

CHRIST IS BEFORE ALL THINGS

And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. For it pleased *the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell.*

Col 1:17-19

CHRIST IS FIRST! He is always to have the first place since it was the purpose of God the Father, from the beginning, to sum up all things in his Son. The fulness of the Godhead dwells in the Lord Jesus, the God-Man, and the Father has placed Christ in the centre of all things. At the end, every knee will bow to the Lord Jesus Christ and acknowledge his complete Lordship (Phil 2:10-11). This is either done willingly, as by the saints who marvel at and glorify the Lord at the Second Coming, or it is done unwillingly when sinners are forced to acknowledge the truth by a God of wrath and vengeance.

Thus all God's purposes centre in Christ and have the objective of putting Christ first. Even the structure of the universe is based upon the centrality of Christ. How much more should the church, the body of Christ, be focused upon putting Christ first?

The Universe

Here in Colossians we see that the premiership of Christ is even fundamental in the composition and sustenance of the universe.

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. Col 1:16-17

The universe was created by him and all life derives from him. Everything was created for him, that is to glorify him in their expressions of varied life. They were created through him, that is by his power, design and wisdom. As a result of being created through him, all the universe is sustained as it remains in Christ. It is not sustained by independent physical laws; these simply describe and manifest the way the sustaining takes place. It is not independently sustained or self-generated by evolutionary processes. No, the universe and all that is in it is upheld only as it is in Christ. 'In him all things consist'.

The Greek word for consist means 'to place together', 'to band together'. We understand somewhat how the cosmos exists. All bodies (including animal, mineral, plant and stellar bodies) are made up of molecules and atoms, and discoveries are being made to further explain how the internal structure of an atom operates. Certainly there are structures within atoms that are spinning around and have various properties. Science is still struggling to understand exactly how this all works. What is certain is that there is a cohesion in the physical structure of all things to stop atoms (and their internal structures) flying apart. No one can explain why this is; just as no one can really understand why the galaxies, stars and planets cohere in the way that they do giving structure to the cosmos. Even within our own solar system there are bodies operating in ways that science cannot explain.^[1] Theories come and go but here we are told that the holding together, the cohesion, is in Christ.

Footnotes:

[1] Current cosmological (evolutionary) theories cannot explain the differences in planetary rotations. Seven planets rotate in reference to their revolution round the sun; Venus rotates backwards; Uranus rotates at a 98-degree angle from its orbital plane. Neither can they account for retrograde satellites. Of 32 moons, 11 orbit in directions opposite to that of the rotational direction of their mother planets. There are other inexplicable anomalies with moons as well (especially with Neptune's moon Triton).

Everything is created in Christ and for Christ and holds together because it is in Christ. This is a vital foundational truth – that Christ is placed at the centre of everything by God and must be placed at the centre of everything for us. If Christ isn't central, things collapse. Things work when Christ is before all else.

This is a very important lesson to understand, and I want to apply this to the church.

The Body of Christ

Notice that immediately after Paul explains that Christ is before all things and holds the universe together, he refers to the Lordship of Christ over the church, affirming that he must have the pre-eminence.

Christ must be the first in the local church. As Head of the body, this is axiomatic. We need no additional exhortations or detailed expositions to establish it, the fact that we are the body and he is the Head is sufficient. In everything that transpires in the local church Christ must be at the centre. In every church decision Christ must be central. In every strategy Christ must be the prime focus. In every aspect of the gathered church meeting together Christ must be predominant. The Head must determine what the body does, not the other way round.

Healthy body life

For a human personality to be properly expressed the body needs to be fully healthy. A person who is sick in bed is unable to demonstrate all that they are. A severe disablement, such as dumbness or quadriplegia, results in much of the character being restricted from expression. In such cases the brain's commands are unable to be obeyed in the body as a result of a trauma. The head desires a certain function but the body does not comply.

The same applies in the church, the body of Christ. The way Christ is fully manifest in the church is when the whole body is functioning properly and freely without restriction. Paul expounds this illustration in 1 Corinthians 12, demanding that every member of the body be allowed to minister in their own particular way. We are forbidden to restrict every member ministry. Indeed it is the prime function of leadership to identify, nourish and release this ministry (Eph 4:11-15).

