

Christ Reformation Church

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Hold Fast to Christ!

brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

(Col 2:2b-3 ESV) to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

“God’s Will for Every Christian”

December 16, 2012

Sermon Text: Colossians 1:1-14

Scripture Reading: Acts 28

Introduction-

(Col 1:1-2 ESV) ESV Colossians 1:1 ¶ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 ¶ To the saints and faithful

This letter was written around 62 AD by the Apostle Paul to the church at Colossae while Paul was under arrest in Rome as recorded in the last chapter of Acts.

We have learned that Epaphras, named here in Colossians and a member of the Colossian community, had heard the gospel through Paul’s earlier ministry at Ephesus and had take the Word of Christ to his hometown and very likely to the nearby towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Epaphras is now present with Paul in Rome and has brought some good and bad news concerning events in Colossae.

The good news is that there is genuine faith in the church and thus Paul will address them as saints and faithful brothers. The bad news is that a heresy has infected the church and is threatening the truth of the gospel. It is largely to refute this heresy that Paul writes this letter.

While there has been ongoing debate over the specifics of this heresy, listen to F.F. Bruce give us a general description, based, as he says, upon what Paul wrote in Colossians to refute it:

Basically the heresy was Jewish. This seems obvious from the part played in it by legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, the Sabbath, new moon and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar – things which once had their place as ‘a shadow of the things to come’ but had lost their validity now that Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, had come and fulfilled their significance.

So, for instance:

(Col 2:16-17 ESV) 16 ¶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Bruce continues:

But it was not the straightforward Judaism against which the churches of Galatia had to be put on their guard at an earlier date. That Judaism was

probably introduced to the Galatian churches by emissaries from Judea; this Judaism was a native Phrygian variety, which had undergone a remarkable fusion with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin – an early and simple form of Gnosticism.

....The barriers between Judaism and paganism were not very effective in a region where a Jewish lady could be both honorary ruler of the synagogue and priestess of the imperial cult. Hat might be an exceptional occurrence, but the synagogues of Phrygia were peculiarly exposed to the influences of Hellenistic speculation and consequent tendencies to religious syncretism. When the gospel was introduced to the area, a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism would find no great difficulty in expanding and modifying itself sufficiently to take some Christian elements into its system, and the result would be something like the Colossian heresy as we may reconstruct it from Paul’s treatment of it.

Understand? The Judaism of the synagogue in the area of Colossae had muddled itself up with the Greek pagan philosophy/religion prevalent in the area. With this attitude of mixing everything up together, once the gospel was brought into the area by Epaphras, it would simply be added to the mix by people with this syncretistic

mindset. And you cannot mix the gospel with such things and expect it to remain the gospel.

This has happened countless times in the history of the church. I am told that Roman Catholicism has done this repeatedly as it spread around the world and that today, for example, if you go to South America, you will find elements of Christianity all mixed together with pagan spiritism.

And you will recall from last time that this is an ever present danger for us. We mentioned the “Christian” cults such as JW’s, Christian Science, Mormonism, Adventism, and I would add Roman Catholicism here as well – all of these systems are the result of adding to the gospel. They are not like Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam which we would say are non-Christian false religions. They added to Scripture. Someone had a vision or some philosophy that they claimed would give people a “higher” spirituality and knowledge that the simplicity of Christ crucified:

(Col 2:18-19 ESV) 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and

ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

F.F. Bruce continues-

In this teaching a decisive place was accorded to the angelic beings through whom the law was given:

(Heb 2:1-3a ESV) ESV Hebrews 2:1 ¶ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

They were not only elemental spirits but dominant ones as well—principalities and powers, lords of the planetary spheres, sharers in the plenitude [fullness] of the divine essence. Since they controlled the lines of communication between God and man, all revelation from God to man and all prayer and worship from man to God could reach its goal only through their mediation and by their permission. It was therefore thought wise to cultivate their good will and pay them such homage as they desired.

Moreover, since they were the agents through whom the divine law was given, the keeping of the law was regarded as a tribute of obedience to

them, and the breaking of the law incurred their displeasure and brought the law-breaker into debt and bondage to them. Hence they must be placated, not only by the regular legal observances of traditional Judaism – circumcision, the Sabbath and the various sacred seasons of the levitical year, food restrictions and so forth – but by a rigorous asceticism.

All this made an undoubted appeal to a certain religious temperament, the more so as it was presented as a form of advanced teaching for the spiritual elite. Christian were urged to go in for this progressive ‘wisdom’ (Sophia) and ‘knowledge’ (gnosis), to explore the hidden mysteries by a series of successive initiations until they attained perfection. Christian baptism was only a preliminary initiation; if they would proceed farther along the path of truth, they must put off all material elements by pursuing an ascetic regimen until at last they found themselves transported from the material to the spiritual world, from the domain of darkness to the realm of light. This was the true redemption at which they ought to aim.

