

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 2:1-5

A Faithful Church

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. 5 For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Steven Lawson, a preacher I wish that you all might become familiar with, once wrote, **“Man can build a booming church, but only God can build a biblical church.”** In others, by man’s reason, logic, planning and execution, a “church” may be filled, but such an edifice is of no benefit to man or to the glory of God if the Spirit of God is not the reason, planner and executor of a church’s actions. If we are to be a biblical church, we must be a God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, Spirit-driven people. We are to be a people who hold up the majesty of Christ, the magnitude of Scripture and meaning of the church in our every day lives.

This has been Paul’s thrust in the book of Colossians; his passion for Christ and his passion for the church. His desire in this letter is instill that same passion in his readers; into people like you and me. If Jesus Christ was faithful to the church, then Paul wants to be faithful, like Jesus, to the church. And to be faithful to the church is to call believers to be likewise faithful to the church. Our text in Colossians 2:1-5 presents us with what a faithful church looks like as its people, you and me, seek to have the same passion for the church as did Paul and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The believers at Colossae were striving to be a faithful church and needed to be exhorted and encourage to stay the course. Our passage and these characteristics of a faithful church then not only reveal Paul’s appreciation of the believers at Colossae, but also then an example for us to examine and follow as individuals and as a church. We have already looked at the first two of these characteristics, so let me review them quickly before we look at the last two.

I. A faithful church struggles for one another (2:1)

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face...

Our text begins with Paul wanting the Colossians to know something. He wants them to know **“how great a struggle”** he has for these believers. Notice the language here. First, Paul wants them “to know” – to behold, take note of, to be perfectly aware of and to consider his great struggle. “Look at my life,” says Paul. “Consider my example!” And just what is it that Paul wants considered? Paul wants them to consider “how great a struggle” he had on their behalf.

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II. A faithful church stimulates one another (2:2-3)

that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

In verses 2 and 3 we are presented with three actions by which Paul's struggle for the church was revealed and become practically means by which we labor for the church as well.

First Paul says that by his struggle for the church it was his intent that **“their hearts may be encouraged.”** By this we are to see that it was Paul's desire *to encourage believers into right thinking and behavior.* A faithful church then is one that strives to encourage one another to right thinking and behavior.

In addition to encouraging believers into right thinking by his own labors, Paul also wants to enliven the believers in loving unity. And so we see that a faithful church will strive to enliven in one another loving unity.

And finally we saw in these verses that the church excites one another to complete confidence in Christ. We read from the end of verse 2 and into verse 3, **“and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself...”**

III. A faithful church safeguards one another (2:4)

I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.

The third characteristic of a faithful church is one that safeguards one another with the truth. J.I. Packer begins his 1973 classic book, “Knowing God” with these words: “Ignorance of God, ignorance both of His ways and of the practice of communion with Him, lies at the root of the church's weakness today.” In seeking to explain why there was such an ignorance of God in the church, among those who ought to know God, Packer stated, “that Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit: the spirit, that is, that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God.”

It is a sad state of affairs when church members too often think small thoughts of God and in their place think great thoughts of man. The great call upon every believer is to know God. As Jesus said in John 17:3, **“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”** This means that every believer is called to be a theologian, a studier of God, in the highest and most intimate sense of the word. If the church is to be spiritually sound, then every church member is to be committed to being a biblical theologian in whatever capacity they can.

Why is this important? Because there are people out there, and sadly some even in the church, who want to delude believers with their well sounding and persuasive arguments. This was Paul's concern as expressed in verse 4.

In verse 4 we learn that Paul speaks all these things to these believers so that they will be safeguarded or protected from deluding, persuasive arguments. *A faithful church then safeguards one another by speaking, proclaiming all the wisdom and knowledge that are in Christ rather than listening to and arguing about other matters.* Before us is a matter of the truth. A faithful church knows and protects one another according to the truth of God's Word.

