

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians Colossians 1:24-27- The Church (Part 2)

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God

Last week I ended my sermon with a rather provocative and challenging statement. Do you recall what it was? Let me remind you. It is my conviction, based upon the Word of God, that service to Christ in a local congregation is a primary obligation in every believer's life. I know I ruffled a few feather with this statement. I have been challenged and questioned by this statement. Let me remind you that I said this in the context of Paul's own passion for the Church as expressed in our text, seeing how in verse 24 he was willing to suffer for the sake and on behalf of the church and from verse 25 how he was willing to be spent for the benefit of the church.

I asked you to consider that Paul himself calls believers to imitate him even as he imitates Christ. Therefore, I asked the question, “Did Paul suffer and spend himself for the church even at personal inconvenience?” Yes, He did. Was He imitating Christ in this? I mean to say, did Christ suffer and spend Himself for the church even at personal inconvenience? Of course He did as He gave Himself upon that cross as our Sin-bearing substitute, dying our death so that we might be able to live in His life. Therefore, we are simply left with the question, what are we willing to suffer and to spend for the sake of, on behalf of and for the benefit of the church?

Let me also clarify, that by saying that by saying that service to Christ in a local congregation is a primary obligation in every believer's life, I did not say that it is our only obligation in life. Every believer has many other responsibilities given to him by God, but in every context in which our families, our relationships, our jobs, and our commitments are spoken, they are smack dab in the middle of passages that call us to right thinking, right behavior and right relationship to the Church.

Beloved, I have a passion for the Church. I have, and all who are in Christ have, been called out of the world into the Church. Is my family important? Absolutely. I would lay down my life for my wife and my children. But I would also willingly lay down my life for the Church, because the Church is the Body of Christ, and Christ is the head of the body. And this Head and Body relationship implies something outstanding. It implies that Christ and the church are complementary, for a body and a head cannot exist without each other. Therefore to give priority to Christ, it to give priority to the Body; and to give priority to the Body is to give priority to Christ.

And by the way, if you ask me, “well, isn't Colossians 1:24-27 and other passage like them speaking of the church universal and not the church local?” My response is this; it is obvious that Paul had a passion for the church universal, but that passion has to be expressed in a local setting. Paul reveals in this passage as well as others not only his passion for the churches in general, but to the Church of the Colossians as he writes them to encourage, exhort and warn them. In other words, you express your passion for the church universal, for all believers everywhere, but first expression your passion for the church local, with those believers with whom

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you fellowship, with whom you partake of the Lord’s Supper and with whom you stand as witnesses to Baptisms.

My heart today is to speak to you about the Church. What is the church of which Paul was so passionate about and why should we share his passion? If we have a wrong or misapplied understanding of the church into which God has graciously placed us for His own glory and for the building up of His Body, we will fail to be all that God desires for us. So then, this morning, let me challenge your thinking about the Church.

First, what is the church? Is the church just two or three gathered in the name of Christ? Is that the church? Fundamentally and Biblically, the church is the company of the redeemed who gather together (so it must have a local expression) to worship God together, to fellowship with one another around the Word, to pray with and for one another, who practice the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper together; all (and here is the kicker) with God appointed leadership (pastors, elders, deacons) to guide and oversee the faithful practice of such a company.

One of the earliest confessions of faith says it this way: *The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church [a local gathering of believers] engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them [baptism and the Lord’s Supper]; and it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself [by means of servant leaders; pastors, elders; deacons] according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church-- and no one ought to be separated from it.* (The Belgic Confession of Faith – 1561 – Article 29).

