

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Consistently Christian: The Marks of a Jesus-centered Church

Colossians 3:15-17

Mark Vroegop

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Col 3:15-17

I used to have a counseling table in my office that looked like mahogany. But it wasn't. In fact it really was a large piece of glued sawdust that was cut in the shape of a circle and then someone took a picture of mahogany glued it to the top so that it looked better than what it was. In our house in Fennville the kitchen and hallways looked like they were hardwood floors. But they weren't. In fact they were long planks of particle board with a nice picture of hardwood glued on the top. Any gouge in the floor would reveal what was really underneath. My counseling table and kitchen floor both had a veneer that covered the real substance. That is what a veneer is all about: a thin covering of reality.

Unfortunately people who call themselves Christians and even churches can be just like that. I call it veneer Christianity, a thin and fake covering of what is really going on. It is portraying one's spiritual depth or vibrancy as one thing when, in reality, it is something different. It is having a form of godliness but denying its power. It looks like church, smells like church, even feels like church – but there's not power, no life change, no transparency, no honesty. Have you ever met someone like that? Ever been someone like that? Ever been a part of church like that? It is not good. In fact, there are millions of people who will never come to church because that is the way that they believe the church is.

This morning I'm here to tell you that church doesn't have to be like that, and Colossians 3:15-17 is a great text to remind us about what Jesus-centered church looks like. What are the marks of a consistently Christian church? Now that is an important question and one worth answering.

In last week's message we learned that we need to be the reflection of Jesus by putting on the characteristics that fit with him. We are to embrace compassion, kindness, humility, meekness,

patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. These are the marks of Christ-likeness that are expressed individually.

So what is Paul doing here? He is giving us the marks of a consistently Christian community. He is telling us some of the traits of Jesus-centered body of believers. After this, as we will see in three weeks in Colossians 3:18-19, Paul moves into material regarding a Jesus-centered families. The scope of the application from this book is starting to widen.

What are the marks of a Jesus-centered community of believers?

Peace (v 15a)

After just talking about love which “binds everything together” (v 14), Paul now turns to the subject of peace. Peace, like love, is central to a healthy, functioning body of Christ. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul even identifies peace as the bond which creates unity – “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Peace and love create a binding unity among believers, and it is the first mark of a Jesus-centered community.

The word peace is the Greek word *eirene*. It is used 92 times in the New Testament with the most occurrences in Romans (10) and Ephesians (8). That is an important data point because both Romans and Ephesians are loaded with doctrine, specifically material on the reconciliation between God and mankind through the gospel. The word comes from another word which means to join, and it has a broader meaning of peace, rest, and harmonious relationships. This could include peace between nations (Rev 6:4), a spirit of friendship (1 Cor 16:11), a sense of contentment (John 14:7), and a right relationship with God (Eph 2:17).

The word is tied to the Old Testament concept of *shalom*. Over and over the Old Testament refers to *shalom* as the blessing of God (Lev 26:6), something which was longed for in the kingdom of God (Zech 9:9-10), and that which the Messiah would bring (“Prince of Peace” – Is 9:5). So it is safe to say that *shalom* or peace is the ultimate objective of the plan of redemption.

There is something deeply spiritual and God-centered about experiencing peace. I was walking the prayer path this week, and the combination of the cool air, the sound of the birds, and blowing wind in the falling leaves created this beautiful sense of peace that led me to thank God for his creation. I don’t find myself experiencing the same emotions when I’m in a crowd of people, trying to check my bags at an airport, or ordering food for my family at a drive thru. Peace is a sense of wholeness, safety, and completeness.

Peace is to be a defining mark of the body of Christ. That prompted me to think about those of you who serve at parking lot attendants, in our visitor center, checking children into nursery, and in our first-hand ministries. Do you know why you are important? You are helping create

peace. Our facility layout and the fact that we had 2700 people here last Sunday do not lend themselves toward peace. I would guess that for many of you Sunday morning is one of the most stressful events of your entire week. And that is why it is important for us to work extra hard in doing our part to create peace. Sundays should be full of peace.