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The word “**delude**” speaks of something that seems to be good, rational, and even reasonable, but in fact leads to wrong conclusions. Let me give you an example. We see people do this all the time, using what we call “proof-texting” that is they come up with something they want to say and then find a verse, usually taking it out of context, to prove not what the Bible says, but rather what they want to say. [if time permits, here is an example of bad proof texting as found in an article written by Rick Warren (author of “The Purpose-Driven Life”). While there is proof-texting that leads to grosser, more delusional conclusions than this, let this serve as an example of how this works]. Here is what Warren wrote:

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Psalm 2:4, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs.” Isn’t that a great verse? God has a sense of humor. God laughs!...Do you want to be more like God? Learn to laugh. A sense of humor can preserve your sanity.

What’s the problem with this? We read that God laughs, so what could be wrong with this? But if we actually look at the context of the passage, we see there is a huge problem, that this passage is not speaking about humor at all. Let me read Psalm 2:1-6 and pay attention to verses 4-5:

1 Why are the nations in an uproar And the peoples devising a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them. 5 Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying, 6 “But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

Does God laugh according to this passage? Yes, but it is not referring to some therapeutic, stress relieving belly laugh or sense of humor. This laughter is that of scoffing at man’s pathetic attempt to usurp God’s sovereignty, a laughing that ends with God’s terrifying wrath and fury. The point is, this passage does not say what Warren wants it to say, yet he called Psalm 2:4 one of his favorite verses in the Bible. This is a delusional teaching of God’s word. This is what the false teachers at Colossae were doing. Their teaching was done with “persuasive argument” meaning that it was with the ability to talk someone into believing something even though it is based on wrong conclusions. This is where many believe something just because it is spoken in church or spoken a popular speaker. Succumbing to such reveals a failure to weigh matters biblically.

How do we overcome being deluded by persuasive arguments? Beloved, we must strive, agonize to be more and more biblical in our thoughts and actions. We must saturate ourselves in the truths of God’s Word. You need to be like the Berean believers of Acts 17:11 who checked out what they heard with Scripture. If I may be so bold to say this, deluded teaching in the church would come to a grinding halt if congregations did this. Each one of us has the responsibility to be immerse in the Scriptures so that we might effectively discern the presence of delusions.

I read of one minister who when he preached would constantly hear many members give loud “Amens” to his preaching. But the preacher realized that they were not really paying attention to what he was saying. They were simply following the rise and pitch of his voice and

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responding thoughtlessly with “Amen.” Finally then this preacher purposely wrote a sermon, abusing the text and making statements that were clearly unbiblical. Without hesitation, the congregation responded with “Amen.” At the end of the sermon he told them what he had done and admonished them where they had agreed with false teaching. Why did they do this? Because they did not know the Scriptures. A faithful church safeguards one another, seeking to know all the wisdom and knowledge of Christ so that neither they nor anyone else in their congregation would be deluded by false teachers.

Beloved, this is why regular Bible reading is so important. Would you read daily? Starting in January the church will have on the website as well as in hard copy a new Bible reading program for us. Would you commit to reading through the Scriptures to know the wisdom and truth of Christ that would guard your soul from error and enable you to be a safeguard for others? The Lord proclaimed it accurately when He proclaimed through the prophet Hosea, **“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”** (Hosea 4:6). Therefore, if a believer or attender of a church seeks to go outside the church, which is the pillar and support of the truth, or more specifically outside the revelation of Scripture to be taught of life, the nature of God, the character of Christ; or of how we are to be saved – the result is a delusion. To look to the Kabala, the Koran, the New World Translation, the Book of Mormon, any secular scientific theory of life, teaching of humanism or the like, these will delude the soul; if one is looking for answers to life in them; for all wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ alone. The faithful church safeguards one another from such things.

IV. A faithful church supports one another (2:5)

For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

A faithful church struggles for one another, stimulates one another, safeguards one another and finally, they support one another. Consider Paul’s statement in verse 5 again. While he is not with them personally, he has able knowledge of their spiritual well-being and in sending Onesimus and Epaphras to them, he is with them by way of his teaching and exhortation. But note what he says is his rejoicing; his cause of joy. The church at Colossae practiced **“good discipline”** and was known for their **“stability”** of faith.

