

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Not Shifting From the Hope

Colossians 1:18-23

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.

Just as Christ is supreme over all the natural creation, He is sovereign over the new creation, the church. He is the head of the body – the church. Paul uses this analogy – the church as the body of Christ – throughout his letters, and it illustrates at least three things. First, it illustrates the fact that **the church is a living organism – not a building, or a club, or a society, or a business.** *He is the head of the body, the church.* The church is a body, with all of its parts (members as the Bible calls us), in a living, breathing, relationship with one another. This is one reason why church splits are so difficult and painful. Imagine if you will, that your legs parted company with the rest of you one day in a fit of anger. Not only would that be painful, but it would make it very difficult to get around. And yet, so many people, not recognizing the truth of our spiritual connectedness, will lobby for their own way in the body, until one day they succeed in amputating their little part of the body from the rest. Church splits would be a thing of the past if every member walked in humility and carried out their function as the Head of the body directed – not as their own selfish desires dictated.

Secondly, the body illustrates the fact that **it is through the church that Christ accomplishes His purpose and performs His work in the world.** Literally, we are the hands and feet, the ears and eyes, the muscles and sinews of His body. He is the head – we are the body. Just as Jesus, the Living Word, manifested in the flesh, made known or explained the Father as John says in his gospel: *'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.'* John 1:18, we as the body of Christ make known and declare Christ to the world.

And it is the **through the church that the great enemy of God will be defeated.** Christ triumphs through the church. Jesus told the disciples, on the occasion of Peter's revelation that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that on this revelation, He would build His church and the gates of hell would not be able to withstand it. *'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'* Matthew 18:18-19

Thirdly, the body illustrates the fact that **our union with Christ is vital and intimate.** It is vital because a body without a head, or vice-versa, is dead. If all I had were a body this morning and no head, that would be a scary thing – or if all I had were a head and no body – you might run screaming from the room – because either way, you're looking at something from beyond the grave. It is vital for the body to have a head to lead and guide and direct – and it is vital for a head to have a body to carry out the desire and will of the head. It illustrates as well that this communion is intimate – just like my head and body are intimately connected to one another. In fact when something is going on in my body my head knows it immediately. It wouldn't work if the head and the body were in different places, unconnected with one another.

He is the beginning. **Christ is also the beginning,** and the word means 'source' or 'origin'. And as we saw last week all things in this universe have their beginning in Him. Nothing exists that comes from some other outside source. And so we begin to see even more clearly what utter arrogance and pride is involved when men look to some other origin of the universe.

[He is] the firstborn from the dead. **He is also the firstborn from among the dead** – that is, He was the first to rise from the dead and remain risen. It is a risen Savior we worship. Lazarus was raised from the dead – but he died again and is even now waiting for his second resurrection. But Christ is not only the firstborn of all creation as Paul says in verse 15, but He is the firstborn of all who will be resurrected with Him in life when He returns. It speaks to the believer of our identification with Christ in His death on the cross; it speaks to us of the hope we have beyond the grave, and it proclaims our inheritance with Christ one day in heaven. *'We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.'* Romans 6:4-5

And all of this points to one thing – **Christ holds first place in everything.** *'...that in everything He might be preeminent'* – or as one translation puts it: *'...that He might come to have first place in everything.'* The fact that Christ is the Head of the body, the church, the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead highlights the fact that He ought to be first in all of life. Everything in the universe gets its significance and meaning from how it relates to Christ. It is in Him that we must seek the meaning of everything. After all, the universe was made entirely by, through and for Him – not ultimately for us. In Christ alone are all the answers found to man's biggest questions – on the one hand the problem of evil in the world, hunger, poverty, war and conflict – and on the other, the meaning of love and joy and peace and satisfaction, the very meaning of life – all of those questions are answered in Him.

For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, Colossians 1:19 More than anything, this statement reveals the utter supremacy of Christ in all things. This lays to rest any ideas that we can know God through any other means than through His Son in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. It is only through Christ that we can know God, and be fully known by Him – and it is through Christ that all things in the universe are one day reconciled to God. **What God is doing in Christ in this space we call time, is reconciling the world to Himself.**

and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. Colossians 1:20 Now before you run off and say your pastor is preaching universal salvation, let me assure you that is not what this verse preaches. In verses 20 and 21, Paul talks about reconciliation – one in a general sense and one in a particular sense and we need to keep that in mind as we look at these verses. I think we all understand the word 'reconciliation', but I want you to be clear what Paul is saying here. When we talk about reconciliation, we usually are talking about restoring relationships that are out of whack, or simply taking two things that may seem to be at odds and getting them to agree – like your check book and your bank statement. **The idea, the goal of reconciliation is to make peace, to bring things back into proper alignment and proper relationship,** and there is great peace when your check book is brought into proper alignment with your bank statement – and there is great anxiety when it is not.