Leadership

Yet in the modern church all we see around us is a failure of the body to minister. Members are silent in the pews from one week to the next. A few people may do some subsidiary helping, but virtually all the ministry is performed by one man. Worse still this one man dominates the meetings of the body by being prominent the whole time. In many cases additional prominence is given to this one man by titles and a deferential way of speaking to him. One man does all the preaching and teaching. One man says most of the public prayers. One man makes the strategic decisions, or at least dominates the process in arriving at them. One man represents the church at outside meetings.

To cope with all this responsibility this man is given a regular salary despite there being no Biblical basis for such a thing. There is a place for financial gifts to those who labour in the word but this is to be received, as required, by faith, not by formal salaries like a worldly job. Indeed, the setting apart for full-time ministry is the province of itinerant preachers not for local elders. The eldership of the Biblical local church is plural for three reasons: 1) to safeguard the church from domination by one man; 2) to share the pastoral burden so that one man is not overwhelmed; 3) to ensure wisdom in pastoral decisions by multiple

counsellors rather than one authoritarian leader. Such a system does not require a full-time, salaried minister; two or three good men can easily bear this burden together – and that is God’s instruction. Of course this only works when churches are small in number according to the biblical precedent of being able to meet in a house.

This complete focus on one man results in the church being centred upon a man and not Christ. Christ is to be first, he must be pre-eminent in all things. The Father has placed him as before all things in the church – but in practice local churches have set up a man in the prominent position. The modern church does not focus upon Christ in practice, but upon men.

Meetings

Christ must also be foremost in the gathered church meeting together and serving one another. This is why the apostolic reason for gathering together is to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The focal point of the meeting is a memorial and glorification of the work of Christ in atonement and salvation. The Biblical local church meeting pivots around breaking bread in order that Christ is pre-eminent.

Now on the first *day* of the week, ... the disciples came together to break bread. Acts 20:7

Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. ... (See the context; here Paul speaks in criticism since they were feasting instead. The purpose of gathering is to celebrate the Supper, but they focused on their rich food.) 1 Cor 11:20

The Lord’s Supper is a concrete way to centre believers’ thoughts on the life, work, death and resurrection of the Lord every time they gather.

Then again, the way the church meets together, according to the New Testament, is by mutual edification. Why is this? It is because Christ is to be central and not man. We have seen that there is no elevation of a single man in the apostolic church. Leadership was plural and meetings were founded upon the mutual ministry of all members as the Spirit leads (1 Cor 12). To be sure, those with a gift of teaching will have more time than others since this is crucial in instruction, but the emphasis is always upon the ministry and not the minister and the purpose is edification of the whole body.

In mutual encouragement it is what is of Christ that predominates. First this member, then another, shares what the Lord has given them by the power of the Spirit, and all are encouraged and edified (1 Cor 14). The glory in this goes to the Lord who gifts each member sovereignly. This is unlike modern meetings where a man dominates the whole meeting in speech, order, reverence, prominence and even height (in raised platforms and pulpits). This is wrong, it is Christ who should be first.

The Content of church ministry

Teaching

The evangelical world is awash with ‘How To’ books which purport to offer a quick fix to almost everything. By obeying their various lists of propositions, a Christian is supposed to be able to gain financial wealth, become fully healthy, live a spiritual life in power, become popular or even suddenly become a leader. Needless to say there is nothing like this in scripture. These books may fit in with this superficial world with a craving for instant results, but they are far from Biblical teaching and discipleship.

Christian growth is growth in Christ. Discipleship is following Christ. The path to maturity is becoming more like Christ. Christ is the beginning, middle and end of all growth, and

teaching must focus upon him. Christ is the centre of true teaching and the goal of successful pastoring. All roads may lead to Rome but all truth ends in Christ.

