



THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD
LIVING CHRISTIANLY IN COMMUNITY – CHRIST IS ALL
Colossians 3:12-17

March 29, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Introduction

Can the church sustain community? According to Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, this is one of the central challenges facing the church in the twenty-first century. In his book, *Christianity in the 21st Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, he says (p. 32):

The church of the twenty-first century, like that of previous centuries, will probably remain vibrant as long as it can provide people with a strong sense of community. The congregation, therefore, remains at the heart of the church and, in turn, at the heart of Christianity. But can the congregation continue adequately to sustain community?

Can the church sustain community? That's a great question! But to bring it even closer to home, we can ask: Can *this* church sustain community? Or, perhaps more to the point, *how* do we sustain community? Or, to reach back a couple weeks, can we be that city on a hill? And if so, how?

What is the key to community? *Christ is all, and Christ is in all.* Last week we discussed the one half of the equation: Christ in all. This week we turn now to the other half of the formula: Christ is all. The church can sustain community; the church is a city on a hill, when the church embraces Christ as all.

But what does that mean? What does that look like? The remaining verses of this passage in Colossians 3 paint a picture for us of what it looks like for a church to have Christ as all in their life. In fact, we have in these three verses, three snapshots, of Christ as all in the life of the church.

What are the indicators of a church where Christ is all to them? How will we be able to tell if Christ is all to our church? Paul gives three indicators in these three verses.

Christ is All When We Prioritize Peace in Our Decisions and Disputes (3:15)

The first, in 3:15, is this: we know Christ is all in our community, in our church, *when we prioritize peace in our decisions and disputes.* Or as Paul says: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”

We often hear this verse and think that what it’s calling us to is the subjective experience of peace: that we let peaceful feelings be in our heart. Perhaps we might have heard this quoted in the context of talking about anxiety or worry: don’t be anxious, rather “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Jesus says in John’s gospel: “Peace I leave you . . .” Or Paul talks in Philippians 4 about the “peace of God” (4:7). Both of these refer to that inner peace or personal tranquility that comes from a relationship with God in Christ.

But I don’t think that inner peace or personal tranquility is what Paul means by the “peace of Christ” in this verse. Not our own inner sense of peace, but the actual reality of peace—Christ’s peace, which he purchased with his own death—that peace ought to be.

Why? Because, as the second half of this verse says, we belong to each other. We’re not our own. You’re not your own—you’re public property: you belong to the other people in the body of Christ. We are members of the one and same body.

Disputes are inevitable. [See here the Peacemaker material.]

Instead this passage is addressing what ought to be our aim or goal in making decisions that affect that whole of the church body. We should seek to promote the peace of Christ within our common life together. Why? Since, as the next part of the verse tells us, “as members of one body you were called to peace” (3:15).

So when disputes and disagreements arise within the community, the body of Christ, the church, we are not to ignore them or run from them, as we are so often tempted to do. Nor, however, are we to seek to settle them ourselves—in our own strength, with our own techniques for conflict resolution, by our own diplomacy. Instead, we are to, as this passage calls us, let Christ’s peace rule or arbitrate in our hearts; Christ is to be the umpire when it comes to settling disputes. And his peace is to be the purpose, the goal, the aim, our intention in every dispute.

Before moving off of this point, however, it is worth point out that while peace is indeed precious in the life of the church, it is not preeminent. While unity and harmony within the church is something we must be eager to maintain—as the word of God calls us to in Ephesians

4:3—there are two categories of things worth disputing over: doctrine and ethics. Unity is built upon sound doctrine. And unity is built upon faithful conduct.

What does this mean practically? It means, I think, that we should work hard to lead the church and mobilize ourselves for ministry and mission in a way that is not divisive or alienate some within our congregation. However, this does not mean that we turn a blind eye to either deviances in doctrine or ethics in order to maintain peace and harmony.

Finally, may I remind you of the class that is starting today on Peacemaking. One of our elders, Steve Boisse, who has received extensive training in this, will be leading the class. Let me strongly encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity to learn how to be a better peacemaker.

Christ is All When We Center Our Corporate Life Upon Christ (3:16)

The second indicator of a church in which Christ is all is the most obvious and axiomatic. Christ is all *when we focus our corporate worship on Christ*. This is the point of 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

Again, as with the previous verse, so too with this verse it is tempting to interpret it in individualistic terms. In other words, to read the ‘you’ as ‘me’ rather than ‘we’. But this passage is not primarily about you and me as individuals storing up Christ’s word in our hearts. Instead, this is about the word of Christ being ever-present in our corporate life.

