

# *Apologia*: The Christian in Society

By Rev. Doug Gaunt

## *Introduction:*

Living as a Christian in our culture is a lot like dating. We have to watch who (or what) we flirt and spend time with. If we're not careful we may fall in love, and be sorry. So the secret is to love wisely.

## *Scripture Connect*

“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent...” Philippians 1:9,10a (English Standard Version)

## *Doctrinal Quotation*

“Here belong also all the prayers of the saints in which they ask that they may be taught, enlightened, and sanctified by God. By this very act they declare that they cannot get those things that they ask of God from their own natural powers. For example, in Psalm 119 alone, David prays more than ten times that God would give him understanding, that he might comprehend and learn the divine teaching. Similar prayers are in Paul's writings (Ephesians 1:17; Colossians 1:9; Philippians 1:9). These prayers and passages about our ignorance and inability have been written for us. They are not written to make us idle and remiss in reading, hearing, and meditating on God's Word, but that we should first thank God from the heart that by His Son He has delivered us from the darkness of ignorance and the captivity of sin and death (Ephesians 4:8). Through Baptism and the Holy Spirit He has regenerated and illumined us.” (The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, Free Will)

## *Application*

There are many petitions that come to mind when youth workers lovingly pray for the youth they serve and visa versa. But Paul's prayer in Philippians 1:9, cited in The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, Free Will (Concordia – The Lutheran Confessions, p.553), is most commendable. It is as vital to today's youth groups and congregations as it was during the first century A.D. and the Reformation era.

When Paul prayed for the Philippians, he knew they were living in culture that was contrary to Christianity (cf. Acts 16), much like Christians in society today. What did he ask for? His petition was for love, a divine love, a sacrificial love, a timeless love. It is the kind of love that led Jesus to suffer and die on a cross for us. He prayed for an abounding love, a love that cannot be contained. I am convinced that a love like that can overcome every problem in the lives of every person involved in youth ministry.

But the key qualifiers for this kind of love are found in the final phrase: “with knowledge and discernment.” It is an informed love above all. Many teens today are settling for an inferior kind of love, motivated solely by emotions, that is embraced by our society. But the love Paul describes is directed by the Spirit and works through our minds. Three things are necessary for this kind of love: 1) Knowledge—gathered information; 2) Discernment—the ability to make sense of the information we have; and 3) Wisdom—the ability to apply that knowledge and understanding to our lives in a God-pleasing way. St. Paul addresses the first two when he prays for “knowledge” and “discernment,” and the third when he writes: “so that you may approve what is excellent...”

The quotation above addresses this when it says: “These prayers and passages about our ignorance and inability have been written for us.” Ignorance is the lack of knowledge, and inability in this context is the lack of discernment, the ability to use our knowledge. The point being made in the Formula of Concord is that this kind of love can only come from God. But it doesn’t come out of nowhere. Since God is a God of means, the Lord uses His Word as the means and basis for informing us and guiding us in the way to love wisely. The Reformers were concerned with the kind of teachings the people were believing. If they were filled with the false teachings about Christ, faith, forgiveness, and free will that were common in their society they would be apt to connect with them.

I often tell teens to only date people they would be willing to marry. Obviously, that doesn’t mean they must plan to marry everyone they date. Besides, dating is a time for discovering the qualities we need for a God-pleasing relationship. When we discover someone doesn’t have or desire those qualities it’s time to re-evaluate the relationship. I say, “Be careful who you date because you might fall in love with that person and be sorry later. Then you will either have to go through the hard work of falling out of love before it’s too late, or live with an unhealthy relationship and an inferior kind of love.” The same is true for what we believe and who we interact with spiritually. St. John wrote, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 John 2:15). When we flirt with false teaching and indulge our sinful desires, it’s time to fall out of love with the world. In a culture where “tolerance” is the watchword, we must be careful of being connected to teachings that sound loving but deny Christ and/or His teachings.

In the mid 1950’s, E.F. Scott, a Christian theologian, characterized these qualifiers (knowledge and discernment) by writing: “Nothing perhaps is more harmful than the easy good nature which is willing to tolerate everything; and this is often mistaken for the Christian frame of mind. Love must fasten itself on the things which are worth loving, and it cannot do so unless it is wisely directed.” (Scott, E.F. “The Epistle to the Philippians.” The Interpreter’s Bible, ed. G.A. Buttrick et al. New York: Abingdon Press, 1955)

In other words, Paul doesn’t specify an object of the love he prays for, even though love always has a target. He doesn’t tell the Philippians who or what they should love. Instead, he prays for a love that will choose wisely, and gives wise direction by teaching and modeling an excellent love that is Christ-centered. Through faith in Christ, the Father gives us a love that “has delivered us from the darkness of ignorance and the captivity of sin and death. Through Baptism and the Holy Spirit He has regenerated and illumined us.”

This is our prayer for our youth and youth workers. It is a prayer that is fulfilled when we provide divine knowledge from God’s Word, and seek the discernment we need to love wisely in Christ.