

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "The Nature of the Knowledge that Unifies" (Colossians 2:1-3)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 10/3/2010

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A Final Look at Colossians 2:1-3

I want to focus our attention today, for the last time in this series, on the Apostle Paul's great statement about Christian unity that we find at the beginning of Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. As we've noted many times, the Bible is always up to date. Paul wrote these words to the Colossian church in the first century, but they apply just as much to us as believers in the 21st century:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
(Colossians 2:1-3)

Now as we have seen in our last several messages, we find four pillars of Christian unity in these verses. Presently we're focusing on the last of them. Let me state all four of them for you once again:

First, there is the pillar of facts. Christianity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. Our feelings are indeed involved, our emotions are involved. But the place of feelings and emotions in the Christian life must be that of a response. Feelings and emotions must not be the driving force. And the

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reason for that is that our emotions fluctuate, and our emotions can at times mislead us. But God's Word will never mislead us.

Secondly, there is the pillar of love – agape love, self-sacrificial love. By the power of God's Spirit, we are to cultivate love for Jesus Christ. And we are to cultivate love for the body of Christ, because every believer is precious in His sight, and therefore every believer must be precious in our site. So we have, firstly, the pillar of facts, and secondly the pillar of love.

Thirdly, there is the pillar of understanding. This is the third thing that unites Christians. The word for understanding in the Greek literally means, "to bring together in the mind." You as a Christian are to use your intelligence, guided by the Holy Spirit, to bring together the various things that you learn as you read and study God's Word and hear it preached, and you are to apply that combined knowledge of Scripture to the specific situations and problems that you confront. And the same, of course, is to be true for the church as a body, and for the leadership of the church. So we have the pillar of facts, the pillar of love, and the pillar of understanding.

And fourth and lastly, there is the pillar of knowledge – knowledge that is to produce like-mindedness in the body of Christ, knowledge that is to produce a consistent, Christ-honoring way of thinking and acting among all believers.

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Review: The First Three Characteristics of the Knowledge That Unites

Last time we began to look at the fact that there are seven key characteristics of this knowledge, and last time we considered the first three.

First, we saw that the knowledge that unites believers in Christ is knowledge of a mystery. In chapter one, verse 26, Paul calls it "the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Second, we saw that the knowledge that unites believers in Christ is hidden or stored-up knowledge. In God – in both God the Father and in Jesus Christ the Son – are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. This is knowledge that is far superior to anything that the world can offer. It is an entirely different kind of knowledge. An entirely different category of knowledge. This world's knowledge is passing away. But the wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in God are eternal wisdom and eternal knowledge. This is knowledge that no man can have apart from faith in Jesus Christ. This is the knowledge that you need in order to understand the world as it really is, and to understand God as He really is, and to live in this sinful world as it is, for Christ's honor and glory.

Thirdly, we saw that the knowledge that unites believers in Christ is precious knowledge. In Him "are hidden all the *treasures* of wisdom and knowledge." These are treasures that the church is so often neglecting today. Among most Evangelical Christians today, the Bible is "the greatest story never read." And in most Evangelical pulpits today, the Bible is "the greatest story never preached."

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The church is going after this world's riches, and neglecting true wealth. Like the church of Laodicea in the book of Revelation, today's church says, "I am rich, and I have need of nothing" when in fact Christ says that it is "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Today's church is neglecting God's treasury, neglecting the precious wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Jesus Christ.

This is knowledge in an entirely different realm from human wisdom and knowledge. And last time we saw two of the necessary and absolutely inevitable implications of all this.

First of all, this kind of knowledge is something completely opposite of the world's false intellectualism. The church should never be intimidated by the world's ways, the world's methods, the world's apparent success. Those things are the devil's deception, and they have no place in the church.

