

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

“Welcome to Colossae, USA”

Colossians 1:1-2

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Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (Col 1:1-2 ESV).

Last week we learned that Christ-centeredness is simply the response to the reality of Jesus’ position. He’s the image of the invisible God, the firstborn. He created everything – seen and unseen. He holds everything together. He’s the head of the church. And the result is that Jesus is preeminent, a word (proteuo) which means to be first in rank and taking precedence over all others.

In other words, Jesus is Lord. He is King. He is sovereign. We don’t make him any of those things, and he doesn’t need our permission, our vote, our affirmation, or our approval. He’s the core and the call of Colossians is to live with Him at the center. The challenge of our lives is to figure out how to live with a conscious awareness of who Jesus is. Hopefully the Core Verse helped you focus on this, and we need to find many other creative ways to remind our hearts that Jesus is the core.

I cannot overemphasize to you how important the centrality or the preeminence of Christ is for our lives, nor can I overemphasize to you how dangerous it is to live in a manner where you try to be preeminent over your own life. The Bible tells us that the desire for preeminence was the cause of Satan’s rebellion against God (Isaiah 14:12-14). It was the core of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God (Genesis 3:4-7). The prideful desire for preeminence is what caused God to banish Nebuchadnezzar to the fields and eat grass like an ox (Daniel 4:28-37). And it was the sin of a man named Diotrephes who, according to 3 John 9, “likes to put himself first, {and} does not acknowledge our authority.”

Paul’s pastoral concern in the book of Colossians was for a group of people who were being tempted to deny, in practice, the authority of Christ in their lives. Our aim this morning is to determine what how this practical denial of Christ was surfacing in the church, and to use their problems as a mirror for our own lives.

Core Players

There are a number of key people identified in the book that are important to understand.

First, we find in 1:1 that Paul identifies himself as the author of the book and he calls himself “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” This title was no doubt important because Paul had formerly been Christianity’s leading persecutor, and he had personally encountered the risen Christ. He was a Jew by birth, studied under the great teacher Gamaliel, and became a prized Pharisee. With the permission of the chief priests, Paul pursued the Christians who had fled to Damascus. And it was on the way to Damascus that he was personally confronted by Jesus in a vision (Acts 9:1-9).

That event moved Paul (then called Saul) from the most significant threat to Christianity to believer in Jesus to Christianity’s most profound spokesman. More than any other person, Paul was responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire through three missionary journeys and by writing thirteen of the twenty-six books of the New Testament.¹

At the end of Paul’s ministry he was arrested and sent to Rome (see Acts 28:16-31). And it is from this imprisonment that he writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, probably between the years of AD 60 and 62. It is likely that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were all sent together by the hand of a man named Tychicus. He is referenced in Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:7-8 with language that is strikingly similar.

The book Philemon was also likely sent with Tychicus. This personal letter was written to a wealthy man, named Philemon, who lived in Colossae. He had a runaway slave named Onesimus who had come to faith in Christ under Paul’s ministry while in prison (Philemon 11). And Paul was sending Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus.

The congregation at Colossae was likely started because of Paul’s extensive ministry in the city of Ephesus. However, the work in Colossae was an area that Paul had never visited personally. We find in Colossians 2:1 that Paul says that he has a great struggle for those at Laodicea and “for all who have not seen me face to face.”

The church probably owed its start to a chief disciple of Paul named Epaphras who came to visit Paul, was arrested, and became a fellow prisoner (see Philemon 23). Colossians 1:7 tells us of Epaphras’ role with Paul and the church – “...as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.” Paul probably used Ephesus as his evangelistic headquarters,² and men like Epaphras were sent out to plant churches in the area called Asia (modern day Turkey). In fact,

¹ John MacArthur. MacArthur Study Bible – Introduction to Romans. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2001. p. 1688.

² Acts 19:9-10 records the vast influence of Paul in the region: 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

you may know of the seven churches in the first chapter of Revelation. Most of these churches were probably planted through this Ephesian outpost.³

The second person we see mentioned is Timothy. It is interesting to note that Paul identifies him in the salutation because he is not the only one with Paul at the time of his writing. He has eight other men with him (see Colossians 4:7-15). However, Timothy was unique to Paul's ministry in that he had a permanent role. He was Paul's closest and more cherished partner in the ministry.⁴

Paul, Timothy, Epaphras, and Tychicus were all part of the extended ministry to the church. Each of them played a role in the spiritual shepherding of the people at Colossae.

