

## *The Perfection of God's Unconditional Love*

**K**nowing the truth concerning God's love in our relationship with Him produces a life-changing effect on us. When Jesus said in John 8:32, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," that included knowing the truth and reality of God's unconditional love. To know this realm does something within us. It frees us. The realm where God's love flows is the realm that makes us free indeed (John 8:36). It is not that we can point to a definite experience that changed us; but within us there is a dawning, a kind of gradual realization that God loves us not because of our condition, but simply because *He* chose to make us the objects of His love. This sets us free. And the more we see the love of God operating in an unconditional way over us, the more we are set free from an abnormal relationship with the Lord.

First John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment." This perfect love, which is God's unconditional love, is the love that casts out fear. Negatively, fear can characterize our relationship with the Lord, just as, positively, love can characterize our relationship with Him. If we have a fearful relationship with God, it will be insecure and not solid. We will not have boldness in the day of judgment (1 John 4:17); neither will we have boldness at His appearing (1 John 2:28). This is because the relationship that we have is characterized by fear, based on an erroneous idea of God and His relationship to us. Such a relationship with Him, characterized by great insecurity and great feelings of fear, is a tormenting experience.

"Perfect love casts out fear." This means our relationship with the Lord begins to be characterized by the unconditional, perfect love of God toward us. We are secure in that love that we see demonstrated and defined in detail in the book of Hosea. God's love pursued Gomer through every kind of failing condition. When you realize that the unconditional love of God is surrounding you, your relationship will be characterized by perfect love. The more we see the perfect love of God, the more our inward being will calm down, will be tranquil; and our relationship with the Lord will be comfortable, without torment and fear. We will rest with great security in His everlasting love. This shows us what a difference the love of God makes in our whole relationship with Him.

Let us enjoy more of this love as we continue opening to the Word. We have seen the basic revelation of God's unconditional love, and we have also seen that the nature of that love is related to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It is the Father's choice and plan that makes up this love, as well as the Son's redeeming work, resurrection, ascension, and present intercession. Also included in the nature of God's love is the Spirit's transmission of all that God has planned for us and all that God feels toward us. So basically, the nature of God's unconditional love is just God Himself — the Father, the Son, and the Spirit — in His choosing us, redeeming us, and then coming into us as the life-giving Spirit to impart all His riches so that we could enjoy His very nature.

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After seeing the basic revelation of God's love and its nature, let us consider the perfection of God's unconditional love. This is a classic kind of fellowship, in that it should revolutionize our whole idea of the church and the way believers are to be related to one another on this earth. So may the Lord give us a revelation of this matter of the perfection of God's unconditional love.

*The Biblical Revelation of "Perfection" —  
Being Related in the Realm of God's Love*

Now let us look into the Word to see the standard of perfection that is revealed for the church and for God's people to be together. In the New Testament, the perfection of the church is God's unconditional love. Love is relational. It has to do with how we are related to one another — how we forgive one another, how we receive one another, how we treat one another. All of us belong to the same God, with the same Father, the same Christ, and the same Holy Spirit; and we are being related together in the love of God. Love is personal, and it is related to God's nature and person. In our relationships with each other, love is in contrast to impersonal ideals, such as doctrinal purity, historical continuity, uniformity of practice, and proper organization. Even spiritual gifts can be impersonal, and not relational.

God is love. He loves and forgives His people. He wants to be related to His people, and He wants His people to be related to one another in Himself in love, rather than everyone merely agreeing on doctrines, practices, uniformity, organization, and gifts. However, because these impersonal things have been the focus among so many believers, the history of the church is filled with division upon division. These divisions, occurring with much heartbreak, hatred, and bitterness between Christians, have resulted from the focus being a doctrine, a practice, an experience, a personality, or some other thing. These things have come between us as believers and divided us. Sincere and well-intentioned, we may have thought that to be absolute for the Lord was to have doctrinal purity and uniformity of practice, or to have the gifts of the Spirit displayed in a certain way. So what has happened? These ideals have upset our relationships with each other. They have been the very factor of division.