Christ is the Word, the expression of the Father's glory. Any true manifestation of God is in Christ. God is a Spirit and invisible to us in this world; thus all expressions of God to man are in Christ. Therefore, as the Bible is the revealed word of God, its entire content is a reflection of Christ in one way or another and all teaching/preaching in the church should centre upon its relation to Christ. The believer will grow in spirit only as he gains understanding of the mystery of 'Christ in you the hope of glory' (Col 1:27).

In this connection we should also note the importance of the New Testament, and particularly of apostolic teaching. The Old Testament pointed to Christ in shadows, through historical narrative, prophecies, types, symbols and poetry. Though full of Christ, they are only shadows (Heb 8:5, 10:1). In the New Testament we first have the words of Christ himself, come at the fulness of time, and the full description of his person and work in the Gospels. Here is the fulness of what the OT promised. We should study most carefully what Christ said and did.

Then we have the testimony of the apostles of the Lord. These men were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to bring truth to their memory and lead them to reveal the final words of Christ from heaven to Earth (Jn 16:14-15). The fulness of the Lord's declaration to men from God is found in the apostolic teaching of the NT. Matters that are cloudy in the OT are brought into direct sunlight in the NT. Things that prophets longed to search into are fully revealed to the NT church and preserved in the apostle's letters.

This means that OT scriptures must be carefully studied in the light of new covenant teaching. This brings many significant changes to the situation that prevails under the old covenant. Grievous errors arise when this rule is forgotten.

To give one obvious example, the whole worship system of Israel is now cancelled. We no longer approach God with literal blood from slain animals. We no longer worship in material structures made by men. We no longer have an officiating priesthood and need none of the clamour of the temple rituals – hordes of singers, musicians, percussionists, musical directors and so on. All these are old covenant, but the new covenant in Christ is spiritual. Worship is now to be in the Spirit and in truth, not in outward form. Though this is basic doctrine, even some of these features dominate modern evangelicalism and are erroneous. Many churches are composed in old covenant ways and this is a denial of Christ's supremacy; a denial of his new covenant.

If the church cannot even obey God in simple and superficial details regarding old covenant forms, how is she going to cope with the deep things of Christ? Obviously, she is not going to cope and the fruit of this is seen all around us in the heresies and aberrations week by week.

Christ must be central in our teaching and we must pay attention to what he says clearly, not to what some misguided preacher expounds from the Old Testament.

The Gospel

The foundation of all teaching is the Gospel; this is the manifestation and exposition of the covenant of God with men. The Gospel is the richness of the whole counsel of God, a purpose that was fulfilled in Christ, the Son sent to Earth to fulfil the covenant requirements and purchase salvation for God's chosen people.

Christ is the centre of the Gospel and the purpose of God.

If Christ is central in the Gospel, then the presentation of this Gospel will also focus upon Christ. The message of the good news is built around all that God has done for us in Christ. It is not an offer but a command: **[God] now commands all men everywhere to repent** (Acts 17:30). Everyone will be judged on how they complied with this command.

Many misunderstand the purpose of the Gospel message thinking that the Gospel is some merciful offer to all people equally. It is not an offer and never spoken of in such a manner, but is God's means of separating the sheep from the goats.

The elect are drawn by God to Christ through the Gospel (Jn 6:44, 65) and empowered by the Spirit to receive Christ (Jn 1:12). Everything is done by God to bring the elect sinner to salvation. He is chosen in eternity (Eph 1:4-5), called (Eph 4:4), drawn, empowered (Jn 1:13), given faith (Eph 2:8) and given the ability to repent (Rm 2:4). There is no work that the sinner can contribute in his conversion. There is no co-operation in salvation; all is of God; **salvation is of the Lord** (Jonah 2:9 and many other places). Even a sinner's believing is a gift of grace not a work. Saints are a gift of the Father to the Son (Jn 17:6, 12, 24) and he secures them for his Son. The glory of salvation is the love and mercy of God seen in Christ.

However the reprobate, those not chosen in eternity, are not called, granted faith or repentance, but are hardened in their sin as they reject the Gospel message (Jn 12:40; Acts 19:9; Rm 9:18). The testimony of reprobation is the wrath and justice of a holy God against sin, meted out by Christ the Judge.