The Colossian Setting

Most ancient letters began with three elements: the name of the writer, the name of the people receiving the letter, and a greeting.⁵ We've already learn about the first part: Paul and Timothy. The people receiving the letter are called: "the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse." And the greeting is classic Paul: "Grace to you and peace..."

The believers are called "saints" which means that they were holy because of God's work in them. Further, they are called "faithful brothers" meaning that to date they were consistent in their allegiance to Christ.

The city of Colossae was located in the Lycus Valley in the region called Phrygia. Colossae was situated very near the city of Laodicea, and Paul gives instruction in Colossians 4:14 for the letter to the Colossian church to be read in Laodicea.

The city was just south of the main road that led from Ephesus to the Euphrates River. Colossae was not a large city like many others in the region. In fact, it was the least influential of all the cities to whom Paul wrote. Its singular claim to fame was the trade of wool which was often dyed a dark black or red.

Colossae, like most cities in Asia Minor, was a cosmopolitan city consisting of people from all over the world. Jews had been resettled there from Babylon by Antiochus III in the second century B.C.⁶ Acts 2:10 tells us that there were people from this region of Asia Minor in Jerusalem and who heard the message of Peter at Pentecost. The city contained a strong

³ F.F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Colossians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984. p. 15.

⁴ In Philippians 2:20-21 he says about Timothy: "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."

⁵ Bruce, p. 39.

⁶ Peter O'Brien. The Word Biblical Commentary – Colossians, Philemon. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. p. xxvii.

Jewish contingent and a significant diversity of culture. However, it appears that the church at Colossae was primarily a gathering of Gentile converts.⁷

The city of Colossae was not the most strategic city, nor was it the most influential. The church had been birthed as a derivative of the apostle Paul's ministry, and now that he had heard a report from Ephaphras, he wanted to reinforce some critical truths. You see, Ephaphras had some good things to say about the church, but he was also clear about some problems within the church. And the problems related to what is often called the Colossian Heresy, a multi-faceted belief that was a threat to the gospel and their spiritual lives.

Colossian Heresy

Every letter of the New Testament has a reason for which it was written. Colossians was written out of Paul's concern that they were being taken captive by some teaching that was not compatible with the gospel that they had received. Paul warns them in 2:8 -"8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."

What exactly was the teaching against which Paul was fighting? He never fully identifies the problem, but we do pick up some clues throughout the book:

- The heretical teaching was presented as philosophy of life –even higher knowledge-- based upon an ancient tradition, and it claimed to be a revelation from God (2:8)
- There was an emphasis on specific lifestyle standards regarding which foods should be eaten and which holy days should be observed (2:16)
- It focused on humility and the worship of angels (2:18)
- It created a subtle elitism that was, at its core, full of pride (2:18)
- The teaching appeared to be wise, intellectual, and disciplined (2:23)

The problem with the things that I just mentioned is that many of them, in the right context, are actually wonderful things. Philosophy is not bad, nor is learning from history or tradition. Who could argue that humility is a bad thing to practice? Or who could say that living a disciplined life is something to be shunned?

Somewhere in your mind you need to mark it down that this is always the problem with false teaching: it is rarely completely false. However, it is false enough in certain key ways that it compromises the integrity of truth. My definition of maturity this: maturity is not what you know; it is knowing what is important. And that is critical for our study of Colossians.

⁷O'Brien (p. xxiix) cites Moule's four reasons for this assertion: 1) 1:12,21, & 27 refer to them as "outsiders brought inside", 2) very few O.T. references, 3) distinctive Gentile vices are listed in 3:5-7, and 4) very little is said about reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles.

The Colossian heresy was some kind of blend of Judaism, Christianity, and Gnostic philosophy. It was probably presented to the church as an improvement or advancement on the gospel that Epaphras had preached. It sought to merge Christianity with its Jewish roots and Greek philosophy. In practice it produced a religion that looked and sounded like Christianity, but its focus was more and more on discipline, rules, and spiritual experiences. The problem at Colossae was different than the Judaizers at Galatia in that it was far more personal, spiritual, and mystical.