But what is the word of Christ? It is both the word that Christ spoke, and which we have a record of in this Bible. It is also the word about Christ, the Gospel, the news about who Christ is and what Christ has done for us. We are to be, then, a church that is rooted in the Gospel, the word about Christ, and built up by the Bible, Christ’s word to us.

This verse is calling us, then, to be *radically Christ-centered* in our corporate life: to let the word of Christ dwell in our midst as a church. Dwell in our midst, in this case, both in our preaching and in our singing.

Our preaching must be Christ-centered

Regrettably, however, it is far too common these days to have Christ be rather marginal in the worship of the church. Instead, the self is center-stage. No, not songs to the self or sermons extolling the self, some kind of rank man-centered humanism. Instead, sermons that begin and end with felt needs and never manage to rise above human platitudes dressed in the garb of biblical clichés. As one writer as observed, if you listen to many sermons these days you here about conquering and coping: But what you don’t hear about is *Christ*—at least, not immediately and directly, but only as a means of enabling the self to cope or conquer. He puts the matter poignantly:

How can I conquer my world? How can I enter into my destiny? How can I triumph over my enemies and claim my inheritance? How can I better cope with life’s daily struggles? How can I relate more effectively with my peers and co-workers? If Christ is mentioned, and he usually is, he exists to aid us in our search for significance. He

is important only so far as he awakens us to our importance. We talk about him so that we can feel good about ourselves.¹

As a preacher, you inevitably receive all kinds of feedback to your sermons. Some encouraging and some, well, less than encouraging. The compliments are easy to forget; it's the critiques that usually linger for a long time. And of all the critiques I've ever received, none landed on me with more convicting force than when a godly man, whom I quite respected, humbly said that he appreciated the sermon but didn't hear much about Christ in it.

The story is told of the preacher who had an earnest older lady who used to sit in the front pew of the sanctuary and if the preacher ever began to veer off course in his sermon, this faithful old lady will shout out: "Get 'em up, pastor!" The preacher may be waxing eloquent on something irrelevant to the cross and resurrection, and the woman would say: "Get 'em up, pastor!"

Now, I'm not prepared to invite exactly that kind of accountability from you! But I do hope that you come hungry and wanting to be fed, not my own pontifications or ruminations or stories, but Christ. And that if I don't serve you up an adequate diet of the Lord Jesus Christ, you gently whisper in my ear after the service: "Get 'em up, pastor."

Our singing must be Christ-centered

So our preaching must be Christ-centered. That's obvious enough. But this passage requires that the second aspect of our corporate worship be Christ-centered as well. Our singing, this verse insists, must be Christ-centered. The "word of Christ" is to dwell in us richly, not only as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through preaching, but also as we "sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (3:16).

Now just as our narcissistic self-oriented culture has infiltrated the church and impacted our preaching, so too has it impacted our *singing*. So that nowadays at least some, if not much, of what is being sung in our churches has the subtle tendency to direct our attention, not upon who Christ is and what He has done, but upon who I am and what I'm doing.

Lest this sound exaggerated, consider a fairly popular praise song from just a few years ago entitled, "I Will Celebrate":

I will celebrate, sing unto the Lord.

Sing to the Lord a new song. (*Repeat*)

With my heart rejoicing within,

With my mind, focused on him;

With my hands raised to the heavens,

All I am, worshiping him.

I will celebrate, sing unto the Lord.

Sing to the Lord a new song. (*Repeat*)

¹ Sam Storms, *The Hope of Glory: 100 Daily Meditations on Colossians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), p. 279.

Now what's remarkable about this song is that nowhere is God or the Lord or Jesus Christ mentioned as the subject; instead, consistently throughout the self is the subject: "I will celebrate" and "All I am, worshiping him." Nor is there any mention of who exactly this "Lord" is that we are signing unto. As a result, this praise song could be sung equal well by a Mormon or a Muslim; there is nothing distinctively Christian about it.

Which in turn causes one to wonder what's actually being celebrated, or what is in the end being sung about: is the celebration in response to what God has done for us in Christ? If so, the song doesn't tell us. Perhaps the song is simply celebrating the act of celebration, and thus is a song praising our act of praise. Which puts the self right at the center of this song, and not Christ.

