

Colossians 1:15-2:10

¹⁵ He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them

God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

^{2:1} For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Colossians, Part 2: Discerning Truth

This morning we pick back up with part two of our series on the book of Colossians, which is St. Paul's letter to the Church in Colossae.

I preached part one two weeks ago, before I went on vacation. And you may recall that it concerned the subject of spiritual authority and the importance of exercising it in the relationships where we have authority, but also discerning where we *haven't* been given that authority, where exercising it will likely cause more harm than good.

But in part one I also introduced the letter to the Colossians. I explained that Colossae was a town in the southwest quadrant of what is now Turkey, and the gospel of Christ had come to Colossae only *indirectly* through the ministry of St Paul. As he mentions in chapter 2, verse 1 of today's passage, Paul had never been with the Colossian Christians "face-to-face". Instead, that there was man named Epaphras, who was probably from Colossae, but who seems to have encountered Paul and been led into a relationship to Christ in Ephesus, before being sent back by Paul to Colossae to share the gospel with people he knew and establish the Church. But despite the fact that Paul had never made it to Colossae himself, he had no hesitancy about standing in his spiritual authority with the Christians there. So when he learns from Epaphras that some in the Colossian Church had begun to be persuaded by a heretical teaching, Paul writes them this letter we read from today, which eventually came to be included in the canon of Holy Scripture.

But what was this heretical teaching that had become so influential in the Colossian Church and that Paul is writing this letter to combat? Well, we cannot give a complete, definitive answer to this question, because what we know comes only from what scholars have pieced together from different comments Paul makes in the letter and from what is known about the religious ideas prevalent in the region at the time. But what we can say with a pretty high level of confidence is that an individual or group of individuals had come into the Colossian Church, and they likely presented themselves as Christians. In fact it doesn't seem that anything they were saying was directly *opposed* to Christ or His lordship. Instead, the problem was what they were saying the Colossian Christians needed to add on to their faith in Christ. What they introduced to the Colossian Christians were some spiritual practices that they purported had been revealed to them, which were rooted in Judaism and they claimed would bring the Colossians greater spiritual peace

and moral purity. For greater spiritual peace they prescribed the mystical practice of angel worship and for attaining greater moral purity they insisted on the practice of some of Judaism's more rigorous regulations & observances.^a And today we'll be examining the first of these – the practice of angel worship – and seeing how Paul addresses it.

But first I should explain what caused the Colossians Christians to be so vulnerable to being persuaded by these false teachings rooted in Judaism. This may seem especially surprising because these Christians were not ethnically Jewish like Paul and others; they were gentiles.^b However, their unfamiliarity with Judaism probably made them all the more susceptible to being persuaded about the legitimacy of these quasi-Jewish ideas and practices. Think about it, the members of the Colossian Church had turned from paganism to faith in Christ. But Christ is, of course, the Jewish messiah, who proclaimed he was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets of the Hebrews scriptures, scriptures that were all of a sudden the authoritative, but that these young gentile Christians probably didn't know a whole lot about. So one can imagine how these gentile Christians would've been extremely vulnerable to confusion and susceptible to persuasion about things presented as being of the Jewish roots of Christianity.^c

However, the idea of angel worship probably seems pretty bizarre to us. But let me explain this a little more. You see, among the Jews of Paul's day it was commonly believed that angels were at work behind political structures of the world, along with their evil demonic counterparts (which are just fallen angels). So these powers were thought to wield such influence, directing the rulers and people of the world, that they became referred to by many as the "angels of the nations". So the false teachers who had come into the Colossian Church seem to have convinced some of these Christians that seeking to engage these angels could not only lead them to enjoy mystical spiritual visions and experiences, but that it could also effect some of the external situations of their lives – whether it be relationships or politics – for the better. Thus, the promise of greater spiritual peace.

So it's not too hard to imagine how the promises of spiritual experiences and greater control over their lives would've appealed to the Colossians in their sinfulness,^d however foreign that specific practice might seem to us. But let's look at how Paul seeks to convince them that this is a false path.