Beloved, this is the church. The church is a body. It is a corporate entity made up of many, for the benefit of many and not simply for some “ones” personal benefit (although there are personal benefits for belonging to Christ). The problem is that we have come to almost neglect or disregard the teaching of the New Testament, failing to recognize and live our lives in light of the corporate mentality we are called to exercise in our relation to Christ and His church. Beloved, we cannot think rightly about Christ if we do not think rightly about the church. As someone once said, *“To think of Christ without the church is to sever what God has wedded together in holy union.”*

I am dumbfounded how easily I have allowed myself to think of my relationship to Christ primarily in terms of my own spiritual life and fail to consider well the great pictures given in the New Testament of the corporate body of Christ. And when we fail to consider rightly Christ and His Church, we damage the Body, we stunt our own spiritual well-being, and we rob the Body of zeal and joy. And the truth of the matter is that we tend to think of our relationship to Christ and the Church in far better terms that we might be actually demonstrating with our lives. We say to ourselves, “Yes, I have great faith, hope and love and I more than appropriately love and cherish the Church into which Christ called me and for whom Christ died.” But have you put your thoughts and actions toward the Church up against the Word of God. You have heard the phrase, “His eyes were bigger than his stomach” when someone thinks they can handle more than they are able? Might we discover that our affection and commitment to the Church into which Christ called us and for whom He died exists more in our minds than in our actions? Beloved, all Christian graces and virtues are only properly manifested and realized not in our

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heads, but in real fellowship, interaction, worship, service and participation with the saints. That beloved is when and where we see the church and when and where we see Christ.

If we are content to pursue our own personal passions and allow ourselves to nurse our petty resentments and hurt feelings toward one another, or we are content with engaging in sinful behavior willingly, or simply neglect one another, we are, even if be unknowing, inflicting the most hurtful of wounds upon the Church of Jesus Christ, into which He has called you and for whom He died.

So, how can we recover a proper and Paul-like passion for the church; a passion that considers the fellowship of the saints not simply a duty, but a sheer delight; not about attendance, for we will not always be able to fellowship, but about attitude; not about legalistic expectations that make us feel guilty and simply to go through the motions, but rather liberal exercises of faith and spiritual gifts to the benefit of the Church. Beloved, to experience true union with Christ, we must experience communion with the saints.

And so, after this long-winded introduction, I would like to take you on a journey this morning, leaving the pages of Colossians 1 to view the great gallery of New Testament pictures concerning Christ and His Church. I pray that you and I will come to have a great passion, love, devotion and commitment to the church; again, not to the exclusion of other appropriate God given responsibilities, but rather to the benefit of those responsibilities. For I say to you, if you want to be that more godly spouse, the more obedient child, the more Christ confessing worker, such find the greater possibility of realization when we rightly picture and then practice the body life of the Church. As one write so aptly said and bears our consideration (Millard Erickson) *“There is no such thing as an isolated, solitary Christian life”* (Christian Theology, p. 1039). The Christian life is a life in which we share a common life in Christ. And it is this common life in Christ that serves as the basis for our communion with one another.

To be a part of the church is to be in a special relationship to the living God. In the Bible, to be in a special relationship was to be in a covenant. Those of you who are married understand that you are in a special relationship with each other. You have committed yourselves to one another. At some place and time you pleaded your love, your loyalty and your lives to each other. In an even greater fashion, God has initiated a special relationship between Himself and His people. The promise of the New Covenant of which Jesus inaugurated was one in which we read the promise, ***“I will be their God, and they shall be My people”*** (Jeremiah 31:33) – a very corporate experience.

In the New Testament we find this promise given to those who call upon the name of Christ for salvation. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 we read,

Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.”

This is the company of the redeemed, the community of faith, the fellowship of believers, and the communion of the people of God. This is God’s doing as He called and created this body of Christ by His own sovereign pleasure. We, here this morning, who have confessed and committed to Christ, we are God’s people. We belong to God. We are His possession. And the funny thing is, He selected us due not due to any merit of our own. He chose us while weak,

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puny, helpless, hopeless sinners to be the recipients of His great love. He chose us to be the beneficiaries of all things good and wholesome in Christ. How can such thoughts not stir within us the deepest devotion and the highest sense of privilege? We belong to something greater and more wonderful than our individual lives, we belong to the body of Christ, and we belong to God.

But we can be slow to see this, can we not? Sin taints our reason and our appreciation of what God has given us in Christ and in being placed into His body. But God is gracious and gives us pictures and descriptions so both our hearts and minds might better grasp the truth and so let us look at this album of the Church. What does the church look like?

