

Shorter New Testament Letters
Colossians: “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy”

“Keep Christ as Center”

Colossians 1:1-23

Dan Collison
April 8, 2018

Scripture

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel⁶ that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of God’s will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please God in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to God’s glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Creator, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of God’s holy people in the kingdom of light.¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all God’s fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

²¹ Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.²² But now God has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that

you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Colossians 1:1-23 | NIV

Introduction

1. We are in a multi-stage teaching series called “The Shorter Letters of the New Testament.” The occasional letters of the New Testament offer modern Christ followers a unique look into the relationships and quandaries of various Early Christian communities. When studying these letters, we are pressed to understand why and how people were connected to their communities and contexts, resist assumptions based upon our modern world view while maintain curiosity about why topics and themes were chosen, and wrestle alongside the authors of the letters as they reason, encourage, rebuke, and teach.

Reading these letters can be precarious, but it is rewarding work when we are patient enough to unearth timeless truths and wisdom cured in the fires of personal, theological, communal, and cultural conflicts. We have already studied Galatians through the lens of freedom, Ephesians focused on grace, and Philippians acknowledging the anxiety Paul faced when writing that particular shorter letter. Today we turn to the shorter letter to the first century Church in Colossae—an agricultural town located on the southern bank of the Lycus River in the territory of Phrygia (modern Turkey), about 110 miles east of Ephesus.¹

2. In the last two centuries many scholars have questioned whether Paul wrote Colossians. As one scholar points out: “The cumulative evidence of differences in vocabulary, style, and theology from the undisputed letters by Paul have led many to this conclusion.” Authorship is an interesting topic. And, at the same time the canon or library of books we refer to as the Bible has *many* books whose authors are either completely unknown or known to be written by those surrounding a figure, but not the figure themselves.²

Such deliberations are not ultimately core essentials to Christ followers who read the Bible with humility and approach Scripture *not* for the purpose of wielding its *content*, but rather by being transformed by its *intent*. It was once said that, “to read the Bible properly is to find an altar where one meets the living God.”³ This is a mystical, intensely humbling and transforming experience that is very different than the approach seen sometimes today and throughout Christian history where the Bible is wielded like a weapon and for the purpose of advancing one group’s socio-cultural preference and dominance.

3. The Bible follows the Judeo-Christian narrative over several thousand years, frames viewing angles on God mixed within the unfolding drama of the human experience. It is an accessible and yet wildly complex compilation of books, letters and poetry that, if read and interpreted with humility, can inform and transform people’s lives, reform the Church, and—ultimately—help Christ followers know how to navigate all of life with faith, hope, and love.

¹ David Garland, Colossians/Philemon The NIV Application Commentary. Page 17.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorship_of_the_Bible (accessed 4-7-18)

³ Quoted from the final report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology in 1963. As used in “A Resource Paper: The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible”. Page 2.

Our six week teaching series on the shorter letter to the Colossian Church will seek to help us navigate some of the competing ideas within Christian religion with the goal of learning new “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy.”

Ways to Make Christianity Healthy

Colossians 1:1-23”	“Keep Christ as center”
Colossians 1:24-2:5:	“Embody what you believe”
Colossians 2:6-23:	“Become a person of substance”
Colossians 3:1-17:	“Remember that the separate self that is the problem”
Colossians 3:18-4:1:	“Get into trouble”
Colossians 4:2-18:	“Know there are no outsiders”

We will cover such themes as, “Embody what you believe,” “Become a Person of Substance,” “Remember that the separate self is the problem,” “Get into trouble,” “Know there are no outsiders,” and today’s theme of “Keep Christ as center.”

4. Today’s Scripture starts things in an important way—even as it has some internal challenges of its own. It includes a typical greeting, many exhortations and encouragements to lead fruitful and faithful lives, and the centerpiece: theological framing of a high Christology. In our brief time I will seek to help us recognize the multiplicity of traditions within the large canopy of Christian religion, and find freedom in keeping Christ and Christ’ teachings as preeminent in our Protestant and Covenant affirmation of the Centrality of the Word of God.

First, let’s explore what it means to keep Christ center.

A. Keep Christ Center

1. The author’s theology of who Christ is in relationship to all that is, is profound...

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all God’s fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Colossians 1:15-20. NIV

“Image of the invisible God...firstborn over all creation...all things that have been created, were creative through him and for him. All Things hold together in him.” This lofty framing resonates with the opening chapter of John’s Gospel biography where John equates Jesus to the Logos or “Word of God” existing before even time itself. And, Jesus as God’s Word was spoken and manifest into time and space at the moment of Jesus’ incarnation. A third passage of Scripture uses much of the same theological framing and was written by the unknown author of the New Testament book of Hebrews.

2. The writer of Hebrews (who was likely a pastor in the First Century) compared and contrasted Jesus and Moses. Considering that Christianity began with a largely Jewish identity his comments would have been wildly controversial because of the prominent role that Moses played in establishing the identity of Jewish belief and culture. Many Bible scholars point to Moses as the most important figure in Hebrew biblical history because he formulated and systemized Jewish religion and society.