Because of sin, mankind is at odds with the Creator – God's righteous wrath is raised up against us: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* [Romans 1:18], and we in turn are hostile to God: *For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.* [Romans 8:7], **and what is needed between us is peace – reconciliation.** And so the work of God in Christ is the work of reconciling us to Himself. And not only us, but the entire universe is out of whack because of sin and everything must be reconciled to God – that is, brought back into proper alignment and relationship with Him.

One man's sin affected the entire universe. When Adam fell, the curse of sin impacted all of creation.. Instead of eternal joy and peace and intimate communion with God, we get pain and sweat and thorns and thistles and corruption and death. All of creation *'...was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.* Romans 8:19-21 The goal of reconciliation is that all of creation would be brought back into right relationship with God. In fact the word used here in Colossians for reconciliation carries the concept of the **restoration of a previously existing relationship.** Previously everything was in order – prior to Adam's sin, all of creation was in right relationship to God. And just as the sin of one man ruined that relationship, the blood shed on the cross by One Man, Jesus Christ provided the way for the restoration of that relationship. And one day all things will be reconciled to God. **This does not mean that all men will be saved.**

Paul tells us in chapter two that what transpired on the cross was not only the believer's reconciliation to God, but also the rebellious authorities in the heavens: *'And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.'* Colossians 2:13-15 The work of reconciliation as applied to these rebellious rulers and authorities means that their rebellion was judged and condemned on the cross of Christ, and one day the sentence will be carried out. As we see in Revelation 20 where the devil and all his angels, death and hell and those whose names are not written in the Book of Life are thrown into the lake of fire. *'...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever...Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire...And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.'* Revelation 20:10, 14, 15

The triumph of Christ on the cross, brought rebellious man and the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies back under subjection to His authority in time – but in eternity everything in creation will be restored to right relationship with God in the new heavens and new earth. *'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And He who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.'* Revelation 21:1-5

So the work of redemption and reconciliation spreads out to all things in the sense that all things will be brought back to proper alignment and order to God. But as Revelation 20 shows us, not all men will be saved otherwise the Bible would not speak of those whose names were not written in the Book of Life. Philippians tells us that God became a man and went to the cross, dying for our sins to reconcile us to Himself, so that one day *'...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'* Philippians 2:10-11 In that context, then all of creation is reconciled to God, because all of creation is bowing its knee to Christ, acknowledging His Lordship. ***This does not mean that all of creation will be saved – it does mean that all creation will bow.*** All the angels, fallen and unfallen, all authorities, righteous and unrighteous, all of mankind, saved or unsaved, will one day acknowledge that Christ is Sovereign Lord – some to their sorrow and some to their great joy. The question is not will you bow, but when and how you will bow. Some bow now and receive eternal life – others will bow then but receive eternal condemnation.

Reconciliation here in verse 20 means that all that is out of whack in the universe will one day be put right – all unrighteousness judged, all injustice made right, all rebellion and sin dealt with according to the Supreme Judge who rules everything. That is what brings ultimate peace – when everything is in order under proper relationship and subjection to God. It is important to understand that reconciliation flows from God to us, not the other way around. For example, I do not send statements to my bank so that they can be reconciled to my checkbook – they send me statements so my checkbook can be reconciled to their statement of my account. There is an ultimate standard that determines what is righteous in my accounting and what isn't – and Columbia Bank sets the standard for me. And in this universe, it is God who sets the standard and we must be reconciled to Him – not Him to us. ***God is never reconciled to us – we are reconciled to Him.***

Now in verse 21, Paul shows us the particular effect of reconciliation. *'And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 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,'* Colossians 1:21-22 The cross of Christ has the general effect of bringing all of creation back into alignment with Himself in time. But its particular effect is to save those whom He has chosen for salvation. We are reconciled ***now*** – so that ***then*** we can be holy and blameless before a holy and blameless God.

The heart of God's work in reconciling all things to Himself is to bring fallen, sinful human beings into a perfect, restored, redemptive relationship with Himself. Reconciliation means that something is wrong and needs to be righted. If you want to understand reconciliation you have to come to grips with sin. Paul says that we were once *'...alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.'*

This is our settled state before Christ – not wanting God, actively hostile to any thought of Him, and as a result, engaged in evil deeds – that is why men do not want to be reminded that God exists and His wrath against sin is real and personal. It is telling that in our society you can talk about condoms, you can talk about safe sex, you can talk about homosexuality and all other kinds of perversions, but you better not talk about God and the Biblical view of these things. Unregenerate man is hostile to God and doesn't want to be brought to account for his sin. They do not want to hear words like sin and repentance and confession.

But Paul says, '*...you, who once were...*' All those who have embraced the gospel **once were** just like every other unregenerate sinner on this planet. But through Christ's death on the cross we have been reconciled – brought into proper alignment and relationship with God – our relationship restored, God's favor obtained, one day to be presented holy, blameless and above reproach before God. This underscores the fact that salvation is something that is a life-long process. We have been reconciled to God by the death of His Son presently, in order to be presented holy, blameless and above reproach futurely. We know that this is the case because of the next verse.