The Lord's table is another example of this. The table of the Lord expresses the oneness of the Body — one cup, one bread. When we participate in the table, we are not only declaring the Lord's death on the cross, but we are partaking of one bread. This signifies that we are all members one of another. We are one loaf. The Lord made us one Body. Thus, the table symbolizes the matter of

oneness among believers; yet the very practice of the table has become, in church history, a factor of division. For example, the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans are divided over transubstantiation and consubstantiation. The doctrine of transubstantiation means that the elements are changed into the physical body and blood of Christ. This teaching was defined in a philosophical way by Thomas Aquinas. Consubstantiation means that the elements are not actually physically changed, but that the Lord is present in and with the sacraments. Then there was Ulrich Zwingli's thought that the sacraments were only signs, or symbols, of the Lord's body. Thus, the Catholics were divided from Luther, Luther was divided from Zwingli, and the Lord's table, which was intended to express oneness among Christians, became itself a factor of division.

As believers we may have been in this realm of doctrinal debate for years and years, not realizing that the perfection of the church is not here. The perfection of the church is in the realm of the love of God between believers. It is relational. It is not about whether you believe every single point, or whether you agree with me on this or that. But it is about how much I can forgive you. It is about how much forbearance there is between you and me who have differences of feeling about things. How much can we live by the life of Christ in our spirit to bear one another in love, and to enjoy and to minister to one another, and to deprive ourselves of our own rights for the sake of building up one another in love? How much can we stay in God together? In eternity we will not be celebrating doctrinal purity, charismatic gifts, historical continuity, or geographical distinctions. We will all enjoy being together in the love of God, and flowing with one another in that realm. In eternity we will be relational; we will be built together and related by the perfect love of God.

The perfection of God's unconditional love will be found in the church, which becomes the container and the embodiment of that love. These are the Lord's words: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). And this love toward one another is the love that gathers together, worships together, prays together, forgives together, drops complaints together, is forbearing together. Even if you are spiritually and doctrinally right about something, yet it interferes with your relationship with another, you do not hold to your rightness. Paul presents an example of this in Romans 14:14: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Paul was spiritually and doctrinally correct concerning how God felt about believers eating meat that was

offered to idols: “there is nothing unclean in itself.” Yet he is saying that because his brother is offended by his eating, even though it is spiritually and doctrinally right, he will not eat meat in the presence of his brother. This is to walk according to love, and to care for God’s building. It is caring for the relationship rather than rightness. Without this kind of love, marriages are destroyed. Rightness becomes the factor in your relationship rather than fellowship, forgiveness, and loving one another with the unconditional love of God.

In my own marriage over the years, I know that the interference in our relationship was always due to my holding on, so to speak, to what I felt was right. That meant that my spouse was wrong and I was right. Rightness destroys relationships. It has destroyed the church; it has divided the church. No one would divide unless he felt he was right. Yet Paul transcends the realm of everyone’s rightness in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 by saying, <sup>1</sup> “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” In other words, if I am doing everything right, but have not love, I am nothing. My rightness counts as nothing. So the premium is placed on love rather than on all those other things. It is into this realm of love that God wants to perfect all of us.

### *Being Perfect Is Loving Perfectly*

Now let us look at the Word of God itself to see the biblical standard for the ideal church. In Matthew 5:43-48 the Lord says, <sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? <sup>48</sup> Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

What does it mean to be perfect? It simply means to love perfectly, to have perfect love. And none of us have this love. You do not have it, and I do not have it. This love

is of God. It is absolutely intrinsic to His life. To have this love, you have to have His life, because this love is the nature of His life. So, the only way to be perfect — to love as God loves — is to have God. The Lord’s words “that you may be sons of your Father” prove that perfect love is not something we can generate or work up. It is not a matter of reading enough about it, studying it enough, or getting enough training in it so that we can do it. That will not work! To be “sons of your Father” means that you must have the life of the Father. You need to be begotten with the divine life. When that life enters us, it comes as a gift — “the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). So we have to realize that when we receive the life of the Lord Jesus, in that life is this perfect love that loves the unlovely, the sinners, the enemies, and that pursues the Gomers and can stand when everything else has fallen. That love is part of His life. First John 3:14 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” We know by the way we feel about the brothers. There is a feeling of love in us toward them because we have God’s life.

When we fellowship about this kind of love you might think, “There is no way that I could love like that. If you only knew how bad I am — how much I have bitterness and hatred in me.” We are all the same and we are all on the same level. None of us have this love. But now, we have received God’s life; and with that life comes His love. So as we enjoy that life and drink that life, spontaneously that love will become more and more a part of our reactions. We will have a disposition that just reacts with God’s reactions toward any kind of situation. This is why we need a lot of life, and a lot of enjoyment and experience of life, allowing that life to flow.

