

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Christian Unity: Facts, Not Feelings" – Colossians 2:1-3

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/20/2010

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Introduction

Today we're continuing our focus on Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. Last time we saw that the Apostle Paul was engaged in a great spiritual conflict on behalf of the believers. And we saw that Paul's conflict is our conflict as believers today. It is the conflict of anyone who has a spiritual responsibility for others – whether you are a parent, a pastor, a Christian educator, or God in some other way has given you a responsibility for the spiritual welfare of someone else. You need to be engaged in that spiritual conflict, that spiritual warfare of praying for them, warning them, and teaching them, with the goal that they will become mature in Christ Jesus.

Today I want to focus your attention on a second aspect of these verses, and that is the issue of Christian unity. We hear a lot of talk in our time about the need for Christian unity. But that unity must be genuine Christian unity. It must be the right kind of unity. It must be unity on the right basis, unity on the right foundation. The ecumenical movement, the Purpose-Driven church movement, the Emergent church movement, and so many others in our time are seeking a unity that is not genuine Christian unity.

Why is that? First of all, these unity movements do not seek to unite true Christians only. They are trying to unite possibly a few genuine Christians who have been deceived, along with a great mass of unsaved people and apostate churches under a so-called Christian banner. The unity these movements are promoting is not a unity that has the Word of God as its foundation. The unity these movements are promoting is

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not a unity that has the genuine Christ of the Bible as its Chief Cornerstone – the genuine Jesus, the preeminent Christ who we are studying here in Colossians.

Contrary to all of this is the unity that the Apostle Paul sought to instill and encourage among believers in the early church. The unity we find in Colossians chapter two, verses one through three, is genuine Christian unity. Unity on the right basis. Unity on the right foundation. Unity in the true body of Christ, His true Church. Unity on the basis of truth.

And so, today, I want to begin by giving you an expanded translation of Colossians chapter two, verses one through three, based on the original language. Paul says this:

“For I want you to understand how great an agonizing battle I engage in for you and for those in Laodicea, and for all those who have not seen me face to face – a conflict that is a constant part of my life – in order that your innermost beings may be established, encouraged, and confirmed, being united on the basis of a shared certainty rooted in and manifesting itself in self-sacrificial love, and in all the abundant and invaluable riches of the absolutely complete, absolutely certain confidence and conviction of the understanding, to the full, complete, and accurate knowledge of the once-secret things now revealed concerning both God the Father and Jesus Christ, that are only revealed to those who are in Christ, in Whom all of the good and precious things of both wisdom in a general sense, and a deeper understanding of the wisdom concerning God specifically, are stored up.”

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The Situation of the Colossian Believers

Now, as we consider these verses, we need to remember the situation in which the Colossian believers lived. The Colossian believers were a minority – the same thing that is true of the genuine Church of Jesus Christ today. We live among a vast majority of people who do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. People who are not saved, even though many of them may be religious. At the time Paul was writing to them, the Colossian Christians lived among three particular kinds of unbelievers.

The first and largest group was the pagans, the people who worshipped all of the Greek gods. Colosse was a center of pagan worship. These people were held captive by superstition.

Then there was a second group of unbelieving people, the Gnostics. The Gnostics were people who were trying to mix together Greek philosophy and elements of Christianity in a way that appealed to their intellectual pride. So you had the pagans and you had the Gnostics.

And then there was a third group, the Judaizers. These people were ethnic Jews who said that faith in Jesus Christ was not enough. They said you needed to also keep the Old Testament Law in order to be saved. These people were legalists.

Behind the Text: A Tremendous Contrast

We need to keep this background in mind as we read the first three verses of Colossians chapter two. What we have behind the text of these verses is a

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tremendous contrast. Paul is working day and night, engaging in great spiritual conflict, to make sure that the Colossian believers understand who they are and what they possess in Jesus Christ. These are things that the pagans, and the Gnostics, and the Judaizers did not have and could not have. You can only have these things if you are truly in Christ, and Christ is truly in you. Here at the beginning of Colossians chapter two, Paul is saying that certain things are the hallmarks of genuine, growing, maturing believers in Christ.

