

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy" (Part 3)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/22/2010

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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 in connection with our study of the first three verses of Colossians chapter two. As we begin today, let me call your attention to those verses once again. Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. Here 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 one particular phrase in verse two: "being knit together in love." This is one of the pillars of Christian unity that we find in these verses. As we've seen, the word for love that the Apostle Paul uses here, by divine inspiration, is the Greek word *agape*. We've seen that *agape* love is a special term for love in the pages of the New Testament. *Agape* love has a special motivation, and that results in a special kind of demonstration. We've seen that *agape* love is motivated by an appreciation of the preciousness of Christ to the

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believer. And we've seen that *agape* love is also motivated by an appreciation of the preciousness of our fellow believers in Christ within His church.

Furthermore, we've seen that *agape* love is unique not only in its motivation but in its demonstration. And in particular, we've been considering the fact that the Bible tells us that *agape* love, when necessary, demonstrates itself by being willing to put your reputation on the line, by taking the often difficult step of exposing apostasy within the church, and being willing to endure the possibility that other people are going to criticize you and perhaps even persecute you for doing so.

### **Why We're Spending So Much Time On This Matter**

Now some of you may be wondering why I'm spending so much time on this particular aspect of the demonstration of *agape* love. I'm doing this for four reasons.

First of all, this aspect of *agape* love is one of the most misunderstood things in the Christian church today. It is also one of the most misused and abused things in the church today. We're going to see that people often twist Scripture to make *agape* love into something that is entirely different from the true picture of it that we find in the pages of the Bible.

Secondly, as we look at the history of the church – from the very beginning, from the earliest chapters of the book of Acts – we find that the history of the church is the history of the battle for sound doctrine and against apostasy. The history of the church is littered with the wreckage of individuals and churches that refused to

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confront apostasy and deal with it. But as we look carefully at the history of the church, we also find that it is the history of the spiritually heroic efforts of those who took a stand against error. The pages of the New Testament, and the subsequent 1,900 years of church history, give us the record of men and women who, by the authority of Scripture alone and by the power of the Holy Spirit, did a mighty work for God.

These men and women helped to bring rescue and repentance to churches that were headed toward apostasy. And, they also helped to rescue God's remnant from churches that had gone into apostasy and refused to repent of it. They did this by sounding the clarion call that we find in Second Corinthians chapter six – "Come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord, and do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."

Why did these people do what they did? We find that they were motivated by *agape* love. They were motivated by an appreciation of the preciousness of Christ their Savior. They were motivated by an appreciation of the preciousness of their fellow believers. And so, because of their love for Christ and His church, they were willing to put their reputations on the line, and even in many cases they put their very lives on the line, even in many cases suffering torture and death, in order to stand against apostasy, to stand for the truth, as Paul puts it in Ephesians chapter six, "having done all, to stand."

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My third reason for spending so much time on this particular matter is the state of the church in our day. Apostasy of every kind and in every form is rampant among us today. As I look at the pages of church history, I do not believe there has ever been another time when apostasy was so widespread, and moving so rapidly, on so many fronts, in so many churches, and in so many countries as we find today.

The Internet and mass-media satellite communication, by radio and especially by television, have made it possible for apostasy to spread, literally at the speed of light. A particular brand of apostasy can be born in one church in one country today, and within a week it can spread around the world, as it is watched, and listened to, and embraced by untaught and undiscerning people in churches in a hundred other countries. It is happening. I don't have time to give you examples today, but if you go to our website (at [teachingtheword.org](http://teachingtheword.org)) and look at the resources you will find there, you will find many, many accounts of such things.

My fourth reason for spending so much time on the issue of dealing with apostasy is the fact that over the past several years I have found myself spending a considerable portion of my time in the ministry, helping people in churches who are dealing with false teaching and apostasy in their own churches. Some of these dear people are pastors, but many more of them are elders, or deacons, or regular church members. These people are deeply troubled by the real apostasy they are discovering in their churches and their denominations. And they are also deeply troubled because when they have pointed out the problem, the reaction of other people quite often has been to criticize them, and even to persecute them. I have known people who

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suffered actual physical abuse from another church member because they stood for the truth.