When you take care of anything related to life in you — if life is not spending that money, if life is not going to that place — if life in you is doing something and you follow that life, every step of your obedience of life *is* your loving of the brothers. Our daily personal life is related to my loving you and your loving me in this way. For example, the other day I was enjoying the Lord by following Him in my little habits around the kitchen. I realized that I was loving the brothers in a practical way in those moments. I was getting a disposition of love wrought into me as a result of taking care of that life.

In 1 John 3:14 we saw that the love toward the brothers is the standard of perfection. Perfection is loving perfectly with God’s unconditional love. Again, this means it is relational. In other words, instead of looking for doctrinal purity, I am looking for how I can enjoy Christ with you and be related to you when we differ doctrinally. This is to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7). This

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# The Common Factors of Our Oneness

(A study in the book of Romans)

To have a proper realization of the oneness between us all as believers, we need to consider the common factors of our oneness from the book of Romans. When these factors exist among us, the church is in the reality of the kingdom of God. Romans 14:17 defines the kingdom of God as being “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul says this in the context of the saints’ relationships with one another in the church. Thus, it is the church life that is the reality of the kingdom today.

With righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit being its inner essence or reality, the church is an organic matter. This means that every member, indwelt by the life of God, is an integral part of the other members. To be organic has to do with (1) life and (2) relationships in life. It is by these life-relationships in the Spirit that the church is the organic Body of Christ. Not only so, but the church life itself becomes the kingdom of God. When we are in God together in an organic way, then the reality of the church is with us. And when others touch this reality, they immediately sense, “This is it. This is what I was made for. This is why I am alive.” Such a sense is normal because God is flowing and the reality of the church is here. Let us see from the book of Romans more about how the church is such an organic reality.

## *The complicated situation in Rome*

To see how the organic reality of the church comes into being, we need to have a clear vision of the book of Romans. In this book we have a complicated situation. Paul had never been there in Rome to establish the saints (Rom. 1:10; 15:22-24), nor had Peter been there. The saints had sprung up in Rome as a result of some who had been saved in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and returned to Rome to meet together (Acts 2:10). In addition, some of Paul’s co-workers had gone to Rome and brought still others to the Lord (Acts 18:2). Thus, there were both Jewish and Gentile believers in this city, producing a complicated situation as far as the practical meeting of the church was concerned. The tendency of the Jewish believers was to group together according to their Jewish background. This same tendency to group according to background existed among the Gentile believers. So, there were some saints who preferred to abstain from meats and to observe certain religious days, and other saints who were not bothered at all by laws and regulations about eating (Rom. 14:1-6). These latter saints knew their freedom in Christ and judged every day alike.

These differences in background produced some tensions that were existing when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Potentially, there was a trend in Rome toward the church being expressed in different ways according to the believers’ various cultural backgrounds. This complicated

situation needed the light of “the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:4-6). Without this light, there would not be a proper expression of the church, that is, of receiving one another in the oneness of the Body of Christ.

Paul, having not been in Rome, yet wanting to see the church established in a proper way in such a large city, wrote to the believers in the most basic way. He began with the ABC’s, the foundational truths of the Christian life, and he proceeded systematically to the XYZ’s, imparting to them a full revelation of the factors that compose the intrinsic nature of the church (Rom. 1:11). By observing the book of Romans, we see that Paul does not mention the church until the end of his letter. Not until chapters 14—16 does he speak of the church life and the churches. In the first chapter of Romans he does not address his letter to “the church in Rome.” He instead addresses it to “all who are in Rome” (Rom. 1:7). Then he mentions the Body of Christ in chapter 12, because the saints needed to know that they were organically the Body before they paid too much attention to how to meet.

Paul lays a groundwork in the first chapters of Romans so that the saints could have a proper foundation. This foundation includes a clear realization of the organic nature of the church. Then the saints could have the right standing as the church in Rome. This is true of the church in any place. It must simply be the outward expression of an inner reality. Thus, it is not a matter of setting up a church, as you would set up a business. Rather, it is a matter of having a revelation of the inner nature of the church, which includes the redemption of Christ and the inner existence of the Triune God, with the Father and the Son operating in all the saints in that place.

