

## Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: Colossians: “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy”

Sermon Title: “Keep Christ as Center”

Sermon Text: Colossians 1:1-23

Listeners Journey: I want my listener to 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.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.

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“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.

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 import 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

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorship\\_of\\_the\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorship_of_the_Bible) (accessed 4-7-18)

<sup>2</sup> 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.

people calling themselves “Christ-i-ans” and the larger house of all of created things.<sup>3</sup> The writer of Hebrews wrote in chapter one: <sup>3</sup> 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 (NIV)

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,<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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...

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

<sup>22</sup> 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—<sup>23</sup> *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.<sup>5</sup>

I cannot say this with enough emphasis: We are given the gift of the Bible as a mirror to the human experience (all of it!) 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 letter where we need to remember that its

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<sup>3</sup> 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.”

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:18-19, 18:17.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Parable of the prodigal son. Parable of the lost sheep. Parable of the sheep and goats.

not our worthiness or “if” we do something that dictates whether or not Christ’s love does or does not have effect.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. How do you understand the many divisions in the Christian religious tradition? (Personal sharing)
2. How do you see “The Supremacy of Christ” being un-healthfully flipped into “The Supremacy of this or that version of Christian religion? (Exploring the text)
3. What are some ways that you can remind yourself to keep Christ center when reading the Bible and in all of life? (Direct application)