There is one thing that is crystal clear: the focus on Christ shifted. It wasn't that they stopped believing in Christ. It wasn't that they flatly denied him. The Colossians heresy was an outgrowth of what happens when Christ is no longer the core. The heresy detracted from the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. It ultimately treated Christ with contempt, thinking that spiritual experiences or regulations could somehow improve upon him. The simple equation – Christ in you, the hope of glory – would have seemed very juvenile and ignorant.

So in light of this explanation, hear the following verses {emphasis mine}:

27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27).

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Col 2:6-7).

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:1-3).

At issue is the theological and practical centrality of Jesus Christ. Namely, the issue is one of trust. Who are you really trusting? And why?

Colossae, USA

That brings us back to our title: Welcome to Colossae, USA. I used that title because I think that there are a number of ways that might look at our culture and the American version of Christianity through the cautious lens of Colossians. And as it relates to the world in which we live, I think we must be cautious of two things:

1) A Spiritual but Christ-less Culture

About 7-8 years ago, perhaps around the events of September 11, our country developed a growing interest in being spiritual. I think I remember someone saying, "Spiritual is in; Religion is out." Presidential candidates talk much more now than I can remember about their "faith and their spiritual life."

The study and interest in spiritual things is a very broad swath in our culture. Less than five miles from College Park is a store called "New Age People" and their slogan is "products and services for ALL spiritual paths." Yet another example would be the third book on the New York Times best-selling list which is The Secret by Rhonda Byrne. It is book a spiritual self-help book and now a film that boasts the following:

The Secret reveals the most powerful law in the universe. The knowledge of this law has run like a golden thread through the lives and the teachings of all the prophets, seers, sages and saviors in the world's history, and through the lives of all truly great men and women. All that they have ever accomplished or attained has been done in full accordance with this most powerful law. Without exception, every human being has the ability to transform any weakness or suffering into strength, power, perfect peace, health, and abundance.

Rhonda Byrne's discovery of The Secret began with a glimpse of the truth through a 100 year old book. She went back through centuries, tracing and uncovering a common truth that lay at the core of the most powerful philosophies, teachings and religions in the world.

The Secret explains with simplicity the law that is governing all lives, and offers the knowledge of how to create - intentionally and effortlessly - a joyful life. This is the secret to everything - the secret to unlimited happiness, love, health and prosperity. This is the secret to life.⁸

As another example, I could also point to a recent book called The Third Jesus by Deepak Chopra. The summary of his book reads as follows:

In *The Third Jesus*, bestselling author and spiritual leader Deepak Chopra provides ... a challenge to current systems of belief and a fresh perspective on what Jesus can teach us all, regardless of our religious background. There is not one Jesus, Chopra writes, but three.

First, there is the historical Jesus, the man who lived more than two thousand years ago and whose teachings are the foundation of Christian theology and thought. Next there is Jesus the Son of God, who has come to embody an institutional religion with specific dogma, a priesthood, and devout believers. And finally, there is the third Jesus, the cosmic Christ, the spiritual guide whose teaching embraces all humanity, not just the church built in his name. He speaks to the individual who wants to find God as a personal experience, to attain what some might call grace, or God-consciousness, or enlightenment.

When we take Jesus literally, we are faced with the impossible. How can we truly "love thy neighbor as thyself"? But when we see the exhortations of Jesus as invitations to join him on a higher spiritual plane, his words suddenly make sense. Ultimately, Chopra argues, Christianity needs to overcome its tendency to be exclusionary and refocus on being a religion of personal insight and spiritual growth. In this way Jesus can

⁸ <http://www.theseecret.tv/>

be seen for the universal teacher he truly is—someone whose teachings of compassion, tolerance, and understanding can embrace and be embraced by all of us.⁹

You see, in the midst of a spiritual culture, it is increasingly difficult not just to believe in Jesus, but to believe that Jesus is the **only** way to be right with God.

One of our staff sent me this video of an Oprah Winfrey show which highlights the reality of what we are talking about.

This is the world in which we live – right now. We live in a world with increasing openness to spirituality, but a decreasing tolerance for Christ. One of our college students described it this way:

“I think overall, it's pretty easy to tell people that I attend church or even a Bible study, but actually talking about Christ, that I have a relationship with Him, that He's changed my life, is much harder and much less "socially acceptable." It seems that the world is more comfortable hearing about how a person has found peace through Buddhism, through prayer to a general god or gods, or even just "within themselves". Jesus makes them uncomfortable--and maybe that's good.”