And we also saw that one of the necessary implications of the knowledge that is to unite true believers in Christ is the fact that the church must never be yoked together with unbelievers – not in social or political causes, much less in spiritual things. And we saw that the tragic thing is that today, much of the time, the church is putting itself in an unequal yoke with the world. And so the church is constantly being pulled in the direction of the world, instead of taking Christ's yoke upon it, and walking with Christ, learning of Him, walking in knowledge, and doing what Christ commands. Joining with the world in all kinds of causes, all kinds of things that the world can do without the church, and therefore the church is neglecting

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the only two things that Christ told His church to do, because only His church can do them. And those two things are embodied in the Great Commission – to preach the Gospel and to build up the saints in sound doctrine for holy living.

The Final Four Characteristics of the Knowledge That Unites

Well all of this now brings us to the final four characteristics of the knowledge that is to unite true believers in Christ. Let me name them for you, and then we'll come back and consider each one:

- Number four is this: The knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is full or comprehensive knowledge.
- Number five, the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is accurate or precise knowledge.
- Number six, the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is complete knowledge.
- And finally, number seven, the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is consistent knowledge.

Comprehensive Knowledge

So now let's take up characteristic number four: The knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is full or comprehensive knowledge. Let me take you to

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another passage that also emphasizes this point specifically – Second Peter chapter one, beginning at verse two. The apostle says this:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. (2 Peter 1:2-9)

“All things that pertain to life and godliness” – full knowledge, comprehensive knowledge – everything that you need in order to know God, to know Christ, to have eternal life, and to walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. And Peter

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gives us a great chain of the Christian virtues in this passage. Here are the things that result from having the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ:

- Self-control – mastering your desires and passions, and bringing them into submission to Christ.
- Perseverance – steadfast endurance, unwavering loyalty to Christ, and reliance upon Christ, even in the midst of trials.
- Godliness – thinking and behavior that is well-pleasing to God. First Timothy 2:2 – We are to lead a life of all godliness and honesty. First Timothy 6:3 – We are to adhere to the doctrine that is in accord with godliness.
- Brotherly kindness – love for your fellow believers in Christ as brothers and sisters in the faith.
- And, love – *agape* love, self-sacrificial love. And here we come full circle to Colossians chapter two. *Agape* love and the knowledge of Christ are intimately connected.

So this is characteristic number four of the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ. It is full or comprehensive knowledge. “All things that pertain to life and godliness, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature.”

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Precise Knowledge

The fifth characteristic of the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is that it is accurate or precise knowledge. And this recapitulates some of the things that we saw as we looked at the early verses of Colossians chapter one.

There Paul teaches us that it is believing the Gospel of Christ that makes knowledge of God's will possible. Knowledge of God's will is impossible for the unsaved man. Spiritually speaking, the unsaved man doesn't have a clue about the knowledge of God. It is only as God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart of a person who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin – it is only then that the spiritual lights come on, and the individual can truly understand God and His Word. Believing the Gospel of Christ is what makes knowledge of God possible.

And Paul also teaches us that accurate or precise or correct knowledge of God's will is possible. Not some nebulous knowledge, but precise and correct knowledge. We saw that this is the meaning of the word that is translated "knowledge" in our English Bibles in Colossians chapter one, verse nine. The common Greek word for knowledge was *gnosis*. It's the root word from which we get English words like diagnosis (analytical knowledge) and prognosis (foreknowledge). Normally, in Greek, if you wanted to talk about knowledge, you simply used the word *gnosis*. But Paul doesn't use that word in chapter one, verse nine. He says, my prayer is not that you will simply have knowledge, *gnosis* – my

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desire is that you will have *epignosis* – full knowledge, complete knowledge, accurate knowledge.

Paul uses the same word in a number of other places. In Romans 3:20 he says that by the law is the knowledge, the *epignosis*, of sin – the law gives us the full understanding of the sinfulness of sin. In Romans chapter ten and verse two he says that the unsaved Jews have a zeal for God, but it is not a zeal that is according to knowledge, *epignosis*, a full and accurate knowledge of God. The unsaved Jews don't have that, Paul says. And Peter, in Second Peter chapter two, verse twenty, says that Christians escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge – the *epignosis*, the full and complete and accurate knowledge – of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is accurate or precise knowledge. That is the fifth characteristic of that knowledge.