Four Pillars of Genuine Christian Unity

Paul is talking here about the basis of Christian unity. And Paul emphasizes four things in these verses. Let me give you all four of them as we begin today. This is a very, very rich section of the book. We're going to begin to deal with these four things in today's message, and then we're going to continue next time. I think it's appropriate to refer to these four things as the four pillars of Christian unity – the four pillars of genuine unity in Christ.

First, Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of not mere 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, but it is not a matter of trying to grasp something that is nebulous or not fully defined.

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

So let's begin to look at these pillars of genuine Christian unity in detail.

Pillar Number One: Facts, Not Feelings

First, Christian unity is a matter of the heart, a matter of the innermost being, but it is not a matter of mere feelings.

The Gnostics' and the pagans' thoughts and actions were governed by mere feelings. The pagans said that you had to run around placating all these gods who supposedly controlled various forces in the world. You never knew – and you could never know – where you stood with these gods. The Gnostics said that you never really knew if you had enough of the higher, mysterious knowledge that they said you needed to possess. It was a matter of feelings, not facts.

The same is true of the cults today. The same is true of Roman Catholicism today. These false religions thrive on the fact that they tell their followers that they can never be sure if they have eternal life. The followers of these religions are driven back and forth by their day-to-day feelings. Today I *feel* secure with God, but tomorrow I don't. Today I don't *feel* afraid, but tomorrow I am *overwhelmed* by fear.

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Today I *think* I understand, but tomorrow I *feel* like I don't understand at all. It is an utterly miserable existence.

Or worse yet, many of the followers of the cults and the followers of Romanism go along in life with a different kind of feeling, a feeling of complacency – a feeling that somehow, some way, it will all work out in the end, and God will accept them as they are. And they go along in this false feeling of complacency when the actual fact is that they stand under God's condemnation, because they have never truly placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation from sin and judgment.

In the same way, the postmodern mind in the 21st century is governed by feelings. How often have you heard this: "How can it be wrong when it *feels* so right?" How often have you heard this: "If it *feels* good, do it"? This is the moral and spiritual philosophy of our time. No fixed standards. No rules. No objective standards. Everything based on how I feel right now. And sadly, that philosophy has come into the Evangelical church, and it is dominating much of what the church says and does today. In many places today, the thoughts and actions of people and leaders in the Evangelical church are really no better than those of the Gnostics and the pagans in New Testament times.

Paul is saying here in Colossians chapter two that the Christian's thoughts and actions are to be vastly different. The Christian's thoughts and actions are to be governed by a settled assurance. An assurance based on facts.

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Paul says that he labors in the ministry, he engages in this spiritual conflict on their behalf, so “that their hearts may be encouraged” – literally, “in order that their innermost being may be established, encouraged and confirmed” in the faith.

The word that Paul uses here for the heart is *kardia*. He isn’t speaking merely of the organ that pumps blood through the body. He isn’t speaking of the heart as the seat of emotions.

He is speaking of the heart as the center of the inner life of a person. He is speaking of the heart as the seat of understanding, the center of thought and deliberation. He is speaking of the heart as the seat of the will, the source of resolves. He is speaking of the heart as the center of moral conduct.

Christianity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. Genuine Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. It is a matter of certainty within a person’s innermost being. It is a matter of certainty based on facts, based on knowledge, based on reasoned belief. And that is because it is based on a *change* of the innermost being – a change that comes because God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the believer. Within the believer in Jesus Christ there is a renewing or a renovation of the mind. Paul writes of this in Romans chapter twelve, verses one and two. There is a redirection of the will, away from the thoughts of the world and toward the mind of Christ. And this produces a growing resolve in the innermost being of a person, to live this life in a way that is worthy of being identified with the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Yes indeed, there are feelings. There is a growing desire to please God. There is a disturbed state of mind when we displease God. There are emotions of great gratitude toward God because we have a growing realization of what God has done for us in Christ. As we mature in Christ we have a growing appreciation of the infinite extent of the mercy and grace that God the Father has shown to us, by sending His only begotten Son into the world to die for us.

But those emotions are not the *basis* of our faith in Christ. And those emotions are not the thing that *determines* whether you are in Christ or not. You may have times when you *feel* very unspiritual – and often as not, that has to do with un-confessed sin – but at that moment you are no less in Christ than the day you were first saved, and you are no less in Christ than you will be on the day you go home to Heaven.

