

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GOSPEL-CENTERED CHURCH

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
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## Let's Begin

*We frequently think the obstacles we face as modern Christians in reaching our culture for Christ remain far more complicated than the early church ever faced. Perhaps we thus relieve ourselves of responsibility or even guilt for not doing a better job at evangelism or church growth. While it is true modern Christians face certain obstacles our forefathers did not, it does not follow that the obstacles they faced were either less severe or complicated. In fact, in many respects, the problems they faced have a striking similarity to the obstacles we face.*

*For example, in Colosse, just as today, religious syncretism prevailed. Jesus was seen as “a” way to God but not “the” way to God. For them nothing could be more spiritually arrogant than suggesting that Christianity was the only religion which revealed God. Many paths existed—all leading to the same mountain. The college campus today is a seedbed of religious relativism, informing our youngest generation one religion is just as good as another.*

*Keep this in mind as we begin our study of Colossians. Chapter one unfolds the outline below:*

- I. Gospel-centered Churches Experience the Presence of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 1-14)**
- II. Gospel-centered Churches Exalt the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 15-29)**

## I. Gospel-centered Churches Experience the Presence of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 1-14)

The Apostle begins his letter to the Colossians explaining the spiritual atmosphere of the church of Jesus Christ. For Paul, the Christian's spiritual journey begins with life in Jesus. He writes, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus *our* brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love *which ye have* to all the saints, For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel” (vv. 1-5).

*Christ connects us to life.*

*The presence of the Lord Jesus is visibly experienced in the life we possess. First, Christ connects us to life (v. 2a). As believers, we come into new relationships. Or, as Paul puts it, the church is made up of “saints and faithful brethren.” The term “saints” means “set apart ones.” The Christian is one set apart to God. As “brethren,” we are the family of God linked by a common thread—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And, while Paul wrote specifically to the family of God in Colosse, Christians are spiritually connected to Christians over the entire globe.*

Second, Christ *changes* life (v. 2b). When Christ invades our lives, He brings grace—unmerited favor—and peace. Note the order cannot be reversed. We can never have peace without grace already present in our lives. Grace paves the way for peace to come. Grace is the root of salvation and peace is the fruit of salvation.

Third, Christ *completes* life (vv. 3-5a). As we read these three verses, our eyes lock onto three favorite words of the Apostle Paul: faith, love, and hope (cp. 1 Cor. 13:13). These words summarize the entire span of the Christian's spiritual journey. Our journey begins with faith (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 10:9). Not just belief in anything. To the contrary, saving faith is trust in the Lord Jesus and Him alone. And, the faith we have in Him is teased out in this life through love toward our fellow man, especially love toward other believers (cp. Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22).



Finally, our hope remains in Jesus Christ. The hope we have in Him is not simply wishful thinking as in, “I hope to get a raise in salary.” Rather, Biblical hope, as one Biblical scholar said, always carries with it two ideas—desire and expectation (cp. 1Pet. 1:4; Titus 2:13).

*Second, the presence of the Lord Jesus is visibly experienced in the message we proclaim.* Paul sums up this message, “Whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as *it is* in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as *it doth* also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit” (vv. 5b-8).

Paul makes it crystal clear the church possesses a *truthful message*, calling what we preach, “the word of the truth of the gospel.” This Gospel message contrasts with the mixed, syncretistic message of the culture which insists Jesus is just one of many religious gurus who leads one to eternal bliss. To the contrary, Paul took the words of Jesus literally, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). Saint Augustine said of this verse, “Jesus says, ‘I am the way’ and without Him there is no going; ‘I am the truth’ and without Him there is no knowing; ‘I am the life and without Him there is no living.”

*The truth of the Gospel is as true today as it was in Paul’s day, and it remains for the entire world to accept or reject.*

In addition, Paul indicates the truthful message is a global message designed from beginning to end to go “into all the world.” Again, the Apostle echoes the Lord Jesus Himself (Matt. 28:19-20). The truth of the Gospel is as true today as it was in Paul’s day, and it remains for the entire world to accept or reject.

