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Jerry A. Taylor
jtaylor@acu.edu

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The Love of Christ Within the Churches of Christ: Ephesians 3.14-21

JERRY A. TAYLOR

POWER STRUGGLES AND CARNAL TACTICS

The earliest disciples were fascinated with power. They once verbally disputed with each other over who would be the greatest in the kingdom. In Luke 22.24-30, Jesus interrupted their heated argument with a message that discouraged them from grasping after power. Today in the 21st century, disciples continue to dispute with one another. There is argument over whose interpretation of scripture will have preeminence in the church.

Carnal tactics are used in establishing the supremacy of one's doctrinal conclusions. There is an egoic effort to prove by any means necessary the infallibility of one's religious claims. Religious combatants arrogantly refuse to admit the possibility that their claims could be incorrect. The need to be right has made some Christians captive to the deceptive belief that they have a monopoly on all truth. This arrogance leads them to think that it is heresy to revisit and question long-held religious claims.

To question an established religious conviction is immediately considered a serious threat to the church's "official" interpretation of the scriptures. This reaction proves that some Christians believe it is their calling to maintain and defend the supremacy of the church's "authorized" conclusions. Any individual or institution that challenges the church's "official" positions immediately becomes the object of slander and character assassinations.

THE CHURCH'S GREATEST NEED—THE LOVE OF CHRIST

The church's greatest need today is the love of Christ. The followers of Christ must demonstrate that they are followers of the Prince of Peace by learning how to be at peace with one another. The love of Christ empowers us to love our brothers and sisters deeply from the heart, even when we experience theological differences. Failure to engage one another in the love of Christ causes the church to lose its influence in a world that is already crippled by religious and political divisions.

Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians explaining the glorious nature of the church of Jesus Christ. The church is a place where believers are to find the common ground of mutual love and spiritual edification. It is not intended to be a battleground where combatants carry out calculated operations of rage, bitterness, anger and unwholesome talk!

The central emphasis of Paul's apostolic prayer in Eph 3.14-21 is the love of Christ. He prays that the Ephesians will have the power to grasp together with all the saints how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. The power of the love of Christ is far greater than all other forms of power.

Political force controls people and things externally. Only the love of Christ through the Holy Spirit controls and empowers people within. In 3.16 Paul prays that God will strengthen the church with *power* through God's Spirit in the inner being. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit in this passage demonstrates the superiority of the inner quality of spiritual power and the inferiority of the external form of carnal power. According to Rom 5.5, the Holy Spirit is pouring the love of Christ into our inner being. Therefore, being

under the influence of Christ's love in our inner being releases us from the need to engage in theological competition in the church.

In 3.19 Paul makes the point that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge and fills the church with the measure of all the fullness of God. Without the love of Christ and the fullness of God, the church is spiritually bankrupt. When the church resists the love and fullness of God it forfeits the right to be called the church of Jesus Christ. According to 3.21, the result of the church being filled with the love of Christ and the fullness of God is that it will seek only the glory of God above all things in the church. The God-filled church sees its main task as being the earthly vehicle that transports God's glory into the world. It agrees with Paul when he says, "to Him be glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

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The church is not commissioned to be a self-glorifying body. It refuses to exalt any of its interpretation of scripture to the status of divinity. Paul says in 3.10 that it is God's intention that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul does not say that the church is the manifold wisdom of God. The church is only an instrument through which God fulfills his divine agenda.

Ancient Israel set a bad example for the church. According to Matt 15.3-9, ancient Israel became driven by a fanatical conservatism that sought to preserve the traditions of their religious fathers. While they built defenses around their esteemed traditions, they failed to internalize the sacred word of the living God. They were more devoted to the traditional interpretations of the law and the prophets than they were to the God to whom the law and the prophets pointed.

Instead of rejoicing in the indestructible identity of our Lord Jesus Christ, many Churches of Christ seem to be gripped by the fear of losing the religious identity that distinguishes us from our religious neighbors. I believe that if we are rooted and established in the identity of the loving nature of Jesus Christ, we should not fear the church losing its proper identity.

In 2 Tim 1.7, Paul tells Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." The church becomes unhealthy when it is permeated by a spirit of fear. Members in such a fearful religious environment often entreat one another with fear and suspicion. Fearful and suspicious Christians easily commit religious homicide by killing the reputations of those who disagree with them. Such religious murdering takes place under the eloquent disguise of preserving the pure identity of the church.

This carnal spirit of vicious attack has nothing in common with the love of Christ. The loving inner being of Churches of Christ is revealed not by how we treat those who agree with us, but by how we respond to those who disagree with us. Jesus says in Matt 5.43-48 that the children of God are known not by how they treat their family and friends, but by how they treat and respond to their enemies. When the love of Christ is in the inner being of the church, Christians will seek to restore and not destroy those they think are in religious error.

The church also reveals the love of Christ in its inner being by following the advice given in 2 Tim 2.24. Paul says, "the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful." Christians do not have any biblical justification for treating any human being in a hateful and harsh fashion. Christians filled with the love of Christ do not seek a sadistic thrill through the public humiliation of other human beings. Such Christians never mock or belittle perceived religious opponents in the

name of exposing false doctrine. Love-filled Christians always seek to refrain from attacking the character, motives and intentions of the persons with whom they disagree.

Summarily, I am saying that without the love of Christ the church develops a cult-like disposition.

CHURCH OR CULT?