All this angel-worship is condemned by Paul as specious [showy, having deceptive attraction or allure; having a false look of truth or genuineness] make-believe. Far from representing a

more advanced grade of religious truth than that which was presented in the apostolic preaching, it was at every point inconsistent with that preaching and tended to undermine the whole gospel.... Christ was probably held to have relinquished successive portions of His power to these lords as he passed through these spheres, one after the other, on His way to earth. But certainly His death was believed to prove His inferiority to them, since it was they who made Him suffer.

Paul’s answer to this ‘tradition of men’ is to set against it the one trustworthy tradition, the true doctrine of Christ. Christ, he says, is the very image of God, the One who embodies the plenitude [fullness] of the divine essence, in which these elemental spirits have no share at all. And those who are members of Christ realize their fullness in Him; they need not seek, and they cannot find, perfections anywhere else. It is in Christ that all wisdom and knowledge are concentrated and are made available to His people – not just to an elite, but to all. Christ is the one Mediator between God and man, not in the sense of one who occupies the lines of communication between them and can transmit messages passing from one side to the other, but in the sense that He combines Godhead and manhood in His single person and so brings God

and man together. Christ is the One through whom and for whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers to which the Colossians were being tempted to pay tribute. Above all, Christ by His death is revealed as the Conqueror of these principalities and powers. On the cross He fought and won the decisive battle against them. Not only did He repel their attack upon Himself and turn the cross into His triumphal car before which they were driven as His vanquished foes, but by that victory He liberated His people also from their power. Why then should those who through faith-union had died and risen with Christ go on serving those beings whom He had so completely conquered?

Far from being a form of advanced wisdom, this false system which they were being urged to accept, with its taboos, bore all the marks of immaturity. Why should those who had come of age in Christ go back to the apron-strings of infancy? Why should those whom Christ had set free submit to this yoke of bondage again?

[The New International Commentary on the New Testament]

One of the great allures of Roman Catholicism is all the additions that so appeal to the gullible. Prayers to Mary

and to the saints. Legends surrounding these personalities. Ascetic practices and offerings designed to appease them. Here in Colossians, the Apostle Paul is telling us to reject it all. These things are completely inconsistent with the truth of Christ's Person and His completed and present work for us. Inevitably they will produce a false gospel that cannot save. All of these false systems add to Scripture. They have some new tradition, some new "testament" of Jesus Christ. And people are drawn by them. We must not be. We have it all in Christ.

The hearts of a New York congregation are heavy after a thief stole a statue of Jesus from their church. The statue of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus," made of white porcelain, sat on a pedestal outside the rectory of Saints Peter and Paul Church in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for more than a decade, CBS News reported.

Now, the 1,500-person congregation is upset after someone ripped the statue from its base in the middle of the night just days before Christmas.

"It's a sign of the presence of God among his people. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is one of the most famous expressions of religious devotion in

our Catholic world,” Rev. Manuel de Jesus Rodriguez said.

<http://www.foxnews.com>

And so you see this mixture of Judaism, Jewish fables, and pagan religion threatening the Colossians. The paganism may have accepted the ideas of Jewish angel worship as a form of worshipping the same intermediary gods they served. They recognize the existence of spirits, as is perhaps evidenced in Ephesians:

(Act 19:11-20 ESV) 11 ¶ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. 13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." 14 Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. 15 But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 16 And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 17 And this became known to all the residents

of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. 18 Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 19 And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Paul the Apostle

(Col 1:1-2 ESV) ESV Colossians 1:1 ¶ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 ¶ To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Appointed as an Apostle by God, Paul addresses the Colossians as *saints and faithful brothers in Christ*. Every Christian is a saint, having been set apart for a holy purpose, as God's holy vessel for His holy service. This one phrase is enough to disprove Rome's practice of canonizing people as "saints." If you are in Christ, then you are holy. You are a saint.

These Colossians were faithful. Holy and faithful. They were living out their faith:

(Col 1:3-4 ESV) 3 ¶ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus **and of the love that you have for all the saints,**

Notice that where there is authentic faith in Christ there will also be the genuine love of Christ exercised, especially for the saints of Christ. Consider:

Heb 6:10 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

1Jo 3:14-17 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

Joh 13:35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

1Th 4:9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,

1Jo 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

1Jo 4:12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

And Paul continues:

(Col 1:3-8 ESV) 3 ¶ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 **because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,** 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing-- as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Paul will go on in verse 9ff to describe his prayers for the Colossians, but let's pause here and consider this matter of "the hope laid up for you in heaven." You see the thing down in verses 23 and 27 again, and in other NT verses.

