

## Philadelphia

Later in the day, after a fortuitous encounter with a believer in Christ I knew but hadn't seen in a while, I was horrified to realize that I had been terribly rude to him. How I was rude isn't germane right now. Disgusted with myself, I began reflecting on my thoughtless attitude, and it occurred to me that what I did was withhold brotherly love. As I thought further about it, I realized that this is a massive problem among Christians, something we need to discuss.

The New Testament uses the term, *philadelphia*, 6 times. It means "brotherly love." (The word also is used once as the name of the city in eastern Turkey, one of the cities mentioned in Chapter 3 of Revelation.) Here are 4 of those:

**"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another"** (Romans 12:10).

**"As touching brotherly love, you need not that I write unto you; for you yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed you do it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we beseech you, brethren, that you increase more and more..."** (1 Thess 4:9-10).

**"Let brotherly love continue"** (Hebrews 13:1).

**"Seeing that you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned brotherly love, see that you love one another with a pure heart fervently"** (1 Peter 1:22).

But even without using the *philadelphia* word, Christ's concern, and the Apostolic concern, for brotherly love in the church appears again and again. For example:

**"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another"** (John 13:34-35).

**"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abides in death . . . By this we perceive the love of God, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren . . . But whoever has this world's good, and sees his brother has need, and shutteth his compassion from him, how dwells the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth"** (1 John 3:14-17).

**"Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. He that does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."** (1 John 4:7-8, 11).

Yet, in spite of these compelling texts, we don't love one another. We Christians in America are fiercely sectarian. We have contempt for and want nothing to do with those who are not of our particular denomination. It's Presbyterians vs Methodists vs Baptists vs Anglicans vs Brethren vs . . . hey, you get the idea. We all believe in the need for forgiveness of sin, we all trust Christ for salvation, we all have the same doctrine of substitutionary atonement and await His Return, yet we avoid fellowship with each other as if the others were all heretics. There are churches for black people, for white people, for Asians, for Latinos, for Hungarians, and for Haitians. There are churches for Jewish Christians and churches for motorcycle riders. Who would ever have guessed that Christians are supposed to be united in love?

Even within the same church, we are barely tolerant of others – if not secretly contemptuous. There are those in the assembly who are haughty, for example, or superficial, or vain or arrogant or worldly or wacko or hypocritical or etc. We have lots of adjectives at our disposal by which to censure those we don't want to love. We depart immediately after the Sunday morning service deliberately so as not to have to interact with the others there. Or even if we do, it's a Sunday morning relationship only; there's little or no contact during the week. We go to churches with gigantic auditoriums purposely so that we can be anonymous and not have to interact with others. "Nobody else there knows me and I don't know them, and that's how I want it." We come to church with zero intention of finding out if anyone else there has a need we can in love meet. We know nothing of *philadelphia*.

In the church we gossip, we quickly share the faults of others, and we demand our views be heard if not adopted. We fight with each other over matters large and small because we're so sure we're right and others wrong. "So-and-so ignores me, so I'll ignore him (or her)." "So-and-so never did anything for me, so why should I do anything for him (or her)." We know nothing of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

From the very beginning of history, brotherly love (or lack thereof) is an overt biblical issue. Cain murdered his sibling. Lamech boasted of his hatred toward those who weren't far removed from being his brothers. Jacob feared his twin brother Esau would kill him. The sons of Jacob hated their brother Joseph. But near the end of Genesis we have a precious example of brotherly love. Judah willingly substituted himself for his brother Benjamin, fearing that Benjamin's life would be taken (44:33). He did it out of love for his father Jacob. Much of the Mosaic Law deals with the expression of love for other Israelites, all brethren. The Book of Judges, at its end, narrates a hideous episode of brotherly hatred. God punished Miriam for being contemptuous of her brother Moses (Numbers 12), and only because of Moses' intercession was Miriam delivered. The Books of Kings and Chronicles narrate the enmity between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

Why is this such a serious matter that the Scriptures dwell on it extensively? Because of God's nature. Unlike Allah, the Muslim god who is a singular deity, and who therefore does not and cannot love, the God of the Bible is a Trinity. The members of the Trinity have a transcending love for each other, a love that is of infinite quality and intensity. The Son came to earth specifically as an expression of that love. It's a love that manifests as mercy, as forgiveness, as self-sacrifice, as grace. It's a selfless, giving type of love that's so unique and so deep that the infinite Creator God will bless even rebellious mortal creatures by adopting them into His family (so to speak) and doing all that's necessary to make them fit to be blessed. So the Scriptures require us, His creatures, to reflect His glory by also showing love to one another. Even the rabbis of ancient times, those who gave us the Talmud, understood perfectly that the essence of Scripture has to do with loving others because of God's love for us. Rabbi Tanhuma, for example, explained: "If thou despisest any man, thou despisest God who made man in His image."

The kind of love that Christ commands us to express isn't just an emotion, although it may be. It's seeking the good or benefit of another, even at the expense of oneself. It's not speaking ill of others; it's forgiving them, and making allowances for their faults. It's helping others with their needs without conditions or expectation of a return. It's persistent intercessory prayer on their behalf. Let Paul describe it: **"Love must be sincere . . . Honor one another above yourselves . . . Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn . . . be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited"** (Romans 12:9-16). Again, **"don't put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way . . . do what leads to peace and to mutual edification . . . we who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak . . . don't do anything that will cause your brother to fall"** (Romans 14:13-21). In 1 Corinth 13, Paul says that love is patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't boast, isn't rude, self-seeking or easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs, and it protects others. Many other texts could be cited here, but these suffice.

Love is unconditional. We don't love people because they're lovely. God loves us in spite of the [sometimes obvious] fact that we're not lovely. One future day God will transform all of us to be like Christ, so how or what we are now, in this life, doesn't affect God's love for us. And it shouldn't affect our love for our brethren. Are some of them in error in some inessential way? Have some of them failed in some way? We should look at them as one day being as perfect as Jesus.

Let's acknowledge that love is a spiritual gift (Galatians 5:22). But that doesn't mean that it supernaturally comes to us from God. If that were the case, why all the texts describing and commanding how we're to show love and not be unloving? There are two interconnected truths here: If we obey the Scriptural commands to love, which is our part, we can count on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Sadly, we're so in love with ourselves, so unmindful of the Scriptures, so determined to live as we always have, the gift of the Spirit isn't there, nor is it soon forthcoming.

The goal of love is unity. As God is a unity, so should be the Body of Christ. Recall Jesus' words: **"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one . . . I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"** (John 17:11,20-23). The love and the attendant unity is to bear testimony to the truth of Christianity. Their love and unity evident to all, the early Christians reached out, and Christianity rapidly spread throughout the Western world. Today, in the West, Christianity is in precipitous decline, and the most obvious reasons are our lack of love for each other and a severely fractured Church. So who would or could believe our testimony?

Now more than ever, we need to repent of self-love and indifference to Scripture, and instead practice *philadelphia*.