It is vital that Christians know the difference between a religious cult and the authentic love-filled church of Jesus Christ. Steven Hassan's book *Combating Cult Mind Control*¹ and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton's book *Toxic Faith*² have helped me to see more clearly the difference between a healthy church and a toxic cult. They effectively point out that cults seek to discourage dissent at all costs. They force every person to be in total conformity to their way of thinking. Cults seek to control their members by censoring the information they receive. They discredit individuals who question their authority by slanting, twisting and misrepresenting their motives and message. Religious cults believe their *interpretation* of scripture is the actual mind of God. Challenging or questioning the cult's interpretation is believed to be equivalent to challenging and questioning God.

Steven Hassan points out that the first rule of the cult is "thou shalt not disagree." The existence of cults relies on the establishment and maintenance of a theological and doctrinal conformity. This rule must be strictly obeyed if cults are to maintain their identity. If this rule is broken, then the hypnotic spell the cults have over their members will also be broken. Hassan believes that in order for the singular religious identity of cults to persist, individual identities must be contained or controlled. I strongly believe that the stronger an individual's confidence in the love of Christ, the less likely he or she will succumb to a toxic cultic pressure to conform. Such strong individuals make cult leaders frustrated because they refuse to be coerced into merging with them psychologically. Strong individuals who resist the cult's attempt to conform often elicit resentment from other cult members, who view themselves as true believers.

Hassan says that cults are swift to label nonconformists as heretics. He describes their behavior in the following way. They portray the ideas presented by the "heretic" or nonconformist as being dangerous. Cults believe that people who don't know better will be led astray by the heretic's ideas. Therefore, the heretic should be held accountable. Nonconformists are portrayed as having a deliberate interest in endangering the lives of cult members. They seek to close off what they consider to be certain dangerous lines of discussion. Often, members will be scorned (or worse) for reading dangerous books or having contact with dangerous individuals. The stronger the evidence against the cult's core beliefs, the more emotional and inflexible the response is to the presentation of that evidence.

Hassan says that cults behave like a colony of insects when disturbed. A challenge to core beliefs stirs up a frenzy of activity, directed toward protecting the beliefs, and attacking the insider or outsider who has challenged them. They practice a high degree of public coercion to force others to accept their way of thinking. The expression of views opposed to their position is subtly or openly discouraged. Individuals who disagree with a teaching that binds cult members together are likely to be criticized, punished and eventually excluded or shunned.

People who are drawn to cultic religious systems suffer from a profound sense of personal inadequacy and powerlessness. This feeling of internal weakness predisposes them to becoming overly dependent upon the outward forms of religious practice. This kind of religion is dangerously unhealthy because it exchanges a personal relationship with God for a cold, impersonal relationship with the rules and expectations of a religious system. The outward forms and worship practices of a religious system can never produce an inner spiritual transformation.

1. Steve Hassan, *Combating Cult Mind Control* (Park Street Press: Rochester, Vermont, 1988, 1990).

2. Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith* (WaterBrook Press: Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1991, 2001).

OUTWARD PATTERNS OR INWARD RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LOVING CHRIST

In light of what we have said about cults it is extremely important for Churches of Christ to be very careful not to give the erroneous impression that the outward pattern of worship is more important than an inward relationship with the loving Christ. We certainly do not want to turn people into religious addicts whose internal powerlessness drives them to the externals of religion as a means of feeling empowered.

A sense of power that is solely derived from compliance to the external pattern of worship gives one a false sense of pride and self-righteous egotism. It leads to the false and arrogant conclusion that our mere adherence to an external pattern of worship makes us religiously and morally superior to others. This toxic attitude swells our heads, causing us to think that we have the divine right to try, judge and condemn those who do not perfectly comply with our religious expectations. This attitude also causes us to use our fellowship in manipulative ways. We send the clear message that in order to be accepted into our fellowship, people must declare that their highest allegiance is without question given to the religious requirements we have set for them.

This type of toxic religion simply gives the sinful nature a new way of expressing itself. This kind of dependency on religious rituals conceals from the believer that sole reliance upon outward forms and patterns of worship cannot deliver him or her from the deep, dark negative emotions that lurk within. Only by keeping the love of Christ before the mind's eye can we be lifted out of the darkness of spiritual blindness.

The sole focus upon the outward form and pattern of worship keeps the sinful nature intact without change. The unchanged sinful nature finds it convenient to express its venomous hatred and malice in religious outrage for those who do not comply with our external forms of religious practices.

Our mission is greater than merely restoring a replica of the New Testament pattern of worship. God does not find pleasure in us just because we boast of being the only religious group that has perfectly restored the outward forms of religion used among first-century Christians. We are called to restore the New Testament pattern of the love of Christ. To restore the outward pattern of first-century worship without restoring the love of Christ is equal to seeking to resuscitate a body without its spirit!

CALLED TO WALK IN THE SPIRIT OF THE LOVE OF CHRIST

As Churches of Christ we must walk in the Spirit of the love of Christ. Primarily it is the love of Christ that makes us the church of Christ. It will be through the love of Christ that we will discover and engage in a healthy theology of dissent, without practicing dissension. It is through the love of Christ that we will be able to speak the truth to one another with humility, gentleness, kindness and love. It is through the love of Christ that we will overcome the destructive habit of harshly attacking and discrediting one another in the public square of brotherhood publications, books, letters, e-mails, journal articles and lectureships. It is through the love of Christ that we will seek first to understand the other person's line of reasoning before having our own arguments understood. It is through the love of Christ that we will overcome our addiction to the need to be right, and we will humbly admit that though truth is absolute, our understanding of truth is not. It is through the love of Christ that we express the passion of Christ, and people will know that we are truly the churches of Jesus Christ.

JERRY A. TAYLOR TEACHES BIBLE AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY AND SERVES AS THE ASSOCIATE PREACHING MINISTER FOR THE HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST IN ABILENE, TEXAS.