Now the text tells us that the peace in Colossians 3:15 is the peace of Christ. In other words, it is the peace that he creates. What kind of peace is this? It is the peace of reconciliation between God and a person which leads to a peace in our earthly relationships. It is the peace that Jesus both embodies and brings. Two verses illustrate this very well:

- “For he himself is our peace...” (Eph 2:14)
- “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way...” (2 Thess 3:16)

Peace, in this sense begins with an understanding and captivation with what God has done for us in Christ. But it extends into the relationships and the environments of our lives. Thus we are called to be “peacemakers” (Matt 5:9), giving evidence that we are the Sons of God. In other words people who know the peace of God will create peace. They love peace and they try to create peace. They let peace rule.

Letting peace rule means that peace becomes the controlling force in our lives. The word “rule” actually refers to an umpire or referee at an athletic event. Therefore, peace is supposed to be the governor of individual, Jesus-centered hearts. The peace of Christ is to hold sway over the whole of our lives as we relate to each other.¹

Now I know what it is like to be referee. I was a basketball official for two years at Cedarville, and I officiated Jr. and Sr. High games in Michigan. I really enjoyed the role; it was good practice for being a pastor – you have to make tough calls and usually half the people watching don’t like what you decided. But a referee’s job is to identify when a violation happens and then to be sure that the game proceeds in harmony with the rules.

Therefore, peace is supposed to be the referee of our hearts. The Bible clearly calls believers to life of peace:

- “turn away from evil do good; seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet 3:11)
- “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace” (Jam 3:18)
- “strive for peace with everyone” (Heb 12:14)
- “agree with one another and live in peace” (2 Cor 13:11)
- “pursue what makes for peace” (Rom 14:19)
- “if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18)

¹ Peter O’Brien. Colossians and Philemon - Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. p. 204.

What does God want? He longs for:

- Husbands and wives who can resolve conflict
- Children who love their parents and their siblings
- Relationships restored between parents and children
- Friends who've parted ways to be reconciled
- Ministry leaders to get along
- Church ministries to consider the needs of others more important than their own

Do you see how important this is? Some of you have a broken relationship or a relationship that is starting to fracture. Don't let the devil and your flesh win any more! Make the first move. Pick up the phone. Set up a time to talk. Do something loving for them. Get over the fact that you need to go to them. Die to yourself and pursue peace. After all that is exactly what Jesus did for you! The mark of a Jesus-centered church is peace.

Gratitude (v 15b)

We covered the aspect of gratitude before (specifically last week regarding chosen, holy, and beloved) so I'm not going to spend a lot of time here. However, I don't want you to think that it is not important.

Paul gives a command that is supposed to be continually practiced. In other words, gratitude is the normal and natural frame of mind for the person who has been captivated by Christ. The Greek word is eucharisto, and it is the combination of two words: eu – meaning good and charisto – meaning favor or grace. It reflects an attitude of joy toward God for his gracious treatment of his people. That is why the Lord's Table is called the eucharist. We are giving thanks for what God has done through Christ.

A lack of gratitude is more than just being pessimistic or seeing the glass half-empty. Romans 1:21 clearly tells us that a lack of gratitude to God is an expression of a self-centered, God-less heart – "...although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking..." In his second letter to Timothy, Paul indicates that the last days will be characterized by lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant...and ungrateful people (2 Tim 3:2). A lack of gratitude indicates that you think you deserve grace.

But the people of God know what they deserved, and they are completely overwhelmed by God's extravagant grace. They see everything that they have as a gift from God (James 1:17). Last week every service stood to their feet and clapped at the end of the cardboard testimonies. It was an unbelievable moment, wasn't it? But what we were celebrating at the moment was not the accomplishment of the people who were standing up here. No. We were expressing

our gratitude to God because everyone in the room knew that those people could not have made that change on their own. God did it. And therefore gratitude just makes sense.

Expressing gratitude to God is really important. Worshipping together is critical to your spiritual life, the spiritual development of your family, and the growth of the entire body. It is important for you to be with a specific group of people regularly, and it is important for your family to worship together. Here's why: gratitude is caught not taught. And a church with Jesus at the center will be filled with people who are so in love with him that they cannot help but be moved as well.