So then, in our time remaining, I would have you imagine if you would that I am showing you an album of pictures and on each page we find a specific picture of the church, a picture that speaks to us of the pervasiveness and the priority of the Church in the mind of God and therefore in the mind of the New Testament authors.

As we look at the first picture of the album, we find the first of our images that show us the wonder and priority of the Church. In 1 Timothy 3:15 we read these words and see this picture:

but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household [oikos – a family functioning] of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

We are God’s household, we are all part of the same family, under the same Father, all with the same older Brother who loves us and holds us accountable. Truly blood is thicker than water and the blood of Christ that binds each genuine believer to one another is thicker than any earthly blood. In glory it will not be the household of Samuelson, or the household of Godfrey that is in focus, but rather the household of God. The imagery of being a household or family was in Paul’s mind when just a few chapters over. In 1 Timothy 5:1, notice the familial terms used of our relationship to one another.

1 Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, 2 the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

For some of you, you have seen this to be true and regard brothers and sisters in Christ as closer than brother or sisters of the flesh. We are God’s household. And as there is to be mutual respect and consideration among earthly family members, this picture tells us how God expects us to conduct ourselves in the Church with one another.

The second snapshot I would offer you is found in 1 Peter 2:9 were we read these words;

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...

I have underlined those adjectives, chosen, royal, and holy. Beloved, if nothing else these words convey the idea of the highest esteem in which God holds us as His people and therefore how we ought to hold one another. Do you regard these people here as chosen of God, a royal,

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glorious priesthood, and the holiest, most wonderfully set apart people in all the world? We often marvel at the things chosen and set apart by man, but how much more ought we to do so at the things set apart by God?

The third snapshot we will look at is found in 1 Peter 5:2-3 where the Church is spoken of in terms of a flock. We read:

2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

I wish I could spend more time on these but simply consider that the idea of being the flock of God portrays a sense of sense of the tenderness with which the Church is to be treated. We are to be tenderhearted, kind, forgiving and loving toward one another.

The fourth picture we look at is found in 1 Corinthians 3:9 where the church is pictured as a building. We read;

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Even our children can easily understand this picture. Each believer is as a stone, a living stone according to 1 Peter 2:4. Each of us is carefully fitted for inclusion in something bigger and grander than ourselves. And we did not fit ourselves, but the Master Builder has so that we together might be a suitable dwelling for Him. In Ephesians 2:21-22 we read of the church;

...in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

How could we possibly think of the church in such individualistic terms as we do when we are told we are built, placed connected together by God? Do you know what stones are called when they are in a pile or scattered about in no apparent order? That is called a ruin. But we are called the dwelling of God.

Not only are we called the building of God, but similarly we are called the temple of God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 we read;

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

This picture reveals to us the reverence and respect with which God expect us to treat His Church, to honor the church. Why? Because Christ is the true Temple according to John 2 and the chief cornerstone according to 1 Peter 2 and we are in Him, built up as a temple. God dwells here in this temple. Not in this building, but in us as His temple. If you want to suffer the consequences of God's wrath, simply deface His temple, the Church. If you mark it up with the ugly graffiti of murmuring against one another or with malice toward one another; if you vandalize

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it with rocks of self-will and conceit; or if you rob from it your own attention and participation, you are destroying God’s temple. God loves to dwell among His people, His temple, are you beautifying it or butchering it? Let us long to see along with Christ, the church presented in all her beauty, spotless and unblemished.

This alludes to the fifth picture of the church I would offer you from the Scriptures and that is the Church as the bride of Christ. In Ephesians 5:25-27 we see this picture in part when we read:

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

Who would dare do anything to threaten or harm the bride of Christ? So much does Christ love the church, so precious is the church to Him and to the Father that it ought to be our greatest concern, our highest priority, and our most delightful duty to strive with Christ to do everything we can, personally and corporately to see the church beautified and purified. Have we acted unseemly towards the Church? Have we brought reproach upon Her? Have we neglected her? Christ has promised to love, to nurture, and to cherish the Church? How about you? If you are part of the Church by virtue of your profession of Christ as your Savior and Lord, then you ought to share in His priority to see the Church, beginning with this local expression of it, in the most glorious beauty possible. Men, if I were ever to neglect, abuse, and show disrespect or disregard for you wives, how long would I be your pastor or even a friend? Have we regarded the bride of Christ with the same respect that Christ has shown by loving her, dying for her, nurturing her and cherishing her? Let us ask God that we might be willing to suffer for her sake and be spent for her benefit.

