

### Colossians 1:1-14

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,<sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,<sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,<sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,<sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf<sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,<sup>10</sup> so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;<sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy;<sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.<sup>13</sup> He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,<sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

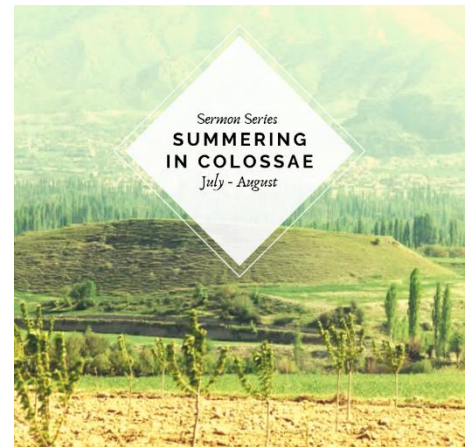
#### Colossians, Part 1: Understanding Spiritual Authority

You've probably gathered from the graphic on your bulletin insert, today we'll begin a five-week summer sermon series on Paul's letter to the Church in Colossae ("coloss-eye"). Now my impetus for doing this sermon series is that next week the lectionary was schedule to begin taking us through Colossians. But I'm away next Sunday, so I decided to switch our second lessons for this week and next week and begin part one of "Summering in Colossae". So part two will be when I return on the 21<sup>st</sup>. But for part one this morning I want to introduce the series by explaining the occasion for Paul writing this letter. And then I want to ponder what we can make of Paul *choosing* to write this letter and how it might relate to our own journeys with Christ.

#### **Introducing the Letter**

Now, beginning with Colossae, as you can see from the map on your insert, it was an ancient town situated in the Lycus river valley of what is now Southeast Turkey, known in biblical times as Asia Minor. It has a population just a hair larger than Oakdale. And believe it or not, when you look at the graphic that says "Summering in Colossae", you are actually looking at a picture of Colossae today. The hill there that's about 100 feet high and sort of unnaturally shaped with a flat top was the site of Colossae was before it ceased to exist in later Roman times. Hills like this, which archaeologists call 'tels', T-E-L, tend to mark the sites of ancient cities as a result of the accumulated refuse of generations of people living on the same site for hundreds or thousands of years. But remarkably, even though the site of Colossae was discovered in 1835, still to this day it has never actually been excavated! Although an Australian university is rumored to be planning on it, to this point archaeologists have focused more of their attention on neighboring Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Now the writer of this letter was Paul, and to make sure we're on the same page about him: he, of course, was a Jew who had his conversion to Christ maybe two years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. And this conversion famously occurred when Paul had a miraculous encounter with the ascended Lord on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus, recorded in Acts chapter 9. And at that time the Lord made clear that



Paul would be his lead apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), to non-Jews. Well, about ten years passed before Paul began his missionary journeys. However, on that first journey begun in 44 A.D. he only made it as far west as Pisidian Antioch, which you can see in the upper right corner of your map. Then, on his second and third missionary journeys, Paul made it all the way to Greece. However, there is no record of him ever travelling through Colossae. He seems to have come closest on his third journey, when he travelled from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus, which you can see on the map would have brought him pretty close – Laodicea was less than a day’s walk – but he never actually went to Colossae. So how then did there come to be a church in Colossae?

Well, once Paul made it to Ephesus on that third journey around 55 A.D., he remained *there* for at least two years, and spent some of that time teaching in the synagogue. Well, with Ephesus being such a major city – being at least five times larger than Colossae during that time – it served as a hub of sorts, bringing visitors from all over the region for business, or worship, or pleasure. And while Paul was there, those who encountered him proclaiming the gospel and found Christ for themselves would often then return home and share the gospel there. In fact, Paul would even send out some of them with a definite commission to evangelize and form Churches in these places. And this actually proved to be a very effective means of spreading the gospel, as Luke reports in Acts 19 that during time Paul was in Ephesus (quote) “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

So this appears to be the way the gospel arrived in Colossae. In our passage, beginning in verse 2, Paul writes to the Colossian Christians,

*<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. <sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.*

It seems likely that this Epaphras had been one of those travelers to Ephesus who had heard Paul’s teaching and converted. And being from the Colossae area about 100 miles away, Paul likely sent him back to his home to share the gospel there and, as others came to believe, the Church of Colossae was formed. And we have no idea how big the Colossian church was, whether it was 20 people or 200. So even though Paul probably *never* ended up stepping foot in Colossae, Paul was essentially their missionary bishop, while Epaphras served as their local pastor. In fact, the end of verse 7 calls him “a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf” and the Greek word translated “minister” here is actually ‘diakonos’ or deacon. Remember, initially there were only two categories of ministers: bishops (or overseers) and deacons. The third and middle order of priests probably didn’t emerge until around the beginning of the second century. So Epaphras was the primary deacon ministering to the Church in Colossae on Paul’s behalf.