The Word (v 16)

The third characteristic is the centrality of the Word of Christ. In the same way that peace was to rule their hearts, now the Word is to dwell in them richly. Now what exactly does this mean?

First, it is keeping the gospel central. The text says "the Word of Christ." This is not just referring to his specific words, but rather to the word about Christ or concerning Christ. It is the word that centers on Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and everything that is effected by that work (see also Gal 1:7, 1 Cor 9:12, 2 Cor 2:12).

Secondly, it means saturation. The Word dwelling richly in them implies that there is a love, an understanding, an application, and a blessing from the Word. Knowledge alone is not a sufficient meaning here. Rather it means that the rule of Christ is exercised in their lives through living Word-saturated lives. They would come together, hear the Word explained, submit to its authority, and live it out.²

Third, there will be mutual edification. The Word becomes the means by which we help each other. The text says, "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.." The clear result of the Word of Christ dwelling in a body richly is an expanded role of the Word in various relationships. In other words, the Word is present in everything, and it is present in way that is really helpful ("in all wisdom"). A culture of teaching is created as people give positive instructions to one another how to live. A culture of admonishing is created as people warn each other. The image here is a body of believers who love the Word, and the beauty of the ministry is not one teacher or one program; it is the power of Word that is all over the ministry.

Fourth, there will be vibrant worship through music. Paul sees this not as an appendix to the Word, but as a critical part of it. In other words, the songs that we sing prior to the preached word are not the warm-up band to the main attraction. They preach a message as well; edification happens through worship through music. So be careful how you use the word worship. The entire service is about worship, and we have different means to accomplish it.

² Peter O'Brien. Colossians and Philemon – Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. p. 207.

We worship through prelude, through singing, through offering, through baptism, through preaching, and through responding to God.

And notice the diversity through which we worship through singing. Paul talks about psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. I don't want to make too much here about the distinction between these but it seems as though Paul is showing that singing drawn from Scripture (Psalms), drawn from deep doctrinal truths (hymns), and drawn from heart-felt love for God (spiritual songs) are all part of the dynamic of edification through music. His point is not the form. The point is the edification value of the musical worship and how it leads us toward gratitude ("with thankfulness in your hearts to God").

Jesus-centered churches love the Word and it dwells in them richly.

Real Life (v 17)

The final mark of a Jesus-centered church is that they take living a Jesus-centered life seriously. They live it beyond the four walls of this building. They take it home. They do something with it. They live real life with Jesus at the core.

I can almost imagine Paul waving his hand through the air as he says these words and the scribe writes them down. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus..."

He is calling us to have one rule in life – glorify God by being a passionate follower of Jesus. Notice how deep and wide this is:

First, this is deep. Notice that we are to do everything "in the name of Jesus." To attach Jesus' name to something means that we have his endorsement, his blessing, his approval, and his participation. We are to approach our practical, daily life with a view toward that fact Jesus is personally involved in everything I'm doing. Further, we are to do so with a view toward turning the events of our life into platforms for gratitude to God. The name of Jesus and gratitude to God – deep areas become the guiding values for real life as a Christian.

Secondly, this is wide. Notice how emphatic Paul is with the breadth of this command: "whatever you do", "in word or deed", "do everything. Do you get his point? Paul sees the Lordship of Christ as the banner over every arena of life. Nothing can be separated from him.

Some people play games with God and his grace. They think that they can create little areas of their life over which Jesus isn't allowed to have rule. You cannot do that with Jesus (see 1 Cor 6:12-20).

So there are three questions you can ask yourself all day long:

- Does this fit with the name of Jesus?
- Will this create gratitude in my heart for God?
- Can I thank God for this before or after?

God wants his children to be like Jesus. He wants us to be real.

Look, the world has seen enough of veneer Christianity. The body of Christ is supposed to be marked by peace, by gratitude, by the Word, and by real life. But in order for that to happen it takes all of us deciding that Jesus is worthy enough, the church is important enough, and the power of sin is deceptive enough to take this stuff seriously.

Each of us, before God, must determine what part God wants us to play in making College Park Church a Jesus-centered church.

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