I have one final picture of the Church I would offer you and it is the most used and most familiar in the Scriptures; the church as the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:27 we read the simple words;

Now you [all] are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.

The idea of the Church as being individual parts forever joined together to make a body is dealt with in detail in the books of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians. The books of Romans and 1 Corinthians reveals the church as a group of believers who are intimately connected to one another because they are connected to Christ. Unless a believer can be separated from Christ, he cannot ever think in terms of being separated from the body, the church. We are many members, but one body. We can no more separate ourselves, or excuse ourselves from our responsibilities to one another as the church than we can excuse ourselves from responsibilities to Christ. To neglect the church is to neglect Christ; to seek to live with only a limited connection or with a limited accountability to the church is to seek to live in limited connection and accountability to Christ. As Romans 12:4-5 declares,

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For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

The idea of being the body of Christ carries with the idea of absolute dependence upon one another and ultimately Christ who is the Head. If we are in Christ, we are absolutely interconnected to one another.

Some of you might remember back in 2003 when the East Coast and Midwest was struck with a massive black out. One newspaper reported at the time, “The power collapse that paralyzed a large swath of North America on Thursday apparently began with a failure in the Midwest that cascaded into Canada, and from there into New York ... In seconds, parallel lines were overloaded and shut themselves down, and then generating stations disconnected themselves. Ultimately, dozens of lines and about 100 power plants, with a staggering 61,800 megawatts of generation, had shut down – apparently before anyone could react. The series of failures began about 4:08 pm EDT, and was over within roughly five minutes...” All this happened because of how interconnected the power grid of the US and Canada are. How much more interconnected is the church? We are so interconnected that what happens to one part, even one individual, good or bad, characteristically affects the whole body. Try hitting your toe with a hammer and see if you can keep your whole body from reacting? And this is exactly what we see portrayed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; please turn there. Please hear what the Word of God has to say about the church.

12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

In other words, we need each part of the body; I need each one of you and we each need each and every believer here to be concerned, connected, functioning, participating and fulfilling

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your God given roles in the context of the body? And never think you have nothing to offer. John MacArthur has pointed out, “In seeming humility [one may say] ‘My gift is second-rate and unimportant. I have nothing to offer, so why participate?’ But that attitude does not reflect humility. It is self-centered, selfish, and an affront to God’s wisdom and love.” (I Corinthians, p. 315).

You have something, in fact much to contribute, but you need to be engaged and involved with the other members to realize it. Each one here needs to learn and practice their spiritual gift in the context of the local church. What will you contribute Sunday by Sunday? What is your spiritual gift by which you can contribute to the common good of the body? You should come here expecting to contribute. You should be able to offer praise to God, encouragement, comfort, hospitality, exhortation, leadership, administration, or some kind of help for the proper function of this body as we worship the Lord. And during the week you have opportunities to carry this out further through participation in home Bible Studies, prayer meetings and even in smaller personal meetings with other believers. And then, by these acts of faithful service to God by service to one another, we demonstrate to others and are better prepared to present to unbelievers our love of Christ by our love for one another. Did not Jesus Himself say in John 13:35-

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Beloved, this is the Church, the company of the redeemed, those who are the grand recipients of our love for Christ by serving one another in Christ name; regarding one another as we would regard Christ. I have run out of time again, but let us pray that God would graciously grant us renewed eyesight to behold the beauty of the Church whom Christ has redeemed; to conceive with our minds more clearly God’s glorious plans for His people and to commit with our hearts to submit ourselves with more fervor and dedication to the service of the body of Christ. May the words of Ephesians 5:21 be true of us, ***“and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”*** Let us be willing to suffer for her sake and to be spent for her benefit knowing that as we do it is to the glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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