Observe, Paul not only speaks about the church’s *truthful message*, but also insists the church has *faithful messengers*. How is the Gospel taken to the nations? God could have assigned the responsibility to angels to be sure. However, He did not do so; rather He assigned the responsibility to human beings, human beings with feet of clay (Rom. 10:13-14). One such faithful messenger Paul mentioned was “Epaphras,” whom he deemed “our dear fellowservant,” and who, for the Colossians, remained a “faithful minister of Christ.” God calls us all to be “servants,” a position reserved for the best, most gifted among us. Humility marks the servant of Jesus Christ, for he or she knows the message carried is all about Him, about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the presence of the Lord Jesus can not only be made visible by the *life we possess* and the *message we preach*, but also by the *miracles He performs*. Note again the result of the message preached by faithful messengers: the proclaimed message “bringeth forth fruit” (v. 6). God performs life-changing miracles which accompany true Gospel preaching. Indicative of faithful proclamation, our Lord

### Reflection Connection

*Does your church give an uncertain message about whether Jesus is the only way to be saved? Explain.*



promises us “lo I am with you, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20). His presence continues in His church today. Indeed He “strengthens” us with “all might” developing in our fellowship “patience” and “longsuffering” as we serve Him with all “joyfulness” (v. 11).

Finally, the presence of the Lord Jesus is made visible through the *intercessions we pray*. Note carefully the prayer the Apostle offered, “Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, *even* the forgiveness of sins” (vv. 12-14). Offering a specific prayer (“for you”) is indicative of Paul’s love for the entire Body of Christ since he never met any of the Colossians.

Even more, Paul *continues* to pray for them, for his desire is for them to be “filled” with God’s knowledge. And, just what is the knowledge with which the Colossians so desperately needed to be filled? Namely, the fact that all believers are “delivered from the power of darkness, and hath translated into the kingdom of his dear Son”! How? Our redemption ever remains through the “blood” Jesus shed on Calvary, a message the apostolic church must never tire of proclaiming.

## II. Gospel-centered Churches Exalt the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 15-29)

Paul now gives what may exist as the most complete description of the Person of Jesus Christ found anywhere in the New Testament. *First, He is supreme God*. He writes, “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by 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 might have the preeminence. For it pleased *the Father* that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, *I say*, whether *they be* things in earth, or things in heaven” (vv. 15-20).

Paul proclaims that Jesus Christ is *above the creation* (vv. 15-17). When the Apostle opens his praise of the Lord Jesus, he journeys back to before creation itself. Two particular words leap off the page. First the term “image,” which Paul insists Jesus bears of “the invisible God.” The term carries with it the idea of exact representation. In other words, Paul asserts Christ is the exact representation of God Himself. He makes the invisible God visible. If anyone wants to see God, simply look at Jesus of Nazareth; He is God’s exact image (cp. 1:19 and 2:9). Deity is at home in Jesus Christ. Jesus is not “a” god; Jesus is the God in human form (cp. John 14:9).

The second word is “firstborn.” Immediately, we may be tempted to infer from “firstborn” the idea of being formed or created. Nothing could be further from Paul’s meaning, however. The term “firstborn” concerns being *prior in time*; hence,



the Apostle mentions “before all things.” In other words, before anything was created, the eternal Logos (John 1:1) existed as the second Person of the Triune God. Christ is above all things and before all things. Indeed it is through Him the entire cosmos “consists.” He holds all things together whether in heaven or on earth. All things are “through Him” and “for Him.”

Not only is He *above the creation*, he is also *over the church* (v. 18). He is “head” over the entire body, the church. Jesus told the disciples He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). In fact, governance belongs to Him, not us. When we speak of our church, we obviously do not mean such in the sense of owning the church or being over the church. Instead we are speaking of “our” church in the same sense as we speak of “our” family. Not so when the Apostle speaks of the Lord’s church. Jesus Christ literally owns the church and is governor of it. He guides it through history and one day will come for it.