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.

Colossians 1:23 **The proof that we have really embraced the reconciliation of the Gospel is that we continue in the faith.** When Paul says '*if*' here – he is not saying that you might experience initial salvation and then somehow become unsaved in the future. He is not talking about losing your salvation. What he is saying is that the proof of your genuine conversion is borne out by the fact that you continue in the faith all the way to the end. It is not as though we start out well and somewhere along the line the grace of God becomes insufficient for us and we end up losing our faith. The grammar of the conditional clause here - *if indeed you continue in the faith* – assumes the positive – so we might translate this, as some have, *if you continue in the faith and I am confident you will.*' Paul expresses confidence that the Colossians will continue in the faith.

This confidence is called the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints – **and it says that those who have truly been reconciled by the blood of His cross will continue in the faith.** The word he uses is **epimeno**, a close synonym of **hupomone** – and it means to stay, remain, continue, persist, endure. And his point is that if we have this kind of faith, **that is genuine faith.** If on the other hand our faith is the kind that does not endure, is not stable, is not steadfast, **then that is not genuine, saving faith.** Genuine saving faith Paul says is a faith that does not shift, or move away from the hope of the gospel.

Genuine saving faith is **stable** – the word means that it has a solid foundation – and it is **steadfast**, or firm, having been built on the solid foundation of the truth of the gospel. **It is the kind of faith that is founded on the word of God and is not swayed by public opinion, private speculation, or current trends.** Last week my wife and I were stunned to hear the announcement that Ray Boltz, for years an icon in the Christian music community, had come out of the closet and declared that he had left his family, divorced his wife, and was embracing the homosexual lifestyle. I couldn't have been more stunned if the pope had said that he was converting to Islam. Boltz said that he had struggled against his homosexual feelings for over 30 years and finally had had enough of the struggle. *'I'd denied it ever since I was a kid. I became a Christian, I thought that was the way to deal with this and I prayed hard and tried for 30-some years and then at the end, I was just going, 'I'm still gay. I know I am.' And I just got to the place where I couldn't take it anymore ... when I was going through all this darkness, I thought, 'Just end this.'*

This is from a guy who wrote such powerful songs as *Watch the Lamb*, and *I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb*, and *Thank You*. But what finally shifted him away from the hope of the gospel was bad theology. In an interview with the Washington Blade, a gay community magazine, Ray said: *'This is what it really comes down to,' he says. "If this is the way God made me, then this is the way I'm going to live. It's not like God made me this way and he'll send me to hell if I am who he created me to be ... I really feel closer to God because I no longer hate myself.'* And now he says he has been dating and lives "a normal gay life". What tripped him up in the end was a poor understanding of who God is and how He works in the world. Ultimately his faith was not stable – that is the foundation of his faith was weak because it was not founded on the word of God.

I don't know why he struggled all those years with this burden, there might a lot of reasons – **but none of them include the fact that God creates homosexuals.** Good theology will keep you from making the mistake of turning your sin into a virtue and concluding that since the desire never leaves you that it must be from God. We cannot look at our emotions or our desire to sin or our circumstances and conclude that this thing doesn't work, or the word of God must not mean what it says. **The gospel is the power of God to save – utterly, completely, wholly and finally – and that is our hope.** If we find a discrepancy between what the word of God says and our experience, one thing is for certain, **the discrepancy is not with the word of God!** It is crucial that our faith is founded on the unchanging, solid rock of the word of God so that we do not ultimately move away from the hope of the gospel somewhere down the line.

Our faith must be fixed on the hope of the gospel that says that if we truly embrace the truth of the gospel, if we bow our hearts and knees in submission to Christ here on earth, we will not shift away from the hope of the gospel and He is faithful to bring the work of reconciliation to a final glorious completion one day in heaven.

Our great God and faithful Father,

Thank You for the great work of reconciliation You carried out in Your Son through the blood of His cross. We rejoice Lord Jesus, that You didn't stop short of the goal but brought us all the way to peace with God. We exult in the thought that God's righteousness is satisfied, His truth is established, His word is magnified and a foundation is laid for our hope. Grant that we would continue in the faith, steadfast and stable – never shifting from this hope. Forbid it Lord that we should one day find our that our faith is crumbling because we built it on the wrong foundation.

Holy Spirit, come and work repentance in our souls – show us our sin and rebellion in all its wretchedness so that we might hate it. Melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God. Teach us to behold our Creator – His ability to save, His arms outstretched – His heart big for us. May we trust in Your power and love – may we commit our souls to You without holding back – may we bear Your image, love Your law, pursue holiness without which no one will see You, and be through time and eternity a monument to Your grace and trophies of Your victory. Grant that we would live to know You and make You known, to be glad in You and make others glad in You we pray, in the precious name of Your Son Jesus, we pray, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***