Where our passage picks up in chapter 1, verse 15, Paul launches into what some have even suggested is actually a poem he has written, but it is all about the supremacy of Christ. In the first three verses, Paul writes of Jesus

“¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The way Paul first counters these Colossians' focus on angels is by pointing to the supremacy of Christ over all creation. Paul makes the remarkable assertion that all things were created through Christ, are sustained by Christ, and are ultimately for Christ – all of the life in the universe is ultimately meant for his glory. And what Paul accomplishes here is showing that these angels the Colossians have become preoccupied with are *chopped liver* in comparison to Christ; that whatever dominion or authority they might have, they are still created beings who are subject to Him!

But then in the second half of this paragraph or poem, Paul says that in addition to all of creation being *in Christ and through Christ and for Christ*, Jesus is central to the salvation of humanity that has now begun to unfold. Paul continues in verse 18,

“¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church.

In ancient times, the head was understood to be the source of life for the body. So Paul is saying that just as it is necessary for a body to be attached to a head to have life, so remaining connected to Jesus is

^a While Gnosticism did not fully develop until the 2nd century, the emphasis upon secret knowledge and asceticism indicates the ideas of these heretics were very much in the vein of pre-Gnosticism.

^b See Colossians 1:21

^c Bp Handley Moule: “in some quarters of the Jewish religious world, about the apostolic time, there was a tendency to disarm Gentile prejudice by representing Jewish doctrine and practice as a sort of “philosophy,” practical rather than speculative.”

^d Our two week series in June on the erroneous doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit revealed how the notion of a next level of religion can be so appealing to believers in our longing for spiritual experiences and spiritual

indispensable for the spiritual life of the Church, as Jesus is the wellspring of spiritual life for all humankind. And then Paul explains how this opportunity to spiritual life was opened through Jesus' resurrection from the dead, next writing about Jesus, (quote)

"He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

N.T. Wright explains the significance of what Paul is saying here is that many people, religions, philosophies have admitted there is a God and have sought after truth, but found both God and truth remaining shrouded in mystery. But the coming of Jesus changed this because he reveals both God and truth to the world. So Paul again is pointing to ways that these angels don't hold a candle to Jesus. And everything Paul has said here about Jesus is affirmed elsewhere, for example: in the gospel of John.

- John chapter 1 opens by describing Jesus with the Greek word *logos*, which means something like the source of all being. He says,
 - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.
- Then John goes on to explain how Jesus is God's means for revealing himself to the world in human form, a form we can comprehend and understand. In the same passage John says, no one has ever seen God; until the only son – who is God – and who was at the Father's side came and made him known.^e
- And later on, in John chapter 18, while standing before Pilate Jesus will also identify himself as the revelation of truth, saying, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."^f
- And finally, it is also in John that Jesus promises His disciples that if they will love him he will send His Holy Spirit to indwell them and to guide them into all truth.^g

But returning to this first paragraph of our Colossians passage: as we said, what Paul is doing here is showing that these angels the Colossians have become preoccupied with are nothing in comparison to Christ:

- Not only were they created by Him and remain subject to Him. But furthermore, whatever 'secret knowledge' these false teachers claim to be offering in regard to angels must pale in comparison to what is available to them in Christ. Beginning in the fourth paragraph, verse 3, Paul identifies Jesus as the one "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" and – verse 9 – in whom the whole fullness of (god's) deity dwells" and has come to dwell in them – verse 10: "you have been filled in him" and – by the way, did I mention he is head over the angels, "over all rule and authority"?^h

This is what the kids these days would call a biblical mic drop. ☺ I mean, after hearing this how could the Colossians possibly go back to seeking out spiritual experiences with angels?

But at this point you may be wondering how all of this is relevant for us. After all, I doubt many of us are planning on worshipping angels; that's probably not on any of our agendas for the day. But what's valuable for us is the insight Paul provides in how we can discern truth, true spiritual doctrines and practices. That's part of our mission statement here at Saint Matthias: that we seek to "worship Jesus Christ, to live in his truth, and bless others in his name."