To understand where Paul is coming from in writing the book of Romans, and to see the significance of certain phrases that are repeated throughout the book (e.g., phrases about the inclusion of both Jew and Gentile in 1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9, 29; 9:24; and 10:12), it is crucial to understand that in Rome there was a potential problem situation with the saints. As we have mentioned, there were deep cultural and religious differences, which were rooted in their backgrounds and in their traditions. This tense atmosphere is reflected in John 4:9b, which says, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans,” and in Acts 10:28, where Peter says to the Gentiles, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation.” So, how do you handle such a situation in Rome with the saints meeting in various houses and having differences of tradition and practice?

In Romans 16 Paul greets more than 26 persons specifically, as well as the saints who are with them. Some he refers to as his “kinsmen,” that is, Jewish saints (16:7, 11, 21). Others are Gentile saints, signified by the Greek and Latin derivation of their names (16:7-15). The household of Aristobulus (16:10) represents a group of saints; the household of Narcissus (16:11) represents another group of saints; Romans 16:14 mentions another group of saints and “the brethren who are with them”; and Romans 16:15 mentions still another group and “all the saints who are with them.” All of these various pockets of saints — some Jewish, some

Gentile, some practicing one way, and some another — were meeting there in Rome when Paul wrote his letter to them.

How do you approach such a situation as existed in the locality of Rome? How do you handle these groups of believers in light of “the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 16:25)? How do you address at least eight different groups of believers in a city, including those coming to Paul at his rented quarters in Rome (Acts 28:30-31)? And how do you bring them into the vision of one Body in Christ, where Jew and Gentile meet together and sing and praise the Lord with each other? It is with this complicated situation and environment that we now turn to the book of Romans to have a careful study of Paul’s thought, burden, and purpose in writing this letter.

### *The recipients of the book of Romans*

Let us start with Romans chapter 1 and see the way Paul begins to release his burden. In verse 7 he addresses the saints in a particular way: “To all who are in Rome.” This is in contrast to the way he addresses other localities, where there were existing churches. Notice that he does not say, “to the church in Rome” (as he does in 1 Cor. 1:2). Nor does he say, “to the church of the Romans” (as he does in 1 Thess. 1:1), or “to the saints in Rome” (as he does in Eph. 1:1). He says, “To *all* who are in Rome.” To say “all” immediately embraces and includes all the various groups of believers in the city.

The extent of Paul’s letter is no less than “all who are in Rome.” He was throwing out the net, so to speak, to all the various saints in Rome, irrespective of who they gathered with. Later, in Romans 16:3 and 5 he mentions the church in the home of Prisca and Aquila. But at the beginning of the letter he purposely omits the word “church,” so that there would be no misunderstanding about who was included in the church. He first needed to lay a solid foundation of who is included in the gospel, which answers the question of who is included in the church. So Paul does not mention the church initially, but addresses “all.” Then he lays the solid foundation of the gospel. And finally, he opens up the matter of the church at the end of the letter.

### *The burden of the book of Romans*

Paul’s stated burden in Romans is that the saints, who were meeting in the various homes, would be established. In Romans 1:10-11 Paul says, <sup>10</sup> “Making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established.” Then, so that he would not give the impression of a one-sided fellowship, he says in verse 12, “that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” Paul’s way of contacting the Roman saints was full of the spirit and wisdom. There is not a feeling of superiority with Paul, but of mutuality. He imparts a sense of one Body to the saints, so that together he and all the saints in Rome could mutually enjoy each other’s faith.

Paul’s burden to establish the saints is expressed not only at the beginning of the book, but also at the end. In Romans 16:25-26 Paul says, <sup>25</sup> “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began <sup>26</sup> but now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the [eternal] God, for obedience [of] faith.” Paul’s burden for the saints to be established is given in this prayer: “To Him who is able to establish you.” Then Paul says that the establishing is according to his gospel. It is as if he were saying that the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1) had become his personal possession (“my gospel”) through his identity with it in the revelation given to him (Gal. 1:11-12). The unique feature of the revelation given to Paul is his understanding in the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:1-6). This mystery is the Body of Christ, including Jews and Gentiles in a practical oneness and expression as the church.

Paul’s gospel — “the preaching of Jesus Christ” — is according to the revelation of God’s heart’s desire, His eternal purpose. That is, it is according to the mystery of Christ — the church, the Body, the oneness (Eph. 3:4-11). God is able to establish the saints in Rome according to this gospel that is unveiled in the entire book of Romans. Thus, the saints being established in the organic oneness of the Body is the issue of the revelation in this book.

