Colossians
Class Notes for the Highland Church of Christ
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2013
Colossians

Lesson 1

The Nature of the Heresy

- Whatever the exact nature of the heresy is, we know it is an ominous menace (a “philosophy,” 2:8) that affects faithfulness (2:6-7). The Colossians received Christ, but the impulse to expand their spirituality by going beyond the gospel became a potential target by outsiders.
  - They are tempted by teachings that stress abstaining from earthly desires of the body (2:16, 21-23), as if rules have value or power in checking our desires.
  - Self-abasement, false humility (2:18, 23),
  - Observing special days (2:16).
  - More knowledge, insights, and heavenly visions of the mysteries of the cosmos (2:18) are dangled before their eyes.
  - More spiritual experiences entice them. The possibility of participating in angelic worship practices (2:18) knocks on their door.
  - The “philosophy” accentuates the feeling that something is missing in their relationship with God and offers tantalizing alternatives.
    - Do More
    - Know More (especially if it is a secret wisdom)
    - Feel More (wrapped up in experience)
  - Circle vs. Ellipse: a circle has one focus, an ellipse two. The Colossians were not satisfied with one center, subsequently they became “eccentric” or off center.

- The Colossians are US! It is not that the Colossian heresy is beyond figuring out. The elusive nature of the teachings haunts us because it is so nearby, tempting our own desires for more. The insecurities we often feel about our relationship with God entice us to buy what the “philosophy” is selling.

- Some spiritualities and religious additives harm your health. The lists of new spiritualities and dualisms reappear in some form in every generation. Colossians 2:6-7 provides an explicit contrast between the traditions of Christ and those who deceitfully try to ensnare the Colossians with their version of an augmented Christianity (2:4, 8).

- 2:9, 10, 19
Lesson 2

Narratival Sub-Structures

- **Paul’s Story**: Paul is not as autobiographical in Colossians as he is in other writings, yet his story can be reconstructed (1:7-8, 1:23-2:5; 4:3-4, 7-18). The lack of detail about Paul’s life is due to his limited personal association with the church.
  - In 2 Corinthians 10:13-16, Paul defends his right as an apostle to preach in the territory assigned to him by God. For others to impose themselves upon his territory crosses the boundary of acceptable behavior and violates the rule (kanon) appropriate for missionary activity. Paul acknowledges that he is not the church planter at Colossae; he affirms Epaphras’ role and aligns his position with his colleague (1:7-8).
  - He intentionally connects his understanding of the gospel that redeemed and produced fruit in them with the same message they heard and believed (1:23).
  - Paul’s describes his desire and goodwill enacted on their behalf (1:24-2:5).
  - Finally, the lengthy greetings at the end of the letter describe various overlaps between Paul’s travels and companions. Although the gospel has been preached to the whole world (1:23), it is a small world after all (4:7-18). While Paul does not need a letter of recommendation to a church that he established (2 Cor 3:1-3), he relies here on the goodwill of the relationships that he and the Colossians share in common.

- **Colossians’ Story**: Paul begins where their story begins, recalling how they first heard the gospel and came to faith. The local story can be reconstructed (1:12-14, 18, 21-22; 2:11-14, 19; 3:1-4, 7-9).
  - They were pagans who heard the gospel through the preaching of Epaphras.
  - They believed his word and were baptized.
  - The promise that God would reveal them with Christ in glory remained secure.
  - God’s cosmic plan of redemption found fruition in their lives.
  - But something happened. The threat of intrusions foiled the plotline. While Paul does not call them to repentance for yielding to false teachings, he does warn them of a looming threat.

  - **God’s Story** (seen through Israel and showcased in Jesus): Paul claims to have a secret knowledge too. A secret that is being shouted on every housetop, whispered loudly in the marketplace, and forwarded exponentially through the Internet. God’s mystery is Christ (1:27; 2:3). He proclaims the secret openly in order to present the Colossians mature in Christ (1:28). The secret contained in the hope of the gospel, the hope of glory, is Christ living in them (1:27).
  - The Christ Hymn relies upon the master story of creation and redemption. Elements of the story are found throughout the letter (1:12, 15-23; 2:8-15, 20; 3:1, 4-9, 10-11). Every pericope must be interpreted by the thick theological content of the hymn.
  - Even if our issues differ from those of the Colossians, we learn from Paul a commitment to the deep theological witness of the gospel when addressing the problems facing the church. The rest of the text means less in isolation from the glorious chorus that lauds the nature and work of Christ.
Lesson 3

Propositio (the thesis) Col 1: 21-23 and amplified in 2:6-7—The thesis calls the Colossians to continue steadfast, holding onto the salvation they received in Christ. After the triumph theme seen in the hymn, the thesis echoes the earlier metaphor of reconciliation (1:13-14).

Probatio (supporting proofs) Col 1:24-4:1—Paul gives three arguments or proofs supporting his thesis that the gospel of salvation found in Christ is sufficient, provided that believers remain faithful.

1. The first proof establishes Paul’s credibility as a witness to the gospel they accepted by believing the message first preached by Epaphras.
2. The second proof encourages the Colossians to remain faithful to the gospel by warning them against the possible threat of outsiders who offer supplemental practices and experiences designed to enhance the work of Christ.
3. The final proof connects their holiness to their baptism and describes appropriate practices of those who commit to the gospel.
   • The baptismal language continues throughout the section with terms like “put to death,” “get rid,” “take off the old self,” “clothe yourselves with the new self,” etc. The new communal ethic that clothes the person found in Christ opposes the old individualistic ethic that should be stripped off and put to death.
   o The virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, without complaint, with forgiveness, in love, unity, and peace, are communal practices that are done in the name of Jesus (3:12-17).
   o Therefore, we let the gospel we first receive dwell in our hearts in all wisdom in order to bless one another whether in word, song, or practice (3:16).
   o Paul’s writing to the Colossians has exemplified these virtues because he deeply desires that they have all the riches available in Christ (2:2-3).
   • The household codes that follow are concrete examples of the virtuous life that followers seek to imitate Christ and join him in the eschaton.
   o The household codes in the New Testament reverse the expectant relationships that commonly exist in culture. Being in the Lord (seven references in nine verses) overturns and transforms how we relate to one another and urges us to interpret “against the grain” of the social constructs of the world.
     ▪ Note the radical nature of the slave receiving an inheritance (3:24).
     ▪ Nympha is a female leader in the church (4:15).
     ▪ The church becomes a place of healing of the divisions caused by the systemic powers of the world, including class, wealth, gender, race, education, age, nationality, politics, and religious traditions (3:11).
     ▪ In Christ, we operate under a new set of rules. Ethnic, religious, and social distinctions are lost. Human dignity is not measured by the UN Human Development Index, but by a relationship in Christ where the whole body is united and nourished by God (2:19).

For more information see, Tim Sensing, “Preaching to Colossians.” Restoration Quarterly 54 (Fourth Quarter 2010): 207-222.