

Colossians - The Centrality Of Christ ::

A 6 part outline on Colossians by Grant Thorp.

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There was a knock on the door. I opened it and there were two men standing there. One of them said “We’re from the Society of Mary and we’re concerned that there is a lack of devotion to Mary among Catholics, so we’re trying to encourage people to pay her more attention.” I responded by saying “Well you’ve struck out here because I’m a Presbyterian, but tell me why would you be going from door to door telling people about Mary when you could be telling them about Jesus?” What followed was a fairly lively discussion about the real focus of the Christian faith which went on for some time, but as I closed the door I was angry that they had so devalued Christ in all that they said.

Of course they’re not alone in that! Much of modern Christianity focuses the spotlight everywhere but on Christ: the Toronto Blessing, Psychology, family life, personal development they’ll tell you all about these things but they won’t tell you about Christ. Neither is this a new thing. It’s been going on since the early days of the church. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he addresses this very issue, which makes it a very important letter for us to preach on and study.

The Christian community in Colosse came into being during Paul’s Ephesian ministry (c. AD 52-55). Paul’s daily lectures in the hall of Tyrannus were so effective that it is possible for Luke to claim that “all residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19-8-10).

During this period a man named Epaphras, who had come from Colosse in the Lycus Valley, came to faith in the Lord Jesus. He quickly grew to maturity (Col 4:12) and was a hard worker (Col 4:13, 1 Cor 15:10). Through his ministry the church in Colosse was founded.

While Paul never actually visited the church in Colosse he took an active interest in it through his disciple Epaphras. It’s clear reading through Colossians that Paul wrote to combat a threat to the faith of the church. It is generally thought that this threat came from a group of false teachers who were peddling what has become known as the Colossian Heresy.

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

The exact nature of the Colossian Heresy is not known although it’s been thrown around for over a century. Suggestions that have been put forward include: Essene Judaism of a Gnostic Kind (Lightfoot), A Pagan Mystery Cult (Dibelius), Gnostic Judaism with Pagan Elements (Bornkamm) and a Jewish Christian Mystical Asceticism (if you want a bet each way-Francis). The range of suggestions indicates nobody really knows!

Although Paul gives no formal explanation of the false teaching, we can gain an idea of it’s basic ingredients by looking at Col 2:6-20:

- i. Philosophy-the teaching was set forth as philosophy based on tradition. “Tradition” was used to draw attention to the antiquity and revelational character of the teaching but Paul says it has it’s origins in human traditions and the powers of evil.

ii. Depreciates Christ-it's clear that the teaching undermined the centrality of Christ to the Christian faith. Paul makes no bones about it, "in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in Him."(2:9,10)

iii. Legalism-there appears to have been a strong legalistic strain to the false teaching which Paul warns against. Legalism was a thing of the past, we have the reality in Christ (2:16,17)

iv. Mysticism-there was also an interest in visions and angels as a way to know God. Paul maintains that those with such an interest run the risk of losing connection with the Head. Christ is the only way to Know God. (2:18,19)

v. Asceticism-the false teachers were also encouraging asceticism as beneficial to the Christian life. While they may have the appearance of wisdom, Paul maintains Christlikeness is the goal of the Christian life not rules for their own sake. (2:19,20)

The Colossian Heresy seems then to have been a hotch potch of all sorts of spiritual traditions which were being encouraged. The net result however was a lack of emphasis on Christ and all that the Christian has in Him.

As a result, in Colossians we have a letter which focuses upon the supremacy of Christ more than any other part of the New Testament. In this lies the beauty of the letter! It reminds us that all of God's fullness is displayed for us, and conveyed to us in Christ. As a result we ought to continue to live in Him (Col 2:6). Nowadays all of the spiritualities Paul attacks are still alive and well (intellectualism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism). This makes Colossians a timely book to preach on.

STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT

Like many of Paul's small letters, Colossians can be broken up into roughly two halves dealing with theology and practise. This division is fairly artificial but is a reasonable rule of thumb. In chapters one and two Paul basically deals with the Supremacy of Christ as it answers the threat to the church. In chapters three and four he deals with the Christian life, particularly in regard to relationships.

1:1-23 After introducing himself Paul begins with his customary prayer for the recipients of his letter. The prayer is characterised by it's focus on the gospel and Christ. Paul then moves on to extol the supremacy of Christ. Christ is supreme in creation-all things were made by Him and for Him. He is supreme in the new creation-the church. And He is supreme in the gospel. It is this gospel and this Christ that Paul serves.

1:24-2:5 Paul goes on in this section to build on the idea that he is Christ's servant. As Christ's servant he is involved in suffering, struggle and labor for the sake of the body. The goal of his struggle is that Christ may be presented to everyone and everyone presented mature in Christ.

2:6-23 In keeping with the goal of his struggle Paul encourages the Colossians not to be moved from their faith in Christ- "as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him." He then goes on to warn them against the key elements of the false teaching that was besetting them: philosophy, legalism, mysticism, asceticism. In each case the reason he gives for caution is the same: it can add nothing to all that they have received in Christ.

3:1-17 Having just attacked the false teaching and its false path to godliness, Paul now goes on to show how Godliness is truly attained. It is by recognising that the believer has been raised with Christ and then seeking the things above. This involves putting to death what belongs to the earthly nature and clothing oneself with Christlike attributes.

3:18-4:1 An important part of growth in godliness is having godly relationships. Paul focuses on the three major relationships that people would be in: Husbands/Wives; Parents/Children; Slaves/Masters. His counsel is that the subordinate partner should submit and the one in a position of authority should act in love.

4:2-18 In keeping with the theme of relationships Paul now gives advice on how the Christian should act toward outsiders. We should pray for an open door for the word, and act wisely towards outsiders making the most of every opportunity. Paul concludes with a series of greetings.