Listen as I read and try to answer this question: *What is the Christian's hope* that Paul is talking to the Colossians about? -

Col 1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, **not shifting from the hope of the gospel** that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Col 1:27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, **the hope of glory.**

Act 23:6 Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. **It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.**"

Act 24:15 **having a hope in God,** which these men themselves accept, **that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.**

Act 26:6 And now I stand here on trial **because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers,**

Act 26:7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly

worship night and day. **And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!**

1Co 13:13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1Co 15:19 **If in Christ we have hope in this life only,** we are of all people most to be pitied.

Gal 5:5 For through the Spirit, by faith, **we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.**

Eph 1:18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, **that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,** Eph 1:19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might

2Th 2:16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal **comfort and good hope** through grace,

Heb 7:19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, **a better hope is introduced,** through which we draw near to God.

1Pe 3:15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you **for a reason for the hope that is in you**; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

(1Jo 3:2-3 ESV) 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; **but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.** 3 **And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.**

See it? What is this HOPE? It is the *resurrection!* Eternal life. The New Heavens and the New Earth. Life in the face-to-face presence of Christ.

(Col 1:4-5 ESV) 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 **because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.** Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel...

An integral part of the gospel is the Christian's future hope. The fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. The resurrection of the just and the unjust. And it is quite amazing how many times the Apostles and really the Old Testament as well,

emphasizes this particular aspect of the gospel.

The Colossians were people of faith in Christ, they were people who obeyed Christ and loved His people – and what was it in particular that Paul says impelled them? *The hope laid up for them in heaven.*

This requires our serious and constant consideration.

Are you a person of hope? What is your hope? Hope, by definition, concerns the future, right?

(Heb 11:1-3 ESV) ESV Hebrews 11:1 ¶ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the people of old received their commendation. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

This hope is vitally connected to the FAITH of the Christian, as for example we see the two intertwined all through Hebrews 11 –

(Heb 11:8-16 ESV) 8 ¶ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. 11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. 13 ¶ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Read Hebrews 11 right through and take note not only of its emphasis upon faith, but upon the object of that faith – the resurrection. Eternal life. The City and Earth prepared for us by God.

Now this all calls us to some serious thinking and self-examination, and some adjustment of our attitude and mindset. We are people of faith. Faith in Christ. But also faith in Christ's promises. Faith in all that He has vowed to give us – that is yet to come. Our inheritance. The resurrection. OUR resurrection.

And yet we are so *physical and earthy*. We still live in these mortal bodies. We live on this present earth in a world of things we can see and touch and it is all we have ever really known. So it is easy to slide into a hope-less mindset that says “this is all there is. This is real. Anything that lies after this life is not real.” But that is wrong. Entirely wrong. What lies ahead is far more real than this present life because it is forever and it is uncorrupted by sin.

How many of our difficulties and anxieties are due to the fact that we get our eyes off of our hope?

Conclusion

Dr. Ed Murphy, author of *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare*, ended the dedication of the first edition of his book this way:

“To Loretta, who became my bride when we were but young people, who

has lived with me and warred with me against evil since 1950: my wife, my beloved, my companion, my fellow-missionary warrior and intercessor, the greatest treasure God has given to me after Himself.”

Then, in the second edition printed some 12 years later, he added this to that dedication:

“Loretta was quite suddenly ushered into the presence of the Lord at 12:50AM on Sunday, August 4, 2002, with her family gathered around her singing one of her favorite hymns, ‘There is a land that is fairer than day, And by faith we can see it afar, For the Father waits over the way, to prepare us a dwelling place there. In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore...’.

I was holding her in my arms as she breathed her last. I saw with my own eyes the radiance of her life slip out of her body from her feet to her head. It was awesome to see the life substance depart from her suddenly, leaving only a shell behind (as her two-year battle with metastasized stage-two breast cancer ended).

What a privilege has been mine to passionately love this woman since she was only 14 and I 16 years of age. She was my first and only true love. Not

only was she one of the greatest women to have ever lived, but one of the most beautiful, loving, kind gentle, compassionate, and guileless human beings I have ever met. She had such integrity, she could not and would not lie.

Thus, to you, my beloved wife, I dedicate this book. Thank you for being, as I always called you, ‘the wife of my life.’ How I love and miss you!”

This is that old enemy that Christ came to set us free from. And that freedom gives us this hope we have talked about this morning. It is not a “finger-crossed” hope, but it is a certain future fact. It is only a hope because it lies in the future and is yet to come, not because there is any doubt about it. Ed Murphy will indeed see Loretta once again and there will never again be a parting. It will be real. Real bodies. A real place. A real earth. And a real God whom we will see.

And this is why Christ can this to us-

(1Th 4:11-18 ESV) mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. 13 ¶ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep,

that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

And we can bank on it. We have this hope. We have heard it in the gospel and it is ours. Set your minds upon it. Very, very soon we will all be there.