In spite of this level of importance, the writer of Hebrews said that while Moses was faithful, Jesus is the point and the master builder of God's house." And, by "house" he was referring to both what was becoming the communal gatherings of people calling themselves "Christ-i-ans" and the larger house of all of created things.⁴ The writer of Hebrews wrote in chapter one:

³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:3
New International Version

3. Such claims in Hebrews, John, and Colossians position Jesus existentially above all things including Christian religion. This is consistent with what Jesus himself said because while Jesus acknowledged there would be an institution called "church" and leaders of it,⁵ the Creator of all things always has and always will remain substantively different from and larger than any human institution and construct. This was reality before Jesus, with Jesus, and for all time.

- The Church is a people, but Jesus is God.
- The Church is a household of faith, but Jesus is the foundation and master builder.
- The Church is a conduit, but Jesus is the source.
- The Church is an interpreter, but Jesus is the revelation
- The Church is an illustration, but Jesus is the point.

And, of course, Jesus is the point amidst any number of competing secondary theologies and biblicisms (those pesky and sometimes dangerous wide reaching assertions that assume the Bible teaches only one way about such things as politics, clothing, food, and socio-cultural identity). Jesus confronted Biblicisms first hand with first century religious zealots where he said:

³⁹ You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

John 5:39, NIV

4. I share all of this in relationship to our study of Colossians because Colossians chapter three has been one of the most famous Bible passages pointed to in support of slavery and the subjugation of women in the name of "Instructions for Christian households." The supremacy of Christ should make it obvious that there are hierarchy of truths in the Bible, and that Jesus' truth rises above all other voices, including cultural biases. And yet Church history tells us that that conflict rages in every passing generation since Christ as people and religious institutions point to the Bible as the

⁴ The reference to Jesus as apostle and high priest point back to Hebrews chapter one where he called Jesus, "The exact representation of his being sustaining all things by his powerful word."

⁵ Matthew 16:18-19, 18:17.

“Word of God” but, struggle, alongside the New Testament writers to separate what parts of Scripture are time locked cultural traditions, what are likely false projections onto the idea of God, and what is indeed the mind of the Creator of all things for the flourishing of all things.

5. This large interpretive challenge has bearing in today’s text where we read language that seems to point toward a “conditional covenant in relationship to God.” The concept of covenant is woven throughout the entire bible. A covenant is understood to be “a formal agreement between two parties with each assuming some obligation.” And, by saying that he was establishing a “New Covenant” Jesus articulated a huge canopy of God’s grace that stops the cycle of violence, covers all sin, and offers spiritual awakening and new life to all.

But, it seems Paul is saying something else. He wrote...

...¹⁰ so that you may live a life *worthy* of the Lord and please God in every way...

²² But now God has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—²³ *if* you continue in your faith, established and firm, *and do not move* from the hope held out in the gospel.

You need to try to be *worthy* of God’s love...and only *if* we continue in our faith, will Christ’s love and new Covenant have effect. The author is reflecting his experience of conditional covenant even while trying to reach for Jesus’ new Covenant. Sure, one could read this and take the author simply to mean that we need to remain faithful to what we believe in order to receive the rewards of a life of faith. But, some, and even entire Christian religious traditions, have taken these tilts toward conditional covenant as a very real means to threaten and intimidate Christ followers into unending circles of white knuckle meritocracy where we are told that God loves us more when we do “X” and less when we do “Y.” Its all up to us!

No. Jesus delivered the corrective to this kind of thinking in teaching that God’s love for us is unceasing and without restraint. Practically speaking—to do the right thing gives us the joy of doing the right thing. And all of us who have sinned (and that is everyone) know that it hurts us, does damage to relationships, and can put us into downward spirals. But, Jesus’ point of the new and unconditional covenant and his framework for forgiveness is that sin is its own punishment and God doesn’t love us any more or any less by what we do. I know, I know—there are scriptures and theologies laced throughout the Bible that to say that God distances God’s self from our wrong doing. Jesus’ very embodiment defied that logic. In fact, Jesus signaled in several of his teaching parables that God’s love *intensifies* when we go off the rails, and that God longs for us, and comes to us at great cost...and that we are to do the same for one another.⁶

6. I cannot say this with enough emphasis: We are given the gift of the Bible as a mirror to the human experience and a written revelation to teach us the ways of God. The ways of God are discerned from the synthesis of God’s first Bible, the Creation, God’s self-revelation in Jesus, and God’s revelation of Scripture as a whole. Ultimately, this means that not all parts of written Scriptures are of equal weight. And, we need to look to Jesus as the epicenter of God’s revelation and strive to understand Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture as the pinnacle of all interpretative hierarchy, including all that which was written *after* his life and resurrection and here in a shorter

⁶ E.g. Parable of the prodigal son. Parable of the lost sheep. Parable of the sheep and goats.

letter where we need to remember that its not our worthiness or “if” we do something that dictates whether or not Christ’s love does or does not have effect.