The key question is that: What is it that governs you? Do you allow your fluctuating feelings to dominate your spiritual thinking? About yourself? About others? Do you allow your emotions to govern the extent of your unity in the body of Christ, how you deal with and relate to other Christians?

Do you allow yourself to be tossed about by every wind of doctrine? Do you embrace what may well be false teaching, because it sounds good and feels good, without evaluating that teaching against the infallible standard of God's Word? And by failing to do this, do you thus disrupt the unity of the Body of Christ?

Paul's central theme in the book of Colossians is that these things must not be true of the believer on Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself must be preeminent.

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His Word must be your sole authority. Your feelings are not your authority. Your emotions are not your authority. God's Word is your authority. Everything you do, everything you think, must be done and thought according to the Book of Books, the only supernatural Book.

So our first point is that Christian unity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. Paul says that he labors in the ministry of the Word, he engages in this spiritual conflict on their behalf, so "that their hearts may be encouraged" – so that their innermost beings may be established, encouraged, and confirmed in the facts of the faith. Christian unity is first of all a matter of settled assurance in your innermost being, a settled assurance of the truth, that is based on nothing less than the authority of God's inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word, and on the person and work of Jesus Christ as it is taught in the Bible.

Pillar Number Two: *Agape* Love

Our second point about the basis of Christian unity is this: Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism. Christian unity is a matter of love, but it is not a matter of mere emotionalism.

Remember that the Colossian believers were surrounded by people who were the enemies of the true faith. They lived among pagans who worshipped many false gods. They lived among the Gnostics who taught that it didn't matter so much how you lived, but what mattered was a higher, mysterious knowledge that only an elite class of people could obtain. And the Colossian believers also lived among the

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Judaizers, who said that Christ wasn't enough – that you needed to add the works of the Old Testament law to Christ in order to be saved. Now there was one common denominator about all three of these groups – the pagans, the Gnostics, and the Judaizers. And that common denominator was a lack of love. These people didn't live on the basis of love. They lived on the basis of emotionalism – especially the kind of emotionalism that has its roots in the sins of lust and pride.

The pagan temple worship was filled with lust and sexual immorality. The religious philosophy of the Gnostics was based on pride in false knowledge. It was based on a denial of the sin problem of every human being. The legalism of the Judaizers – the false teaching that Christ's death and resurrection is not enough – that legalism was rooted in human pride, a pride that said, "I can do something to bring about my own salvation."

The Apostle Paul wanted the Colossian believers to understand that there is no true, Biblical, Christian love in any of these things. The Christian is to live not on the basis of these things, but on the basis of what the original Greek of the New Testament calls *agape* love.

There are two principal words for love in the original language of the New Testament. One is *phileo*, which has to do with brotherly love, love between family members, or love between friends. The other word is *agape*, and this is the one that is used most frequently in the New Testament in relation to the Church – over 100

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times. And it is the word that Paul uses here in Colossians chapter two, verse two: "that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love."

What is the definition of *agape* love? First we need to understand the basis of it. The basis of Christian love is the loving, pardoning work of God in Christ on behalf of undeserving sinners. And it is for that reason that true Christian love, true *agape* love, is a love that springs from a sense of the preciousness of the object that is loved.

John 3:16 tells us that "God so *loved* the world" – *agape* love, self-sacrificial love, love because even when we were lost, filthy sinners we were precious in the sight of God – "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Paul says this in Second Corinthians chapter five, beginning at verse fourteen: "For the love of Christ constrains (or compels) us, because we judge thus: that if One (Jesus) died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."

That is the second pillar of Christian unity – *agape* love. Genuine Christian unity begins with God's *agape* love for us. Genuine Christian unity then involves our response to God's *agape* love for us. Genuine Christian unity involves Christians responding in self-sacrificial, grateful love toward God for what He has done, recognizing the preciousness of God to us. And genuine Christian unity therefore also involves Christians' exhibiting that same *agape* love of God in our dealings with our fellow believers.

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This is a matter of great consequence, a matter of the utmost importance, for the individual Christian and for the Church as the Body of Christ. And there is a great deal more that we need to say about this second pillar of Christian unity. We need to make sure that we have a complete and well-balanced understanding of what the Bible has to say on the subject of genuine Christian love as one of the pillars of genuine Christian unity. There are several other relevant Scripture passages that we need to look at together. And so we're going to stop here today, and we'll continue on this great subject in our next message.

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