

When Love Divorces Doctrine and Unity Rejects Truth

A Response to End-Time Ecumenism

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It is evident that leading neo-evangelicals believe that our main goal is to eliminate doctrinal distinctives and to emphasize unity among those claiming to be believers.

One of the basic ideas of today's philosophy of ecumenical evangelism is that love is more important than doctrine. Ecumenical evangelists say that doctrine divides, whereas love unifies. What does the Bible say? Is it true that in the New Testament love is more important than doctrine, or truth?

In the so-called "love chapter," we are told: "Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love [agape]" (1 Cor. 13:13). Some say – "That settles it: love is supreme!" But when we examine this chapter more carefully, we discover that truth is also mentioned. In v. 6 we are told that love "rejoices in the truth." In other words, faith, hope and love are virtues, but truth has an altogether different status. It is the frame of reference, the foundation, the atmosphere without which virtues such as love cannot exist at all.

Love "rejoices in the truth." Why? Because without truth to define, interpret, protect, guide and channel it, love can become a total disaster. We dare not place truth on the same level as virtues. Virtues would shrivel up and die if it were not for truth.

Here is an example from the natural world. We cannot imagine life on this planet without water. Water is absolutely essential for life – as long as it stays within proper channels, such as canals, aqueduct and pipes. But when water gets out of control, it is the second greatest catastrophe that can happen to this planet – second only to fire. On the one hand, it is an absolute blessing, but on the other hand it can be a total disaster. So it is with love.

God's Definition of Love

Love without divine definition (God's revealed channels within which it must flow) becomes the most horrible thing on earth. It can destroy human beings by the millions and can be reduced to satanic sentimentalism.

Love, as defined by God, is doing for a person that which is best for him in the light of eternity, no matter what the cost may be. Somehow, however, when it comes to world evangelism, many people have forgotten God's definitions and have fallen into sentimentalism.

Consider some key Scriptures which illustrate the distinction between love and truth: "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:31, 32).

Ultimate freedom may only be achieved by total submission – unconditional surrender to truth. There is nothing here about love.

Love Obeys the Truth

There are many who speak glowingly of their love for Jesus Christ and for lost men. But in John 14, He stresses that obedience to truth is the best form of love: "If you love Me, keep My commandments. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words" (John 14:15, 21, 23, 24).

This is what we call the acid test of love: Does a man obey the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ? It makes no difference how much we talk about our love if we do not obey Christ. It is obedience that counts, not words. Obedience without love is theoretically possible, but love without obedience is, in practice, impossible. It is a satanic substitute for God's plan.

Love Teaches the Truth

John 21 gives an example of one who said much about his love for Jesus. But when it came to obedience, it was not there. When the pressure came, his resolution collapsed and he denied his Lord. After the resurrection of Jesus, our Lord confronted Peter lovingly, but in truth: “‘Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs... Tend My sheep... Feed My sheep’” (John 21:15-17).

How do we express love to the Lord Jesus according to the lesson of this confrontation? By feeding His sheep – teaching His people and training them in “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) – as He also commanded in the Great Commission: “Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

Love Leaves Nothing Out

This leads to a consideration of Acts 20, where we find a good example of an apostle who obeyed the Great Commission. He said nothing about love in this final appeal to the Ephesians. But he exhibited supreme love toward them.

What did he do for them? Did he say, “I love you, I love you, I love you”? Acts 20:26, 27 gives the answer: “Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”

The result was “that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). Paul based his evangelism on sound doctrinal instruction. That is God’s key for world evangelism.

Here is another example. The words of Paul in Gal. 1:6 (“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel”) were blunt but necessary, as he says in Gal. 4:16, in order to “tell [them] the truth.”

Our Lord tells us how we can achieve the perfect balance. Note the gifts God gave the true church, the body of Christ, for service and ministry in this age: “And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11).

Every one of these gifts in the form of a person involves a doctrinal person. They are all totally involved in truth. All were engaged in preaching, teaching and discipling in the light of revealed truth. There is no teaching whatsoever in the New Testament suggesting that love is more important than doctrine or truth.

Love is referred to in Eph. 4:15, where we read of “speaking the truth in love.” Love is the motivation, manner and method of speaking truth. Love is the servant of truth. It makes it easier to receive, absorb and digest. But it must never be allowed to eclipse or set aside truth. God’s truth can never change, but God’s truth in the hands of human messengers is a very delicate and fragile thing.

Love Resists Poisons

There is no living system known to science that can survive without an intricate, elaborate and constantly-used system to purify itself from poisons. This is also true of God’s church. It is impossible for any spiritual organization to survive unless it has a system to purify itself from poisonous influences.

We need to remember that we are in a highly-poisoned environment. We are immersed in satan’s world. He has constant access to every servant of God through his fallen nature. Thus, how can the relative success of a Christian’s ministry be evaluated apart from God’s infallible, inerrant Word? Apart from it, who is to determine what success means?

Love Protects the Flock

Did the Lord Jesus encourage His disciples to listen sympathetically to other religious leaders of that time? His answer is given in Matt. 7:15: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Yet we are told today by neo-evangelicals that we should both teach and study in liberal universities and colleges of theology.

But there is one thing worse than division, and that is peace with compromise. Truth is infinitely more important than the false unity of the world.

Love Corrects Error

We see this in that, for the sake of truth, even families will be divided by our Lord so that at least someone within that unit can perpetuate God's truth (cf. Luke 12:51-53). In Rom. 16:17 Paul states: "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them."

If we honor and love the Lord Jesus we will watch for anything or anyone that may destroy His truth. We will avoid such people.

When there is a rotten apple in a barrel, the bad one never gets better, but the good ones go rotten. It is the same with a good life or good doctrine, which can always be contaminated by a bad environment. A mere association of the good with the bad will never make the bad thing better. The good gets worse; the bad does not improve (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33).

Is it right for doctrinal purity to be blatantly submerged for the sake of worldly ecclesiastical unity? Surely this is a total denial of the Holy Spirit's Word through the Scriptures.

May God give us wisdom as we apply His truth in our fallen world – with love.

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