Again, the immediate background and situation of the saints in Rome involved the existence of differences and distinctions among them — different views, different concepts, and different practices in various areas related to their conscience. Yet Paul wanted the saints to be established organically as the Body of Christ, receiving and embracing one another despite the differences existing between them. Therefore, the burden of the book is to establish them according to the revelation of the mystery of Christ, that is, according to the organic Body of Christ.

Now we need to see what are the factors of this mystery. What are the factors that establish us as the kind of church that has been kept in silence from eternity past? The church that has now been made known through the Scriptures and the command of the eternal God is not a Jewish church, a Gentile church, a divided church. It is no longer the time for that kind of church. The time is over for any kind of division culturally, socially, nationally, religiously. God has been silent about this mystery, the church, long enough. His mouth has been shut long enough. Now He needs speakers on the earth. He wants everyone to talk about the revelation of the mystery. Now it is time to be together practically in this revelation. That is the burden here in the book of Romans.\*

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\*This article, the first of a series on Romans, by Bill Freeman, is part of chapter 1 of a new book entitled *The Major Factors of Our Oneness*. The entire book will be available in January 1995, and may be ordered directly from *Ministry Publications*, P.O. Box 12222, Scottsdale, AZ 85267 (602) 948-4050. The book is \$8.50, postpaid.

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is what is perfect. You do not receive me on the condition that I will one day see things as you see them and come to agreement with you. If our relationship is based on this, there will be another day when we will not agree on still finer points, and we will be divided by that. This is what has happened throughout church history. People were so happy coming together. Maybe they even signed a statement that they were all in one accord. But today, they are all scattered. Why? Because the focus was not love. Love is relational. It is God, and He is a person. He loves people. He is not loving pieces of paper, books, and things like that. He is loving us. Amen!

### *The Bond of Perfection Is Love*

Let us look at this love in another passage. Colossians 3:14 says, “But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.” Some versions translate the last part of this verse as “the bond of perfectness.” In Greek, this construction is what is called the genitive of apposition. Literally translated, it means “the bond in which perfection consists.” Simply put, this love is equal to the bond of perfection. Perfection, in the divine thought, is the love. So here in this verse, Paul defines the perfection, or perfectness, at which we are to arrive as simply “love.”

In the preceding verses of Colossians 3 we see how this love operates. Verse 11 gives us the background: “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.” In the church in Colosse, there were Greeks with their culture and Jews with their religion. Some people were circumcised, and others were not. In the ancient world there was great intensity of feeling about the matter of circumcision and uncircumcision. The Jews called the Gentiles “the uncircumcised” in a very derogatory sense. So in the meetings of the church at Colosse there were people with a Jewish background, who believed strongly in circumcision, and there were also the uncircumcised, the Gentiles. In addition, there were barbarians and Scythians. The latter refers to a very low class of people. Unlike the well-learned, wise Greeks, the Scythians were uneducated. They were sometimes described as savage and uncivilized. For example, they used their hands rather than utensils to eat food. This is the kind of people they were.

Imagine — there is a refined Jew who knows how to delicately handle everything, eating the proper foods the proper way. And in the same church there is a crude Scythian. So there are people of widely different cultures. Not only are there different religious backgrounds, but also different nations. And then verse 11 continues, “slaves, free man.” This represents social distinctions. In

the ancient world there was a slave system. So there were those who were masters and those who had been purchased as slaves. This system was there at the time Paul wrote to the Colossians. Thus, in the church you had brothers and sisters, all loving the Lord, enjoying the same Christ, all on the same level. But in society, some of these brothers and sisters were related to one another as masters and slaves. One owned another, telling him what to do every hour of the day because he belonged to him. The purchased slave did not have any rights of his own. On the other hand, he was now a brother in the church. So there were strained relationships among the saints meeting together there in Colosse, due to these conflicting circumstances. But Paul says that in the new man there cannot be these cultural, religious, and social distinctions, “but Christ is all and in all.” Now we may say that Christ is all, and even put up a banner declaring “Christ is all and in all.” But if you have a background of refined culture and I have a background of barbarianism, when we come together we are going to have some reactions toward each other. This is just part of the natural man, the old man.

