

The Distinctive Plea of the Church

by Keith Parker

Love is the Spirit in All Things

Several years ago I asked my grandmother this question: What advice would you give to young people? My grandmother, my mother's mom, lived to the age of 105. She was not only a woman full of age, she was blessed with wisdom. I'll never forget the answer she gave to the question that I asked. She said, "I'd tell them to get in the church of Christ and stay there." And I want to say to the young people who might be listening or reading, get in the church of Christ and stay there. I love the church of Christ. I've been a part of the church of Christ most of my life. My children are members of Christ's church. My parents and grandparents were members of Jesus' church.

"The churches of Christ salute you" (Rom. 16:16).

[All Scripture references are from the King James Version unless otherwise stated.]

And I want to salute the churches of Christ.

The Distinctive Plea of the Church

The apostle Paul loved the church. Paul wrote to Timothy telling him how to live in the church

(1 Tim. 3:15). Several things are mentioned in Paul's letters to Timothy that we should appreciate about God's family. Let me share a few of them with you.

First, our name, what we are called. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul refers to the people of God as *"the church"* (1 Tim. 5:16), *"the church of God."* (1 Tim. 3:5), and *"the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* (1 Tim. 3:15). Jesus promised to build his church (Matt. 16:18). Why wouldn't we want to call it *"the church of Christ"*? Individual members of this church are called Christians. We are students of Christ and servants of Christ. *"The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."* (Acts 11:26).

Second, our book, the standard of authority. In churches of Christ, we try to follow the Bible. We try to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. If the Bible says it, we want to do it. If the Bible doesn't say it, we want to leave it alone. We want a *"thus saith the Lord"* for everything that we do.

Paul refers to this message as *"sound doctrine"* (1 Tim. 1:10), *"the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:4), *"the faith"* (1 Tim. 4:1), *"the words of faith and good doctrine"* (1 Tim. 4:6), and to *"wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Tim. 6:3). Some of Paul's last words to Timothy were these: *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In other words, we will do everything that the God of Heaven wants us to do, if we follow the Bible. No wonder Paul told his son in the faith: *"Preach the word."* (2 Tim. 4:2).

Third, our organization, the way that the church operates and is organized. Jesus is the

head of the church. He is *"the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God"* (1 Tim. 1:17). Serving under Jesus' leadership are elders or overseers (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and deacons or special servants (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The elders are the men who direct the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 5:17). They are the spiritual leaders who are responsible for our souls. They hold firmly to the trustworthy message, encourage others to do the same and refute those who oppose the truth (Tit. 1:9). The deacons are servants who serve the specific needs of a local congregation. Those who serve well gain an excellent standing in Christ (1 Tim. 3:13).

Fourth, our worship. Paul speaks of this worship in 1 Timothy 2:8 when he says, *"I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting."* Our worship must be in spirit and truth (John 4:24). We must be sincere and scriptural. Our worship must come from the heart and be in harmony with God's word.

Fifth, our destiny. We are heaven-bound. Our hope is eternal life (Tit. 1:2). There is laid up for us *"a crown of righteousness"* (2 Tim. 4:8). The faithful Christian can say as did Paul, *"And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen"* (2 Tim. 4:18).

Love is the spirit in all things

The church is unique. We have a distinctive message and plea. But this message must be preached in love: *"The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"* (1 Tim. 1:5, NIV).

Jesus reminded us of the importance of love when he said, *"A new command I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another: By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."* (John 13:34-35). It would be nice if Jesus had said, *"Everybody is going to know that you are my disciples if you have fellowship dinners every month."* Or, *"Everybody is going to know that you belong to me by the sign in front of the church building."* Or, *"Everybody is going to know you're my people by the translation of the Bible that you use."* But that's not what he said. He told us exactly what we need to hear. When truth is preached, it must be preached in love. As Paul said to the Ephesians, *"But speaking the truth in love"* (Eph. 4:15). In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul gives us an idea as to what love is when he penned, *"Love is patient and love is kind."* In other words, love is an action. Love is not talk. It's not just words. It's not just saying to someone, *"I love you."* Now I like hearing that and saying that, don't you? But there is a difference in speaking love and showing love. John, the disciple of love, instructed us not to love with words, but with deeds and action (1 John 3:18). When Jesus challenged the church at Ephesus, he did so in love. First, he started with compliments. In Revelation 2:3-4 he told them that he was mindful of their works, patience and hatred for evil. After complimenting them, he levels his complaints: *"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love"* (Rev. 2:4). He then told them to do three things: remember, repent, and redo: *"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works"* (Rev. 2:5).

We would be wise to follow the example of Jesus. Before being negative, be positive. Compliment before criticizing. We can say anything to anybody as long as the person knows that we love him. Paul knew some people who did damage to the church. He even gets specific: Hymenaeus and Alexander had shipwrecked their faith (1 Tim. 1:20). Phygelus and Hermogenes had deserted Paul (2 Tim. 1:15). Hymenaeus and Philetus wandered away from the truth and

destroyed the faith of some (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Demas forsook Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). Alexander the metalworker did Paul a great deal of harm (2 Tim. 4:14).

Yet, Paul said these things in love. Even in the midst of all this discouragement, Paul kept the spirit of Christ: *"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline"* (2 Tim. 1:7, NIV).