Complete Knowledge

And number six, the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is complete knowledge. Now, this is a different thing from saying that it is comprehensive knowledge. By comprehensive we mean that it is a knowledge that covers all necessary areas, all necessary categories of subject matter. But when I say that the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is complete knowledge, I mean this: It is all the knowledge you need. It is all the knowledge you need to be saved from eternal damnation. It is all the knowledge that you need to live life in this present

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world to the glory of God. And, it is all the knowledge that you need, to be absolutely certain that you will be with Christ forever in the life to come.

Paul says this to the believers at Rome, Romans chapter fifteen, verse fourteen: "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you are also full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." "Filled with all knowledge." Literally, it means, "filled with knowledge in its entirety."

Now, you may say, "How can that be?" Here is how: If you have the Word of God in your hands and the Holy Spirit dwelling in your heart, you have everything you need. Of course, you need preaching and teaching. Christ has given men to His church whose job it is to expound the truth of His Word so that the Holy Spirit can apply it to your life. But no individual believer, no Christian teacher, no Christian church, will find the knowledge that it needs anywhere else but in the Word of God illuminated by God the Holy Spirit. The knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is complete knowledge.

Consistent Knowledge

And finally, number seven, the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is consistent knowledge. There are no paradoxes in the Bible. There are no contradictions in the Bible. That is because the nature of the Bible is the same as the nature of the God who wrote it. He is God. He is holy. God cannot lie, Titus 1:2. The Bible is as accurate and reliable and consistent as its Divine Author.

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And for that reason, you can never, ever say that God told you to do something that is contrary to His Word. That is a lie. He will never do it. He *can* never do it. Let me make this practical for you. You must understand how God guides the individual Christian and the church as a body. There are three principles of God's guidance that every Christian, and every church, must follow.

- Principle Number One is this: God guides through Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – "All Scripture is God-breathed, is profitable for doctrine (showing us the right path), for reproof (showing us when we've gotten off the right path), for correction (getting us back on the right path), and for instruction in righteousness (keeping us on the right path)." God guides through Scripture.
- Principle Number Two of God's guidance is this: God also guides through circumstances. We live in a real world where God's providence is continually in operation. God in His providence is ordering and directing the manifold circumstances of your own life for His glory.
- But there is a third principle we must always follow. Principle Number Three of God's guidance is this: God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts Scripture. I've heard people say, "Well, Scripture is one thing. But I live in the real world. I have to be practical." What they're really saying is, "I know what the Bible says, but because of this particular situation that I'm in, I need to ignore it, or bend it, or twist it to

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suit what I think is right under the circumstances." Individuals do that, and churches do that. It's called pragmatism. It's called situation ethics. And it is absolutely wrong.

Now, how does all of this relate to the fact that the knowledge that unites true believers in Christ is consistent knowledge? Here is the point, and it is the point both for the individual Christian and for the local church: If you see your circumstances as dictating that you need to do something that is contrary to Scripture, then you are looking at the circumstances in the wrong way. You are letting circumstances become your authority.

You cannot, you must not, do that. Ever. Scripture governs circumstances, not the other way around. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that it is Scripture that is the discerner, or the critic, of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Scripture must govern your comprehension of the circumstances that God sets before you. Circumstances are never an excuse to ignore Scripture. Circumstances are never an excuse to compromise the Scriptural way of conducting your life as an individual, or in governing the life and direction of the church.

What About You and Your Church?

The Scriptures show us many glorious things about the knowledge that is to unite genuine believers in Christ. And the wonder of it is that all of these glorious things are also absolutely practical things. This knowledge is not head-in-the-clouds knowledge. It is absolutely practical knowledge. It is working knowledge.

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It is knowledge that is designed to be constantly and consistently applied in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we close this section of our study of the book of Colossians, let me ask you this: Is this the kind of knowledge you are pursuing? Is this the kind of knowledge your church is pursuing? Is this the kind of knowledge your church is proclaiming? And even more to the point, is this the kind of knowledge that you are putting into practice? Is this the kind of knowledge that your church is putting into practice? This is the vital thing. It is not enough merely to know the truth. The test of genuine Christian unity, the test of genuine Christianity itself, is to live the truth.

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