Now consider, what would the ideal be if we found ourselves in Colosse with this conglomeration, this melting pot, of people? A “good idea” might be to start a Greek church and gather all the Greeks together. Then we would have our Greek things in common. And someone else would start a Scythian church — the First Church of the Scythians. Everyone could come barefoot and dressed sloppily. It would not matter how you came because you would not have to worry about those cultured Greeks. But Paul does not condone building up churches based upon culture or any other kind of distinction. Instead, he says that none of these things exist in the new man, where Christ is all and in all.

Then Paul continues in Colossians 3:12-14,<sup>12</sup> “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long suffering;<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.<sup>14</sup> But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection,” or “the bond of perfectness.” So the way this love works is by all of these virtues: the tender mercies, the kindness, the longsuffering, the forgiving of one another. These are all words expressing Christ with His life and nature. Here we see what perfection is.

### *The Meaning of Every Man Perfect in Christ*

In Colossians 1:28 Paul speaks more about this perfection: “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every

man *perfect* in Christ Jesus.” Some Bible versions translate “perfect” as “full grown.” The idea is basically to reach the peak of maturity. What does it mean to “present every man perfect in Christ”? Paul explains in the next three verses: <sup>29</sup> “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. <sup>2:1</sup> For 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, <sup>2</sup> that their hearts may be [comforted], being knit together in love, and attaining [unto] all riches of the full assurance of understanding, [unto] the [full] knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ.”

Knowing the background of these verses would help us to appreciate what Paul is saying here. Many damaging things had come into the church in Colosse — philosophy, religious rituals, men’s traditions, asceticism. The influence of these things hurt the saints. Specifically, it hurt their love for each other because it hurt their hearts. Their relationships with one another were damaged severely due to so many different teachings. Some among them were saying, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” in relation to eating and drinking. Dogmas were being formed, and as a result the saints were judging each other according to these standards. The focus was not “Christ in you” but whether or not you were conforming to the dogmas. This destroyed their love relationship with each other.

Into such a situation Paul came with the earnest desire to “present every man perfect in Christ.” Then he shows us how this will happen: “that their hearts may be . . . knit together in love.” This is a window into the way we will be presented perfectly at the judgment seat of Christ. It will not be according to our standard, but according to how much we have released the love of God out of our spirit and soul to the brothers and sisters, so that our hearts are knit together in love.

To be perfect in Christ does not mean to agree perfectly, but to love perfectly. And to love perfectly means to forgive perfectly — to be a perfect complaint dropper. Can you drop your complaint? Paul is not in the realm of whether or not your complaint is justified. Your complaint might be justified. You might be right. But he does not care whether you are right or wrong. He simply says that you need to drop your complaint.

I have fellowshipped with brothers and sisters and couples who have had complaints. I have watched the husband and wife oppose each other as if they were in a boxing match. The complaint is always over some matter that the husband feels he is right about, while the wife is feeling she is right. And each feels misunderstood by the other. They are both defending their rightness and stirring up yet more disagreement. It seems as if they are just throwing dust into the air. But Paul says that if you have

a complaint, and you are even legitimately justified in having that complaint, the important thing is not to get your complaint resolved, but to drop it for the sake of the organic relationship, peace, oneness of heart, and forgiveness.

“Put on love, which is the bond of perfectness.” The perfectness is our being related together in the love of God. Seeing this makes all the difference in how we view the church and how the church meets and what the goal of the church is. If our goal is anything less than God Himself, who is love, we are missing the perfection. We are missing it, even if we have the greater gifts of prophecy, all knowledge, and all faith. The perfection of the church is simply in loving all the failing Gomers perfectly with God’s love. Christ loved the church. Though the church was a failure, alienated from Him and ungodly, He gave Himself for her because she was the object of His love.

This is God’s love. We do not have this love naturally, but it is in us as a gift. It has been poured out in our hearts. And when we keep ourselves in the love of God by praying in the Holy Spirit, we are actually in a place of oneness with all believers everywhere. We are in the realm of the love of God. Between us all is this standard of perfection.

#### *Being Brought into a State of Perfection*

John 17:23 is a very crucial passage among us today as believers because we all desire the oneness it reveals. In this verse the Lord says, “I in them, and You in Me.” When He says, “You in Me,” He is referring to the Father in the Son. The Father has loved Him and He is “into the bosom of the Father.” This speaks of the Father’s love to the Son. The first part of the verse says, “I in them.” Of course, when the Son is in us, that brings the Father into us, because the Son comes with the Father. He comes with their love relationship. He comes with this wonderful liquid love flowing between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father. Now the Lord is in us. He is in us moving with that love. In John 15:9 He says, “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.” Let that love move in you. Let it flow in you. That means let the divine life flow. When the life flows, the love flows. When you release life, life comes with that love, or love comes with that life.