Now, there’s some debate about when Paul *actually wrote* this letter to the Colossians. Chapter 4 will reveal Paul is writing it from prison (vv3,10), and scholars have deduced he was likely imprisoned at the end of those two years in Ephesus. So, if that is the case, the Colossian church was less than two years old. But even if Paul *didn’t* write to them until his imprisonment in Rome in 62 or 63 A.D., even then the Colossian Church would only have been about five to seven years old.

But this leads us to the circumstance that compelled Paul to write to the Church in Colossae. We know from verse 8 that, once the Colossian Church was formed, Epaphras had reported back to Paul about its status. But as a very young church comprised of believers who were very young in their faith, this would’ve made their faith especially vulnerable. And toward the end of chapter 1 it will become apparent that Paul is writing the Colossian Church primarily to address a heretical teaching that – despite being at odds with the gospel they had received through Epaphras – had begun to gain acceptance among some of the believers there. And we’ll address this more deeply in the second sermon of the series.

## **On Spiritual Authority**

Now, in the final paragraph of our passage today, Paul begins hinting at some of the issues he will cover in the letter and that we will cover in the series. But what I've already shared about the reason for Paul writing the letter is enough information for what I'd like to explore with the rest of my time today, and that is the subject of spiritual authority. After Paul recognizes how some in the Colossians Church had become vulnerable to erroneous teaching, he exercises his spiritual authority over them by writing this letter of teaching and encouragement. And you may say, "Well, that's the Apostle Paul. Of course he has spiritual authority." But the truth is that every one of us as believers has some spiritual authority. Borrowing from author Peter Scazzero, I would define spiritual authority as the capacity to influence. Spiritual authority is our capacity to influence others for the kingdom of God. And so, everyone Christian has some degree of spiritual authority in certain relationships; every one of us has the capacity to influence others spiritually, though not all to the same degree(s) – and we all use that authority either "well or poorly, for good or for ill".

Now, as I see it, when it comes to spiritual authority, our relationships can be divided into three categories.

- First, there are relationships that by their very nature give us some degree of spiritual authority over another.
  - So, one example of this would be **formal** positions of spiritual authority over other souls, such as a Bishop over his diocese, a pastor or priest over their flock or congregation, and even on down to a Sunday School teacher over the children in their charge.
  - But there are also positions that **naturally** give one person spiritual authority over another, such as when one is a parent to children who are minors. They have a God-given authority over those children – and responsibility – to instruct, encourage, and discipline them spiritually. And godparents have similar authority, though certainly to a *lesser* extent than a child's parents.
    - So with these relationships, no one should have to tell us whether we have spiritual authority, we just do!!
- Conversely, we may also have relationships where we are **under** the spiritual authority of another
  - So in church, a layperson is under at least some level of spiritual authority of their pastor or priest, though I would observe that the extent of the authority anyone grants to a religious leader certainly varies
    - Also, in our Anglican tradition when parishioners are confirmed or received by the Bishop of the Diocese, we are submitting to his spiritual authority to instruct us in the scripture, theology, and morality
  - But a Child who is a minor is also naturally under the spiritual authority of their parents; as well as to a lesser extent their godparents, if they have them, and a Sunday School teacher.
- But in between these two types of relationships there are what I would call **peer relationships**...
  - ...and with these relationships, spiritual authority has to be granted.
    - So one example would be in a friendship, because the two parties are equal, for one to have the spiritual authority to speak into the other's life or hold them accountable, that authority must be granted
      - Therefore, in a friendship it would be inappropriate for one party to presume to have the authority to instruct or give advice in spiritual matters to the other.
      - I may have friendships where I wouldn't *dare* to give advice or bring up a spiritual concern about them, because the other person hasn't welcomed it; they haven't ever given me that authority.
        - Now, does this mean I would never talk about religion or Church? No, because it is a significant part of my life. But it could mean I restricting such talk to being to how such matters are effecting me.
      - But in contrast, I may have other friendships where the person has given me what I like to call a hunting license, that is, the authority to speak into their life or hold them accountable (by either explicitly saying so or by implicitly making it obvious they would welcome that sorta thing)