In the Gospel the eternal purpose of God is glorified and Christ is shown to be pre-eminent. His people, the sheep he died for, are glorified (Rm 8:30) while the reprobate are condemned (Jn 3:36).

Everything in the Gospel message thus centres on Christ. There is no apostolic support to proclaim the Gospel on the basis of man's need, pleading for a response or offering 'what Christ can do for you'; still less for any heretical idea that God has a wonderful plan of mercy for every person. God's wonderful plan for Pharaoh was a hardened heart and condemnation soon followed by death in judgment in the Red Sea (Rm 9:17ff). The terrifying truth is that God's plan for many is destruction and even this is for his own purpose and glory:

The LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Prov 16:4).

For the wicked are reserved for the day of doom; they shall be brought out on the day of wrath (Job 21:30).

Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (Rm 9:22).

The glory of the Gospel is Christ. It is the proclamation of his kingdom; a message that will only be heard by his own people; a message that is hated by those who do not know God. It is a celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus for his people. It is a testimony of his life of suffering, his obedience in death and his glory in ascension. It is a witness to his perfections and virtues and a command to submit to his Lordship.

The Gospel message is a confident proclamation of the message of Christ the King bringing salvation to his people and destruction to his enemies.

The Content of Christian ethics

Those who submit to Christ in the Gospel are called to lead a perfect life, a life of righteousness, which means 'doing right'; obeying all God's commands regarding behaviour.

Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. (Col 1:28)

Labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. (Col 4:12)

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rm 12:2)

Many Christians regularly complain that they are not perfect and never will be, or that their church is never going to be perfect. This is wrong and foolish talking. It is true that while we have the old nature present we will never fully attain to perfection. That will only come at the return of the Lord when we will be transformed with a new body. However, we are called to seek perfection, strive for perfection, discipline ourselves to perfection and refuse to tolerate sin or wrong thinking. Errors and imperfection can never be excused but only repented of. Why? Because we are called to be like Christ and he is perfect. The glory of the Christian testimony on Earth is that it glorifies Christ, the perfect man.

What is the essence of Christian ethics?

The essence of godly living is Christ. It is not rules, regulations or law but Christ himself. Jesus is the standard of human behaviour. He is the man by whom God will judge mankind. Anyone who does not match up to Christ will be destroyed on the Day of Judgment. How then can anyone live?

There are two truths which comfort the believer in this.

THE FIRST IS THAT THE BELIEVER IS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN CHRIST. This means that God has decreed that those who believe into Christ have the righteousness of Christ imputed (reckoned) to them forever (Rm 3:24-28, 4:5). Their sin is pardoned and they are declared by God to be truly righteous and fit for heaven. Justification is a legal declaration made by God as Judge that the Christian is no longer a sinner, but now seen as if he is Christ; thus justification leads directly to adoption into God family as a legal heir. The believer is truly righteous, just as righteous as Christ, in the eyes of God. This is his legal and spiritual standing.

THE SECOND IS THAT THE BELIEVER IS SANCTIFIED. There are two aspects to this. The first is that along with justification, a legal or definitive sanctification makes the believer holy in spirit (1 Cor 1:2, 6:11). On being given a new spirit and heart, the believer has a new nature which is in the likeness of Christ (Eph 4:22-24). This heavenly, spiritual nature is sanctified and is the reason why we can pray and commune with God.

However, we still have an old nature and our soul is sometimes given up to this, whereupon it becomes flesh. This happens when we succumb to temptation and sin. In the course of our lives we learn to deny our old nature, take up our cross, and die to our inner lusts. This is THE PROCESS OF SANCTIFICATION that goes on in our soul throughout our human lives (Heb 2:11), until immediately finalised at the return of the Lord (1 Cor 1:8; Eph 5:27; Phil 1:6; Col 1:22; Jude 1:24). At this point of transformation, our spirit, soul and body will all be sanctified and holy (1 Thess 5:23).

So the believer is legally, spiritually, righteous in Christ and is being made practically righteous in Christ more and more. God confirms that the genuine believer will be preserved until the end. Perfection is required because Christ is perfect. God's people are

being progressively made perfect on Earth as they are considered perfect in heaven in order to reflect the glory of Christ, God's perfect Son.