So “I in them” means “I am moving in them, I am loving in them.” It is a love relationship. The Lord wants to establish in us a relationship with Him and the Father that casts out all fear. He wants us to be comfortable with Him. He wants us to know the security of His love. As the Father has loved the Son, the Son loves us. He wants us to know that love. He wants our whole relationship to be in that love. He wants us to know that even when we are

failures, we are loved by Him. He died for us. He wants us to know the security of coming to Him after a horrible defeat and saying, "Jesus, forgive me." He wants us to know in the security of that love that the blood is cleansing us from all sin.

The first part of John 17:23 says, "I in them, and You in Me." The next word is "that," which can also be translated "in order that." In Greek it is the word *ἵνα*, which introduces a purpose clause. Thus, "I in them, and You in Me" is for a purpose — "that they may be made perfect into one." This can also be rendered "that they may be perfected into one." The verb "perfected" is in the perfect tense, indicating a present state or reality. So the thought here is simply this: "in order that they may be in a state of perfection," which means "that they may be in a state of unconditional love." Then we have the words "into one," showing us that the real oneness of believers today can only be arrived at when we together are in a state of God's unconditional love.

Verse 23 continues with another purpose clause: "And that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." It is based on this highest prayer that believers today appeal to the Body of Christ to be one. The Lord prayed that we all would be perfected into one, but we have to look carefully at this verse to see how this is realized. Because we are loved unconditionally, our relationship with Him and His relationship with us is altogether in this uninterrupted love state. We are in a love state, in a love fellowship, in a love relationship. We are with Him in this state.

If I myself do not have a love relationship with the Lord in this kind of way, it will be difficult for me to relate this love to you when you are a Gomer to me. If you are a Gomer, I will leave you because my love is limited. My love can only go so far, and then my relationship with you is finished and I am out the door. This is what happens in marriages. Your love may last for ten years, fifteen years, or maybe even twenty years. But then one day, because it is your love, something will happen to cause it to run out. This just shows that we need another love, which means we need another life.

This brings us back to the Lord's words in John 17:23, "I in them." He is in us as another life with another love, in order that we may be perfected, or be in a state of perfection. This simply means to be in a state of the unconditional love of God flowing out of us and into others, making us one. The real oneness is the perfect love between us, and it does not require uniformity of practice, organizational perfection, and other various ideals set forth by men throughout church history. It requires the love of God and the heart of God to forgive, to receive one another, and to enjoy and stay in that liquid love together.

Let us all ask the Lord to make clear to us that the standard of perfection for the church is this perfect love. This kind of perfection is what the Lord desires on the earth. In being together as believers, the standard and highest experience is that we enjoy the love of God with one another vertically and horizontally. The Lord tells us that by this love all men will know that we are His disciples. This love is also the atmosphere in which the building of the church takes place. It is the building up in love that Ephesians 4:16 talks about.

In Ephesians 4:13 Paul describes believers as being in a process of arriving at a goal: "Till we all [arrive at] the [oneness] of the faith and [of] the [full] knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." We may have the thought that the "perfect man" means that we all would be practicing the church life in a certain way. But it actually means that we are all going to be loving in a certain way. The perfect man is a man that embodies the perfect, unconditional love of God toward one another. If you are looking for a perfect church in that other realm, you are looking for things — for practices, for doctrines, for gifts. But eventually, you will be disappointed; and in your disappointment you will go from one place to another. But if we are renewed by the Word of God, we will see that the standard of perfection is love — God's love. And out of His love and forgiveness, we grow together in the Lord. Then the Lord will have a way on this earth with all of us. As His people we will be an expression of the love of God.\*

— Bill Freeman

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\* The above article, "The Perfection of God's Unconditional Love," is taken from chapter 7 of a new book entitled *God's Unconditional Love*, by Bill Freeman. The book is available for \$5.00, postpaid. You may order by writing to **Ministry Publications**, P.O. Box 12222, Scottsdale, AZ 85267, or by calling (602) 948-4050.

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