our ancient ancestors were a lot smarter than we usually think they were.

The ride down the slippery slope picks up speed as it manifests itself in other ways. People will begin to say, or to imply, that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament aren't necessarily the same God. So maybe it's not

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important to believe in the Trinity. Maybe Jesus Christ wasn't really God Himself, born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. Maybe Jesus was just a very righteous man, an outstanding moral example, a very skilled teacher. Maybe He didn't really die on the cross. Maybe He didn't really rise bodily from the dead.

And so maybe there are other ways to God. Maybe Jesus isn't the only way. Maybe other religions are also valid ways to God. And maybe good works do help to gain eternal life. And so maybe all I need to do is to try to do the best I can, and be tolerant of other people. Maybe people aren't really as bad and sinful as some parts of the Bible say they are.

And the ride down the slippery slope of apostasy continues into the abyss. People in the church begin to doubt the Bible on moral matters. People begin saying, maybe the things that the Bible says about the evil of homosexuality don't really apply today. Maybe the things that Paul says about the proper role of women in the home and in the church, really don't apply today. And maybe the Bible isn't quite so clear as some people say it is about divorce. And maybe it's not a problem to live with someone and engage in a sexual relationship outside of marriage.

Maybe the Bible isn't quite so clear as some people say it is about the way we are supposed to worship God. Maybe things are a lot more wide open. And maybe the Bible isn't so clear as some people say it is about abortion or euthanasia. Maybe the thing that is really important is not recognizing and repenting of our sins, but building up everybody's self-esteem in the church.

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This is what apostasy really is, according to the Bible. It begins with subtle denials of the Bible as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God. And it goes downhill and gains more and more momentum toward the abyss of Hell, as that abandonment of God's Word works itself out in more and more areas of the church, more and more areas of its teaching, and more and more areas of people's thinking and living. These are things that you need to respond to with *agape* love by exposing them and reproofing them.

Now before we leave this point, let me say something else. Let me say a few words about what apostasy is *not*. Apostasy is not differences among believers about things that are not specifically required or specifically prohibited in Scripture. It is not apostasy if someone believes it is permissible to eat Sunday dinner in a restaurant. It is not apostasy if someone believes that all foods are permissible to eat while someone else does not. (That was the issue Paul dealt with in Romans chapter fourteen.) It is not apostasy if someone believes it is alright to read secular literature on a Sunday afternoon.

Now those are examples that some of you might consider to be ridiculous. But I have known people who will break fellowship with other believers over such things, and that is wrong. They call such things apostasy, when they are not. But let me also give you what some of you might consider to be a more weighty example. It is not apostasy for believers to differ in their views about eschatology, about the end times, as long as those views do not contravene clear Bible doctrine.

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If you're going to put your reputation on the line by lovingly exposing apostasy in the church, first of all make sure it's really apostasy. That's the first of the five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy.

We have a good deal more to cover as we consider this matter of the five keys to a Biblically loving response to apostasy within the church. But we've reached the limits of our time for our broadcast today. So I hope that you will continue with us, as we continue our focus on these issues in our next message.

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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