In many ways our own culture looks like Colossae – a potentially weird blend of spirituality and Christianity. And we need to be careful not to confuse a culture of spiritual interest with a culture interested in Christ.

2) A Christless Christianity

However, there is another and more subtle manifestation of the Colossian problem: Christless Christianity.¹⁰ This tragedy happens when we take Christianity as we know it, and over time allow something other than Christ to be the center.

It was what C.S. Lewis was referring to in his book the Screwtape Letters. The book is a collection fictitious letters from Satan (Uncle Screwtape) and his demonic disciple (Wormwood) about how to defeat Christians. Screwtape deviously suggests that Wormwood should employ a strategy of distraction. “Rather than clumsily announce his presence by direct attacks, Wormwood should try to get churches to become interested in ‘Christianity and...’: ‘Christianity and the War,’ ‘Christianity and poverty,’ ‘Christianity and morality’ and so on”.¹¹

Now Lewis is not suggesting that Christians shouldn't be concerned about things like the War, poverty, or morality. Nor am I saying that the church should limit its influence on issues like

⁹ <http://www.chopra.com/thirdjesus>

¹⁰ I am grateful to Michael Horton and his article in Modern Reformation (www.modernreformation.org) for the insightful development of this concept

¹¹ Michael Horton. “*Christless Christianity: Getting in Christ's Way.*” Modern Reformation. <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=ArtRead&var2=1&var3=main>

family values, social justice, political issues, community transformation, or other important applications of the gospel. However, there is a real danger when those things begin to eclipse Jesus.

You see there is a part of the rich young ruler in all of us (Luke 18:18-30); it is far too easy to elevate the form of Christianity over the reality of Christ. In other words, we begin to miss the very heart of the gospel not by denying gospel or Christ as Savior, but by adding so many things around the gospel that it isn't the source of our trust, hope, and life. The problem at is one of addition, distraction, and emphasis.

"Christless Christianity can be promoted in contexts where either the sermon is a lecture on timeless doctrine and ethics or Christ gets lost in all the word studies and applications. Christ gets lost in churches where activity, self-expression, the hype of "worship experiences" and programs replace the ordinary ministry of hearing and receiving Christ as he is given to us in the means of grace. Christ gets lost when he is promoted as the answer to everything but our condemnation, death, and the tyranny of sin, or as the means to the end of more excitement, amusement, {or} better living."¹²

Do you see the problem? Do you see how easy it would be for this to happen? I know it happens to me. I get so fixed on ministry forms, church work, Bible Study, and the rhythm of ministry that it's possible for me to serve Jesus without trusting Jesus, thinking about Jesus or loving Jesus. Counseling can become a matter of giving people my opinions filled with Bible verses, but absent a focus on Christ. Exposition can become about original languages, grammatical-historical method and background material, and not about savoring the Savior. Preaching can become all about a clear argument, good illustrations, and pathos at the neglect of bringing people face to face with the risen Christ. Congregational worship can become about my emotional response, feelings, and musical taste, and not about worshipping my King. Evangelism can become about methodologies and decisions, not about introducing people to Christ. Educating my children can become about having obedient children who know the content of the Bible, not about connecting each lesson or every day to the gospel. Working on my marriage can be more about wanting to get along with Sarah or my own happiness than really loving her like Christ loved the church.

My problem is not that I deny Christ. My problem is that I have to guard my heart from using Jesus to get what I want; my problem is that I can too easily fall in love with the things that are supposed to lead me to him.

The way to show you the utter stupidity of this would be for you imagine that you are the proud parents of your first baby, and you and your wife bring him in a brand-new car seat to church. Now imagine that I see you in the hallway as you make your way to the nursery.

¹² Horton, "Christless Christianity."

Imagine that I find you, greet you, express my congratulations, and as I bend down to look at your new baby I say, "That is a beautiful car-seat. Wow!"

Neglecting the Savior is a thousand times more foolish and infinitely more tragic.

That is why if you are looking for answers today the best thing I could offer you would not be the programs, the Bible Studies, the small groups, or the counseling at College Park. Those are all means. The best thing I can offer you is a sinless Savior named Jesus who absorbed God's wrath over your sin on the cross. He's the only one who can grant you the ONE thing that you need more than anything else – forgiveness.

And so College Park as we navigate the choppy cultural waters of spirituality and as we "do church" together – let us never forget one very important thing: Jesus is the core!

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