The standard of human behaviour is Christ.

... till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:13)

The power in Christian ethics

It is a mistake made by many to look to man's law (legalism) in order to behave right. That this is foolish is clear. It is denied by apostolic teaching and it is obviously a means of self-serving rather than faith in Christ. If my righteousness is established by my obedience to rules, then there is no glory to Christ. No; legalism and human works are constantly preached against by the apostles.

Another similar mistake is to focus upon Mosaic Law. Again, NT teaching is totally against this, for Christ is the end of the Mosaic Law (Rm 10:4). Believers are not under law but are in-law (Greek, 1 Cor 9:21), a special class. They are not under law like Jews (Rm 6:14-15), neither are they without law like Gentiles, but are fulfillers of God's law in Christ. The whole of the Mosaic Law has been cancelled and the Law of Christ established (Gal 6:2). [For more information see my paper, *The believer's relationship to the Law.*]

A further mistake is to deny the applicability of any law. Some misunderstand the statements made by Paul on the believer and the law and deny that any law applies. This is antinomianism ('against law'). It completely fails to notice that we are under the Law of Christ and that this law is the original moral law, universally true from the beginning, of which much is seen in the moral law of Moses, but enhanced and empowered in the new covenant. Christ's Law contains power for the believer to obey. Moses' Law was a ministration of death (2 Cor 3:7).

All these approaches are wrong, and yet very common in churches. What is the truth.

The truth is in Christ.

As Christ is the end of the Mosaic Law, the fulfilment and completion of all that the Law stipulated, he is also the head of his law, the law of the new covenant. We do not look to regulations for direction in Christian living, we look to Christ. For those in the new covenant, the power of the Spirit of Christ is applied to believers in order to obey Christ's law. Believers are directed by God's word to look to Christ (Heb 12:2) not to rules and commanded to walk in the Spirit (Rm 8:1, 4; Gal 5:16, 25), not in fleshly effort. As they abide in Christ, as they put on the new man, as they are filled with the Spirit, they will bear spiritual fruit – empowered by the Spirit. What is this fruit? It is the character of Christ.

As believers follow Christ in obedience, walking in his Spirit, they will bear a testimony that glorifies Christ and manifests him to the heavenly powers (Eph 3:10).

This is how Christ is glorified and made central in ethics. Christ as a man is one glorious person; the church, which is his body, is a global manifestation of Christ in righteousness that gives glory to God through multitudes.

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Cor 3:17-18)

Conclusion

Christ is before all things. This was God's purpose from the beginning and it is his plan to bring this to a conclusion on the Day of Judgment and restoration of all things. Christ will be pre-eminent in the whole universe forever, since it pleases the Father to place the fulness of the Godhead in bodily form in Christ.

Even in the realm of the consistency of the whole universe Christ is supreme since the cosmos was made through him, for him and by him; and it is Christ who holds it all together every day.

However, the immediate context of Paul's powerful statement is the church, the body of Christ, and Christ is to be pre-eminent in the church especially. How could it be otherwise? The very people of Christ should be the ones manifesting the supremacy of Christ more than anyone or anything else.

But sadly this is not the case. The universe consistently manifests the glory of Christ in the way it is composed and behaves. All material inanimate things obey the laws that Christ established. Unfortunately, those with the most incentive to obey most fail to do so. The modern church, almost universally, has placed man at the centre of her operations. Indeed, many supposed 'Christian' churches are a mockery in that men are not only central, but near worshipped. Some, in their errors and shocking behaviour, hold God in disrepute.

However, even at the level of sincere evangelical works, a great deal is not right. Christ is not central in the leadership, in the church structure, in the life of the church, in the fellowship of the church or even in the ethical lives of the church members. The church is failing her Biblical mission and it chiefly does this by failing to put Christ first.

Beloved, we must change! Christ must be first. Christ is before all things and the church must not only confess this but act upon it with wisdom.

May God have mercy on us all who love Christ.

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