Dear friends, these things are very real. And perhaps right now this message is going out to someone who is in such a situation. I want to encourage you today. I want you to understand exactly what God's Word says you need to do, how to do it, and how to deal with those who, to use the modern phrase, want to "shoot the messenger" rather than do something about the problem.

So these are the reasons why I am spending so much time on this matter. In Acts chapter twenty, the Apostle Paul said this to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He said, "I know this" – I am absolutely convinced of it – "that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things" – things that will turn the church away from the truth and toward apostasy. "Therefore watch," Paul told them. Never let down your guard. "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Demonstrate your *agape* love for Christ's church by guarding the flock of God that He purchased with His precious blood.

What Paul said would happen in the church at Ephesus did happen. And, dear friend, don't ever think that it can't happen in your church. Don't ever think that it might not be happening right now. Paul told the Ephesians in the book of Ephesians chapter six, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities,

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against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:12-13).

And so it is for these reasons that we've been looking at "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy." We said that key number one is that you need to be able to define and identify apostasy. You do that on the basis of Scripture alone. We said that key number two is that you need to be absolutely clear about the Biblical basis for the proper response to apostasy. The basis of that response is genuine Christian love – *agape* love. And, the standard of that response is truth – Biblical truth. We saw that key number three is that you need to understand why any other response to apostasy is a wrong response. Many people refuse to deal with apostasy because they say it is not the loving thing to do. But we saw that what those people call Christian love is really a counterfeit. It is not *agape* love at all.

#### **Key Number Four: Dealing With Objections**

So those are the first three of the "5 Keys to a Biblically Loving Response to Apostasy." That brings us to key number four, which is this: You need to be able to deal with the objections that people will raise, when they try to keep from doing their duty against apostasy themselves, and when they try to keep you from doing your duty. What you will often find is that people twist Scripture to try to avoid responsibility. We're going to look at several passages of Scripture that people

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commonly try to use, as an excuse for not doing the right thing when there is apostasy in the church.

Let me explain to you why key number four is so important. If you make the effort to expose and confront apostasy within the church, before very long you will probably hear people saying things like this to you. They'll quote Scripture to you:

- "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7)
- "Why do you judge your brother?" (Romans 14)
- "Judge nothing before the time" (1 Corinthians 4)
- "Love bears all things...[love] endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13)
- "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4)
- "Come now and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1)

I've heard these and similar verses quoted many, many times, and perhaps you have too. Evangelical and Reformed church leaders and church members often use passages like these to defend their own inaction in the face of apostasy, and to discourage or even prevent others from acting.

But dear friend, you need to understand something. Just because someone quotes Scripture, it does not make him right. Just because someone quotes Scripture, it does not mean he is telling the truth. The cults quote Scripture. Apostates quote Scripture.

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Even Satan quotes Scripture. We know that from his effort to tempt the Lord Jesus Christ into sin in the wilderness.

But what are these people doing when they quote Scripture to try to prevent you from doing your duty and taking a stand against apostasy? The fact is they are twisting Scripture to avoid obeying God's clear commands.

Why do people do this? As I've already said, often they try to use Scripture to justify what is, in fact, an un-loving, un-Biblical, Christ-displeasing response to apostasy. They will misuse Scripture to justify their own unwillingness to take a stand. They will quote Scripture to you, to try to discourage or prevent you from taking a stand. I've seen even pastors use Scripture to justify themselves in not taking a stand, or to try to discourage people in their churches from taking a stand.

### **Why People Try To Shirk Their Duty, and Prevent You From Doing Yours**

Now some folks who are listening to this message may be saying this: "Wait a minute. Hold on. You're getting into judgments of motive. The Bible says that we aren't supposed to judge other people's motives." Let me respond by saying this: You are not making an assumption about someone else's motive if that person makes his own motive very clear. And quite often people are very ready to tell you what their motive is, for not taking a stand against apostasy. Let me mention just three of the many motives I've encountered over the years.