The phrase “good discipline” is a military term that speaks of order in the ranks. It was used to describe troops that were found in ready formation for battle. As Paul uses it, we are to understand that this church was ready for service. They were doing everything necessary to be prepared for battle. We might say that they were living as genuine Christians; dependent upon Christ; proclaiming Christ and living out the gospel. This implies that they were supporting each other. They were preparing each other. They did Colossians 1:28, teaching and admonishing every man among them to be complete in Christ. They were giving attention to one another’s spiritual lives and doing everything necessary, even agonizing over one another’s spiritual condition. When Paul calls them to desire to present every man complete in Christ in 1:28, it is as if he is saying here that they already had been supporting one another in this. Who are you helping to be found in battle formation. Who are you discipling in the Lord? Who is discipling you? A faithful church supports one another in good discipline and so I exhort you to be involved with others here in learning about Christ.

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This good discipline lead to another description of this church and therefore of a faithful church, that is **“the stability of your faith.”** The word “stability” is also a military term that speaks of “a solid front” – an army that cannot be moved. For us it speaks then of a church, a people that are solidly anchored in the truth of Christ and Him crucified. Even as the false teachers sought to delude them, Paul speaks of their ranks as stable and unbroken. For this to happen would require believers to help keep the lines solid. There was a game that used to be played by children where two lines were formed and one shouted to the other, “Red rover, red rover send “someone” right over. That someone would then run hard and try to break through the other line of children who were holding hands. Of course, wherever that red rover aimed, the group sought hard to hold on tight. That is a solid front, the stability of the line.

Beloved, passivity does not build faithful churches. The faithful church is dependent upon *all the membership* to exercise spiritual disciplines in order to increase spiritual growth. This is not a luxury but a necessity. Stability of faith in a congregation is constantly ongoing. It is not something we decide once and then never work on again. Consider Paul’s language, military terms. I have never heard of an effective army just happening. The most effective armies train hard, in fact agonize, going over and over their duties and deployments in order to be strong and win the day. The faithful church has the same determination so that whatever battle comes to us, we are ready, solid, in order, believing in Christ, trusting in Christ alone.

Beloved, we should be agonizing, struggling, striving for the church in such a way that as others see our example, they are encouraged in their thinking and behavior, enlivened in their loving unity, excited in their complete confidence in Christ, watching over one another and preparing one another to be orderly and firm in their faith, resisting the enemies of the gospel and faithful to proclaim Him who is our hope of glory, Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? Let me give you just a few things by which you can participate in being part of a faithful church.

1. Join the church - remember last week about the character Robert and the Jeep club, his passion and commitment to all the activities? In a greater fashion, make a visible commitment to be accountable to a local body of believers. [Acts 5:1ff; 12-13]

Acts 5:12-13

12 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. 13 But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem.

2. Make the local church your priority – build your life around the church and its people. This means that things like football, hunting season, skiing, sleeping in, enjoying beautiful weather, and other concerns are to be secondary, not primary.

Hebrews 10:23-25

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

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3. Make your pastor’s job a joy – I know, self serving, but biblical; Hebrews 13:17 says:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

4. Find ways to serve – membership is not spectatorship – if no apparent ways present themselves, find ways to own the church.

1 Peter 4:10

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

5. Give faithfully, heartily – the local church is the place where you are nourished spiritually, relationally and held accountable. It should have a priority in your resources. Consider 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, which was written in the context of giving to the church.

6 Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

6. Connect with people – passion for the church means being a part of community, pursue relationships with others who you can encourage and be encouraged by in the things of the Lord.

Titus 3:14

Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

7. Share your passion – speak to one another and to others about what Jesus did for the church and your involvement with it.

Hebrews 2:10-11

10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. 11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren...

Soli Deo Gloria

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