PREACHING

Because of the straightforward structure Colossians is a great book to preach on and because of its strong focus on Christ I reckon it's a must. There are quite a few good resource books on Colossians to help in your preparation. Peter O'Brien's commentary in the Word series is very good. It is extremely thorough and answers just about any question the text raises. Dick Lucas's commentary in the BST series is also well worth a read. It's probably more valuable because of its size. I also found Kent Hughes very good. His book is very easy to read and is full of lots of good preaching ideas.

TALK OUTLINES

TALK 1

The Supremacy of Christ Col 1:1-23

Introduction

The major problem of many Christians is that they doubt the sufficiency of Christ. The Colossian church was threatened by a series of teachers who undermined their confidence in the sufficiency of Christ. As a result Paul asserts more clearly than anywhere else that Christ is supreme. He is sufficient and in him we have all we need.

1. Paul's Prayer

Paul gives thanks that the Colossians' faith: is rightly placed in Christ v4; is rightly worked out in love for the saints v4; and is rightly focused on the hope of heaven v5. He goes on to pray that they would be filled with a knowledge of God's will v9; and would please him in every way.

2. The Supremacy of Christ

Rather than attack the false teachers Paul considered it would be best to deal with their threat by reasserting the total supremacy of Christ. Christ is supreme in Creation v15-17; in the church (new creation) v18-20; and in the gospel v21-23.

Conclusion

Do you have a relationship with the supreme Christ? Is Christ supreme in your life?

TALK 2

Struggling for Maturity

Col 1:24-2:5

Introduction

At the moment all eyes are on Atlanta as we gear up for another Olympics. But in order to get there young sportsmen and women have to set themselves some strict and painful goals. What goals do you have in your life that are worth suffering for? Paul gives us some.

1. Paul's Struggle and Suffering

Paul was prepared to give everything to his ministry. He suffered 1v24; laboured 1:28,29 and struggled 1:29-2:1. How did he keep going? Through Christ's power working in him 1:29.

2. The Purpose of Paul's Struggle

Is summarised in 1:28-to present Christ to everyone and to present everyone mature in Christ. Maturity consists in: recognising that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ 2:3, the ability to get on with others 2:2; and steadfastness 2:5.

Conclusion

What are your goals? Paul gives us some goals here that are worth struggling and suffering and labouring for.

TALK 3

No Additions Needed

Col 2:6-23.

Introduction

It's easy to fool people sometimes, but there are times when we need to be careful we're not fooled.

1. The Supreme Charge (v6,7)

Paul says as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him. They needed to ensure they weren't fooled and moved from a simple and complete trust in Christ.

2. Danger Beware (v8-23)

Paul goes on to warn the Colossians against the additions they were being encouraged to make to their faith in Christ. Philosophy, Legalism, Mysticism and Asceticism can add nothing to what they

already have. In Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily and they have been given fullness in him.

Conclusion

Don't be fooled! By adding to our simple faith in Christ all we do is wreck it.

TALK 4

True Heavenly Mindedness

Col 3:1-17

Introduction

One of the most consistent demands made upon God's people is to be Holy. In contrast to the false ways of achieving this recommended by the false teachers, Paul now shows how Holiness is truly achieved.

1. Seek the things above (v1-4)

The believers orientation in life has to be heavenly not earthly.

2. Put to Death things of the Past (v5-11)

Sin requires radical treatment if it's to be successfully eradicated. We're not to put it to sleep but to death.

3. Put on the Graces of Christ (v12-17)

It's not enough to put to death ungodly behaviour. We must replace it with Christlikeness.

Conclusion

It's not easy growing in holiness. We are always swimming upstream, but we need to get on with the job of living as God's distinctive people.

TALK 5

At Home and on the Job

Colossians 3:18-4:1

1. The Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that ultimate reality is all about relationships. Before God created he was all that existed, but because he is the Trinity he is relational. The Bible teaches that God's relationships function on the basis of two principles: order/submission and love. These principles are seen in Paul's advice on relationships. Paul shows how these principles work in 3 different relationships: husband & wife, children & parents and slaves & masters. We will focus just on the relationship between slaves and masters.

2. Slaves and Masters

- a. Slaves are to obey masters in everything, work with all their heart as for the Lord and remember that they will receive a reward from the Lord. Their role is to be one of submission.
- b. Masters are to act in love towards slaves knowing they also have a master in heaven.

Conclusion

Relationships are the most important thing in the world, and we need to see that our relationships are brought into line with the pattern of God's relating.

TALK 6

Making the Most of Opportunities

Col 4:2-6

Introduction

One of the greatest privileges God has given to us is to be involved in bringing people into relationship with him. In this passage Paul tells us how to go about that.

1. Speaking to God about People.

The first step in evangelism is to pray. Paul says we are to be devoted to it. The content of our prayer is for an open door for the word and clarity in presenting the gospel message.

2. Speaking to People about God.

Prayer on it's own is not enough. We must get out and share with people. Paul has in mind here responsive evangelism and he mentions three things that we need to observe:

- i. Act wisely toward outsiders – mustn't under estimate the power of a godly life.
- ii. Make the most of every opportunity – there must be a proper urgency in the task of evangelism.
- iii. Know how to answer everyone – Paul doesn't say "what" to answer everyone. You don't need a B Th to be an evangelist. You just need to have received God's grace in Christ and have a desire to pass it on.

BIBLE STUDIES

If you are interested in running a set of studies in conjunction with this series there are studies available on the same passages. If you would like a copy of those studies please give me a call on (02) 6686 2083.

Grant Thorp is married to Sue and, at the time of writing, they live in Ballina where Grant is the pastor of the Presbyterian Church