In chapter 1 verse 23 Paul's counsel to the Colossians is to continue in the gospel they heard from him through Epaphras; he exhorts them not to shift from the hope of that gospel where Christ is central. And Paul will reiterate this instruction in the second to last paragraph, when he says, "⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith,

^e John 1:18

^f John 18:37

^g John 14:15-17, 15:26-27, 16:13

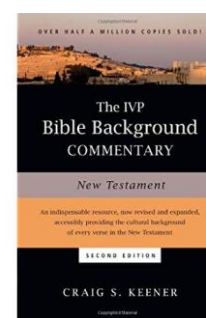
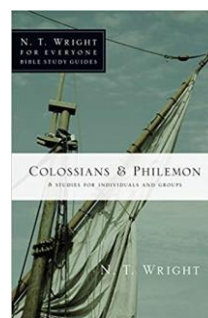
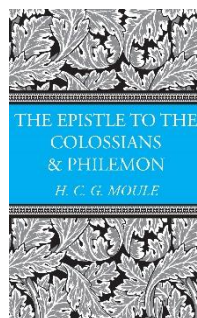
^h Bp Handley Moule writes, "(The Colossians) were tempted to forget that (Jesus) is the ultimate 'Secret of God' (ii. 2), in whom the Christian possesses all that God has to reveal for his salvation; in whom he has access to all the wealth of the Divine wisdom; in whom he is 'filled full,'" and united to God.

just as you were taught...” So, of all the problems Paul could have highlighted about angel worship, the heart of Paul’s argument against it is that it detracts from Jesus, it takes the Colossians away from Jesus, who is the end-all-be-all of creation and their salvation. And if we want to live in the truth, this will be key for us as well. Since everything in creation is from him and for him and since he is our source of life and truth and connects us to God, with every new idea we encounter or spiritual practice that is suggested to us the question should be: will this draw me nearer to Jesus or away from him? Is this consistent with the truth he reveals, with his Two Greatest Commandments of loving God and neighbor, and what he was about in sacrificial love? Is this consistent with who I know him to be, or not? N.T. Wright suggests Paul is offering the acid test for the truthfulness of anything, which is “does this line up with King Jesus?”

But this should not only apply to new ideas we encounter, but to old ideas we’ve inherited from our families, from the culture around us, and even from Church. Three weeks ago, when we had our joint service with the CCRC, I shared some about my own journey and how in the Bible Belt culture of the upperclass South, despite most or many people identifying as Christian, the gospel I inherited – that I learned from others – was actually quite distorted. And so, my Christian journey has not only been one of seeking to discern the truthfulness of new ideas I encounter and whether they line up with Jesus, but with also being willing to question long-held attitudes and doctrines that despite being received in churches or from other Christians *may not actually reflect* the heart of Jesus.

But finally, I want to emphasize that in order for something to be true does not mean it must be explicitly or overtly Christian, because not all truth is religious or spiritual in nature. There are also truths across a variety of disciplines in science, psychology, history, medicine, most of which cannot be learned from the Bible.ⁱ And this certainly doesn’t mean that everything thought by the experts in these fields is correct, but all truth is God’s truth. And this means that because the Lord is the source of all creation we need not fear what findings may come from these fields, but should instead take seriously what these sources may have to contribute to our knowledge of the truth. In fact, some of these fields may help us to recognize where we may have misinterpreted scripture or projected questions onto scripture that it is not seeking to answer; the field of science has been doing this since Galileo. But while this idea that all truth is God’s truth would be affirmed by reformation thinkers like John Calvin, its origin can be traced to St Augustine, who insisted that Christians should always be seeking to learn and should be open to the truth *wherever* it can be found. Augustine wrote “a person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities...”^j So as followers of the Lord of truth, we should love and seek after truth wherever it can be found. But once again, we should be heartened with the promise that we are not left to discern truth from falsity on our own. Rather, we do so in relationship with him, and equipped with his life and revelation as our standard.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.



ⁱ The Bible contains all things necessary for salvation, but it does not contain all of the truth. In fact, there are many matters that scripture doesn’t address, certainly many matters of a non-religious nature, but there also some religious matters that are non-essential to salvation where Scripture is silent or unclear. And in those matters, as Anglicans, we rely on our reason and tradition, that is what God may have revealed through his Church over the centuries.

^j The rest of the quote: “...and deploring & avoiding those who ‘though they knew God did not glorify him as god’”