- Another example of a peer relationship would be **marriage**. Now, I know that the bible says “wives submit to your husbands”, in fact one instance of that appears later in Colossians, which we’ll get to later in the series. But I would suggest to you that, similar to a friendship, a marriage will function best when the spouses voluntarily grant spiritual authority for the other to speak into their lives and hold them spiritually accountable and so on. And this is poignantly true when one spouse is not in Church or not a believer, which we’ll talk a little more about in a bit.
- But it may come as a surprise to some when I suggest that a final example of peer relationship from the standpoint of spiritual authority is the **relationship between a parent and their adult child**.
  - Last Sunday I talked about families who don’t encourage or enable their children to develop their own sense of self as they get older. This would be a situation where parental spiritual authority is being abused.
  - Now, certainly when both parents and the adult child are both spiritually and emotionally healthy the adult child will naturally re-grant some level of spiritual authority to the parent, although never to the same level as when they were a minor. But in order to genuinely grant that authority, the adult child needs to have been given full responsibility for themselves in the first place. ##

So, having said all of this, **the task** then **for each of us** is to determine the extent of spiritual authority we have in our different relationships, so we can exercise it appropriately, as well as determining the extent that we should allow others to have spiritual authority to speak into our lives.

And, as I’ve been reflecting on this, it occurred to me that the problems we can experience with regard to spiritual authority will mirror the general problems around boundaries that can arise in any relationship. On the back of your insert at the top, you’ll find a chart that will be familiar to those who participated in the Lenten Boundaries workshop. This chart summarizes four common reasons general boundary problems can arise in our relationships, beginning on the top left with compliants struggle to say no when they need to, while controllers can’t respect a no from others. Then, on the bottom non-responsives can’t say yes to the needs of others who the Lord calls them to care about, while the avoidant person will struggle to receive or ask for the love they need from others. So I want to explain how these categories of more general boundary problems are applicable to dysfunction we may experience around spiritual authority.

Summary of Boundary Problems		
	CAN'T SAY	CAN'T HEAR
NO	<b>The Compliant</b> Feels guilt and/or controlled by others; can't set boundaries	<b>The Controller</b> Aggressively or manipulatively violates boundaries of others
YES	<b>The Nonresponsive</b> Sets boundaries that don't show care for the needs of others	<b>The Avoidant</b> Sets boundaries that mean they don't receive care from others

Summary of Boundary Problems		
	CAN'T SAY	CAN'T HEAR
NO	<b>The Compliant</b> Grants spiritual authority (sometimes implicitly) to people they shouldn't	<b>The Controller</b> seeks to exercise spiritual authority where it hasn't been given
YES	<b>The Nonresponsive</b> Fails to exercise the spiritual authority they have	<b>The Avoidant</b> Refuses to live under spiritual authority

### Exercising Spiritual Authority where we don't have it

As we exercise spiritual authority in different relationships, we may err in the direction of the **controller**. The controller seeks to exercise spiritual authority where it hasn't been given. And we're going to be most prone to do this in peer relationships. So for example, this will commonly come up in relationships with family like our siblings, or parents, in our relationships with adult children, or our spouses. The temptation to try to play God in their lives can be really powerful. But in those relationships we need to ask ourselves: to what extent has that person granted us spiritual authority to speak into their lives – which, of course, can change as the relationship evolves. But this is crucial to understand, because if we attempt to exert authority beyond their boundary, they will quickly begin to view us judgmental or as a nag. Until someone has granted us spiritual authority in their lives, I would suggest the greatest ways we can love them is by respecting their “no” – whether spoken or unspoken – and instead be proactive by praying for the Lord to soften their hearts and to help us to preach the gospel without words through sacrificial love and acceptance. #

But beyond our families and friends, some may also have a tendency of exceeding their authority when it comes to evangelism. Whether it's with a co-worker or the person in line behind us at the grocery, many churches will teach believers that these are prime targets for sharing the gospel. But unless they give some opening or invite religious engagement, I would suggest that aggressively sharing the gospel with them might be more damaging to the cause of Christ than good. It's like when you get annoyed that a Jehovah's Witness comes to your door; it's because that's a boundary violation: they weren't invited. And typically overly aggressive approaches to evangelism are motivated more by our own fear or our anxiety about pleasing God, rather than actually by love for the other; so it's unsurprising that they would tend to bear bad fruit. But the good news here is that we aren't God, and are not responsible for being proactive where we have not been granted authority; so relax and focus your energy where you have been given spiritual authority.

### **Neglecting Spiritual Authority where it's been given**

But this leads us to relationships where we have spiritual authority or it's been granted to us, but we fail to exercise it. And this would fall into the category of being nonresponsive.