Christ is further exalted as being *on the cross* (v. 20). It was on the cross Christ paid the church’s sin debt, reconciling them to God. Not only so, He paid the entire debt of the world, making it possible for all who believe in Him to be saved (cp. John 3:16). The price He paid and the peace He gave through Calvary’s cross is inestimable for sinful human beings. Eternity cannot reveal the gratitude we owe to our Savior.

### Reflection Connection

*Does your church focus on the Gospel? Explain how the Gospel is central for your congregation.*

And, Paul is perfectly clear about our reconciliation in Him. He writes, “And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, *I say*, whether *they be* things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in *your* mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, *and* which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister” (vv. 20-23).

Again, Paul insists on emphasizing the *price He paid* (vv. 20, 22). Indeed the price included His *real* body (“body of his flesh”) along with His *real* blood (“through the blood of his cross”). No sacrifice remained adequate to pay our sin debt. Because of the tremendous *price He paid*, the *peace He gave* is a constant reminder of His deserved exaltation. He “made peace” through His blood, reconciling “all things to himself.” The cross becomes the meeting place between a holy God and a rebellious world. We who were enemies toward God are now at peace with Him. The “wicked works” of our lives are now forgiven, and the guilt taken away through His loving sacrifice. The battle is over; peace is declared!

*The cross becomes the meeting place between a holy God and a rebellious world.*

Consequently, God’s purpose is now declared—“to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight” (v. 22). God stooped down to



rebels bent on cursing Him and disobeying Him and made peace through the sacrifice of His only begotten Son. If anyone asks, “How do I know there is a God Who loves me?” the Christian possesses a ready answer—“Just take a look at the cross.”

Finally, the Apostle gives three practical truths the Gospel-centered church always employs (vv. 24-29). *First, the presence of Jesus Christ is exalted in our life.* The reality of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe indwelling believers almost takes our breath away. We know we are “in Him,” which is the secret of all victorious living for the believer. We received His presence by faith (cp. Eph. 3:17), and we release His presence through surrender (Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 2:20).

### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul summarizes the work of Christ’s cross in a unique way to the Colossians, “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son” (v. 13). The Greek word behind the English term “translated” is *methistēmi*, and basically means “to change,” or in its negative sense, “to pervert” or “to turn away.” Concerning the latter, note the complaint against the missionary work of the Apostle Paul who was “turning away” many people from the common gods (Acts 19:26). In its positive sense, the Greek carries the idea of transporting or “carrying away;” thus Paul tells us we are transported from one kingdom to another, from darkness to light.

*Second, the power of Jesus Christ is exalted in our life.* The “hope of glory” is “Christ in you” (v. 27; cp. Isa. 40:31). Our weak strength is exchanged for His mighty power. Elsewhere, Paul reminds us, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13; Eph. 3:16). The “afflictions” we receive because of our testimony cannot be compared to the glory we receive from faithfully serving Him (Rom. 8:18). The only way we will be complete or “perfect” in Him is through the power He gives to us.

*Third, the prospect of Jesus Christ is exalted in our life.* Again the Apostle refers to the “hope of glory” (v. 27). Our future is optimistic only because of Christ and nothing or no one else. Were we to pass by the nearest cemetery we would be readily reminded of the hopelessness apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If Christ was not raised from the dead, what hope do we possess for the future (cp. 1 Cor. 15:15-17; Ps. 17:15)? The hope of the world remains in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church which pleases God—the Gospel-centered church—exalts the Lord Jesus as its exclusive hope.

### Wrap Up

*In this study, we noted two marks which characterize the church which makes the hub of its ministry the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The first mark was the visible aspects of Jesus’ continued presence in His body, the church. The faithful church will have a truthful message delivered by faithful messengers. Furthermore, the unashamed exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ characterizes His faithful congregation. No greater purpose can the body of Christ render to our God than exalting the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to the nations.*