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First of all, there is the motive of tradition. I've seen people use Scripture to try to keep people from confronting apostasy, with a line of argument that goes like this: "My family has been in this church for three generations. My grandfather helped build this building. My parents and grandparents are buried in the cemetery next to this church. I've given thousands of dollars to this church over the years. I've invested a lot of my time here. We have a wonderful tradition here, a wonderful legacy. I want my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to continue that tradition. That is the most important thing. I'm willing to overlook doctrinal problems in order to keep the peace and maintain the tradition." And so the stated motive for not confronting apostasy, in this kind of case, is an allegiance to tradition.

Second, there is the motive of misplaced loyalty. Let me give you just one example of this. I knew of a pastor who was unwilling to confront a well-known seminary professor who was a member of his church. It came to light that this professor was teaching a false gospel of justification by faith plus works. He was teaching this false gospel not only in the seminary classroom but also in home Bible studies and in the Sunday school. And this false teaching was spreading in the church. Some people in the church did the right thing. They first confronted the seminary professor, but he was unwilling to repent. And then they went to the pastor about the problem, as they should have. But the pastor of the church told these people that he wasn't going to do anything about it, because he didn't want to hurt the seminary professor's feelings. He didn't want to damage his reputation. This pastor quoted Scripture to excuse his unwillingness to protect the flock that God had placed

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under his care. His motive was misplaced loyalty to a man who had gone wrong in his theology and was preaching a false gospel. This pastor chose personal loyalty over loyalty to Christ and His Word.

Third, there is the motive of being "missional". This is one of the most popular motives that you will hear today, especially when church leaders make excuses for not dealing with apostasy in the church. The word "missional" has become a very popular term in the Evangelical world today. Now, the word "missional" didn't even exist ten years ago. But today, if you do an Internet search on the word "missional", you will find over half a million entries. Today, more and more pastors and church leaders are obsessed with the idea that the church has to be "missional". They say that we can't spend our time confronting apostasy because the really important thing is for the church to be "missional."

Now, what do they mean by this word "missional"? What they usually mean is this: We need to reinvent the church to fit in with the postmodern culture. I know of many churches that are sending their people out into the community, not to do door-to-door evangelism, but to take a door-to-door survey where they ask unsaved people this question: "What do we need to change about our church in order to get you to come?" Being "missional" is often just a code word for reinventing the church to fit in with the unsaved, postmodern culture. This kind of being "missional" is the very essence of apostasy. It is not our job to reinvent the church to look like the unregenerated world. God's Word says that friendship with the world is enmity against God (James 4:4).

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Or, sometimes these pastors and church leaders will say that being “missional” means that the church needs to get on with the work of evangelism. But you can’t get on with the work of evangelism unless there is agreement on the definition of the Evangel. You can’t get on with the work of evangelism unless there is agreement on what the Bible says the Gospel is – and also what it is not. But what we find in so many churches that have adopted the “missional” mantra, is that the church and its leaders aren’t really sure what the Gospel is anymore. They’ve lost their grip on it. And so the motive of being “missional” becomes another excuse for not confronting apostasy in the church, and discouraging people from confronting apostasy. More and more pastors and church leaders who are caught up in this mindset make you out to be the bad guy, if you do not want to jump on the “missional” bandwagon, because you recognize that their brand of being “missional” is facilitating apostasy.

### **Don’t Be Intimidated**

So these are some of the motives. And the people who try to push you into a corner because you recognize apostasy for what it is, those people will often quote Scripture: “judge not” – “judge nothing before the time” – “judge not your brother” – “let us love one another” – and so on. And sometimes their response is also very, very emotional.

Now, many people are intimidated when this happens. Many people are frightened into silence. Many people just go back to their pews, and keep quiet, and let Satan

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have his way with the church. Or, they simply leave the church without saying a word.

Dear friend, I don't want you to be that kind of person. And far more importantly, God does not want you to be that kind of person. God wants you to take a stand, and He wants you to take that stand on the basis of love for Christ, love for Christ's people, and love for Christ's truth. And as we're going to see in upcoming messages, God honors those who stand for His truth.

#### **About the Broadcast**

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