Not this sorta neglect happens by default when a parent isn't a believer. In a sermon a few years ago<sup>a</sup> I mentioned how a 1994 study in Switzerland demonstrated that statistically one of the greatest indicators of whether a child will be a practicing Christian as an adult is whether their father was a practicing Christian when they were a child. If he was, then there is about a 70% chance they will grow up to be churchgoers; if he wasn't there is a 2% chance they will grow up to be churchgoers.

But even as believers, we can really struggle to exercise the spiritual authority we've been given. Even when our spouse or friends grant us some spiritual authority, it can still be really easy to lazily neglect it. And I think the more intimate the relationship, the harder it gets. Just to be confessional, I'll admit that as a priest I find it a lot easier to exercise my spiritual authority with parishioners than with my own kids. And I think that's because with my kids it's so much more intimate and there is so much more at stake. And yet, our reluctance to assert ourselves leaves a vacuum, that our children will fill one way or another.

Just imagine if Paul *hadn't* exercised his spiritual authority with the Church in Colossae. And Paul models what a proper exercise of that authority can look like by indicating he'd been praying for the Colossians; and by writing this letter he is speaking the truth to them in love; despite writing to correct them, here in the opening of the letter he is affirming and encouraging of them about all sorts of things. And the mere survival of that letter indicates that they valued his correction and righted their course. But the good news is that we can make an enormous impact on the lives where we've been given spiritual authority if only we will take it seriously. #

So the guardrails for engaging others are to avoid exercising spiritual authority where we haven't been given it, but not neglect exercising it in relationships where it has been given. But what about the determining the extent we should allow others to have spiritual authority to speak into our lives?

### **Allowing Spiritual Authority where it's not merited or deserved**

Well, we can have weak boundaries in this manner when we allow people to speak into our lives where it isn't merited or deserved. Jesus warned about this in Matthew when he said, <sup>15</sup> "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" Now this doesn't mean people of poor character or can't be used by God to speak into our lives, but if we find ourselves being persuaded by something they say, we are best to check it out with spiritual authorities we trust. But this seems to be what the Colossian Christians had failed to do. As these individuals came among them a teaching that contradicted the Gospel they had received from Paul through Epaphras, they should at least have taken it to Epaphras or Paul to see how they would respond. And we'll talk more in part 2 of the series about how Christians can wisely engage new religious or ethical ideas.

But compliance can also rear its head as a result of some of the dysfunctional family dynamics we talked about last week, where we said the mark that a child has grown into spiritual adulthood is when they out from under their parents' spiritual authority and transition to living under the spiritual authority of

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<sup>a</sup> 4/23/17



their heavenly Father and the values of God's family. So the good news here is that we shouldn't feel any obligation to give spiritual authority or heed the criticisms of those who do not display spiritually and emotionally healthy characters.

### **Refusing to live under sound Spiritual Authority**

But a final way we can err is by being avoidant and refusing to grant spiritual authority to other sound leaders in our lives. So how are we to determine the people in our lives who are worthy of being given spiritual authority to instruct us or hold us accountable. Well, I would suggest we should grant it to people who are seeking after – or better yet who have – what we want. As Paul will later say to the Thessalonians, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake... living out the gospel not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5).

Now, as I mentioned earlier, those of you who are regular attenders here at Saint Matthias are already granting some modicum of spiritual authority to me by coming here and sitting under my teaching. But my hope is that the *extent* of the spiritual authority you give me would correlate to the extents that my teaching reflects the biblical gospel and that my life reflects what I teach.

And the same principle also applies to granting spiritual authority – or hunting licenses – to spouses and friends and family members to the extent they are emotionally and spiritually maturity. And yet, I also think it's more than appropriate with certain people to grant spiritual authority on some subjects, where they've proven trustworthy, but not on others, where perhaps they've shown to have blindspots or bias from wounding.

But finally, there is also great value for us in submitting to the sacrament of confirmation, not even so much to Bishop Menees specifically, but as an acknowledgement of our need for apostolic authority for our Christian faith and practice. But when we fail to grant spiritual authority to others in our lives, we are left to rely on our understanding and live without accountability. And that is a path destined for spiritual destruction. And yet, we stand to gain so much if we can become willing to humble ourselves and submit to sound authorities.

### **Conclusion**

Now, this issue of spiritual authority is not static. Rather, we can expect it to shift as *we change* and as *relationships change*. But we have a responsibility to face up to how we're conducting ourselves and ask for the Lord for the wisdom and guidance to align our lives in accordance with His will. How is the Holy Spirit speaking to you about spiritual authority this morning? And what will you do about it?

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.