So just as you don't judge a book by its cover, so you shouldn't judge a worship song by its tune. A good worship song is not one that rouses the emotion or makes us feel spiritual. Instead, a good worship song is one that orients our thoughts and, yes, our emotions toward Christ, and not toward ourselves; one that recounts who Christ is and what he's done for us and for the world.

This means, then, that the songs we choose to sing must be Christ-centered. Our songs ought to be rich in biblical content; we must sing songs that teach. Listen to what veteran pastor Warren Wiersbe says:

I am convinced that congregations learn more theology (good and bad) from the songs they sing than from the sermons they hear. Many sermons are doctrinally sound and contain a fair amount of biblical information, but they lack that necessary emotional content that gets hold of the listener's heart. Music, however, reaches the mind and the heart at the same time. It has the power to touch and move the emotions, and for that reason can become a wonderful tool in the hands of the Spirit or a terrible weapon in the hands of the Adversary.²

So, brother and sisters, the stakes are high! If Christ is to be all in our corporate worship, we must let Christ be central in our preaching and in our singing. We must let the word of Christ dwell in us richly!

Let thanksgiving permeate everything (v. 17)

The third and final way in which we let Christ be all in our community is when we *let thanksgiving permeate everything we do*. Paul says it this way: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

This profound verse is calling for two specific responses: comprehensive Christ-centeredness and consistent thanksgiving.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1986), p. 137. Cited in Sam Storms, *The Hope of Glory: 100 Daily Meditations on Colossians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 284.

Comprehensive Christ-centeredness

It's not too terribly difficult to be Christ-centered at church. Of course, this assumes the church is preaching Christ and seeking to honor him in its life together. But when that is the case, it's not too terribly difficult to be Christ-centered. However, I suspect we all need help in taking this Christ-centered attitude and outlook and apply it to every other aspect of our life, from what we do to what we say.

In other words, I suspect that most of us struggle with compartmentalization. That is, we find ourselves practicing our Christianity or letting the Christian faith inform certain parts of our life, but not the whole of our life. In short, we don't have a *comprehensive Christ-centeredness*. We fail to let the person and work of Christ to inform whatever it is we do, whether in word or deed.

As the Dutch Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper once said, "Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"³

Consistent thanksgiving

How do we measure the extent of our thankfulness and gratitude for God's blessing of Christian community?—by the extent to which you complain about it. Complaining is a telltale sign of ingratitude. And to complain about this community is to call into question God's. I must confess that I have complained about this congregation. And I suspect that some of you have as well. But we have not been given to one another in community in order to complain about one another. Rather, we have been given to one another as gifts to be received with thanksgiving.

Two concrete suggestions: Let us resolve as a church not to complain. Can we do that? I recognize this as a massive challenge, not because I know you to be a complaining bunch! But because I know my own heart and how prone I am to complain about what I find dissatisfying with this church! Can we offer constructive feedback to one another or provide input on important issue? Yes, of course. That makes for a healthy church. But let's distinguish between complaining about something, and offering constructive feedback or input.

Secondly, let's get in the habit of saying "thank you" to one another for our service to each other, whether that service be small or large, whether that service be serving tirelessly as an elder, or just showing up and singing and smiling and encouraging others with your presence.

Let's let thanksgiving permeate everything we do, whatever we do, whether in word or deed within the life of this community. Let's give thanks!

Conclusion

To live Christianly in community: It's a high calling; it's a great challenge; it's what this passage is calling us to this morning. This is what we are; this is who we are, as Christians, united to Christ and to one another in and through Christ.

³ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 488.

We must remember that this is not something we create, something we manufacture. This is something we embrace, something we realize, because of what Christ has already done. Christ is all, and is in all already! And the more we turn away from ourselves and toward Jesus Christ, the more we will realize that living christianly in community is all about Christ.

Again, let us remember that Christian community is not ultimately about us—it's about Christ. Christian community is all about Christ being all and being in all. In his classic work on Christian community, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently captures the essence of what Paul is saying in our passage:

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ (p. 31).

Bonhoeffer is saying about community what Paul is saying about community—Christ is all, and is in all!

Amen.

© March 29, 2009 by Dr. Todd A. Wilson