Even more—all this tells us that Christian religion and “Church” is and always will be imperfect and need course correction from time to time. Thankfully, Jesus is the one who calls us beloved and offers correct course *whenever* it is needed. This is the joy of every generation of Christ followers and in our time, as ages past, there are parts of Christian religion that are unmistakably broken and in need of course correction.

B. Keep Christ Center in Every Generation

1. Tomorrow is the 73rd anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who lived from 1906-1945 and opposed the state-controlled German Evangelical Church under Adolf Hitler.⁷



In March 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned and later hanged at the Nazi concentration camp at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945 only a few days before the end of the war. He was 39 years old. In a letter written from a Nazi prison on April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer described his thoughts about the state of Christian religion. He wrote:

"You would be surprised, and perhaps even worried, by my theological thoughts and the conclusions that they lead to... What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, for us today."

Bonhoeffer observed that Christians often assumed that their particular sub group of Christian religion was the truest and highest form. But in light of the horrors of the second World War, perpetrated by people on all sides who claimed to be religious, could that proposition still be true? What bothered Bonhoeffer most was that a person could confess doctrinally correct beliefs, observe religious moral codes, and follow the accepted behaviors and practices of the Church, while simultaneously committing unspeakable horrors.⁸

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer (accessed 4-8-18)

⁸ Some quotes taken from the website: http://followingjesus.org/invitation/religionless_christianity.htm (accessed 5-10-14)

2. This happens in every age, of course, and not only in 20th century Europe. In Medieval times, during the era of European colonization and Chattel slavery, in the American Bible Belt South with Jim Crow laws, the current treatment of LGBTQIA, and in such unthinkable tragic situations such as the 1994 Rwanda genocide where the general population was more than 90% Christian and none-the-less between half a million to one million Rwandans slaughtered one another because of racial and ethnic divisions.⁹ These narratives of violence and death at the hands of people confessing Christ are all so disheartening and makes one wonder what good Christian religion is to our world beyond getting people to believe in this or that ideological framework or be loyal to this or that religious sub culture.
3. Bonhoeffer's solution to moving beyond an ideological Christianity was to embrace a "religionless Christianity" which he concluded was as simple as being called to take risks for others and, as Christ who is for others, participate in the *being* of Jesus. Bonhoeffer wrote:

"The church is church only when it is there for others...The church must participate in the...life [of] the community--not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling what a life with Christ is, what it means 'to be there for others.' In particular, our church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism (or fakery) as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment."¹⁰

He said much more in his letters and papers written while in prison including more radical ideas such as Christian institutions not owning land or buildings. These ideas flowed from a burdened soul that was singed by the failure of his Christian religious tradition to recognize and protect the sacred humanity of Jewish people, people of color, and all who didn't fit the demonic paradigm of white supremacy promoted in the late 1800's through the United States Eugenics movement¹¹ and then fully adopted and taken to the extreme by the Nazi regime. It is no surprise that Bonhoeffer felt compelled to strip everything away from Christian religion, all of its power and institutional trappings, and return to the simplicity of Jesus' teachings and ethics.

4. As difficult as it may be, Bonhoeffer's journey is the journey and invitation of every generation of Christ followers even if we choose to be a part of one particular religious institution of another. We take this journey because our traditions are limited in what they are able to accomplish for the simple fact that Jesus is not synonymous with any particular Christian tradition. He is distinct and above all religion and must be treated as such.

Conclusion

What implications does this have for those who are still involved in Christian religion? It means simply, that we must ask the same question over and over again. And, the question is this:

"Are we forming unique Christian community here and between us and imitating Christ out there and with everyone, or are we using our religion as a self-promotional tool of socio-cultural domination?"

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_Genocide (accessed 5-9-14)

¹⁰ Ricoeur, Paul. "The Non-Religious Interpretation of Christianity in Bonhoeffer." In *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*. Edited Brian Gregor & Jens Zimmerman, 156-176. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugenics> (accessed 4-8-18)

As an imperfect and yet courageous community of Christ followers—may we as individuals and all of us collectively find new ways to form unique community here and between us and imitate Christ out there and with everyone!

Prayer

God of all, in all, and for all—we recognize the complexities of our Christian religion and ask for humility to see our own hypocrisies even as we call it out in the larger movement of Christ followers. Holy Spirit, convict us where we are either complicit or aggressors with power structures that do not reflect Jesus Christ, the center of our faith. Jesus, our Savior and wounded healer—help us to acknowledge your supremacy as co-matched with your love and servanthood of all. And, instruct us in the ways of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, and contentment.

Creator, Spirit, and Son, Three in One, may we live all of our lives like Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Benediction

As our week begins, may we recognize the multiplicity of traditions within the large canopy of Christian religion, and find freedom in keeping Christ and Christ' teachings as preeminent in our affirmation of the Centrality of the Word of God.

Go in Peace. Amen.