

August 24, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

By Him, Through Him, For Him

Colossians 1:15 – 16

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.

In a George Barna poll among Christians, 20% of those who call themselves born-again Christians believe in reincarnation, 26% believe in astrology, 45% believe in human potential for getting into heaven and 25% in communicating with the dearly departed. Chuck Colson has described the church today as a 'salad bar Christianity', mixing up so many other agendas with the supremacy of Christ, **that we are no longer moved by His call to leave everything and follow Him exclusively.** We are consumers at heart, and the way Christ is presented in many pulpits today strikes a chord with our consumer-mindedness. We've heard the message that we've all made mistakes and all we need to do is say a prayer admitting we've done wrong, say we're sorry from the heart, and ask for forgiveness. Barna says that we've **'weighed the downside – which really amounted to nothing more than a one-time admission of imperfection and weakness in return for peace with God – an figured it was a no-brainer, a can't lose transaction. The consequence has been millions of [people] who said the prayer, asked for forgiveness and went on with their life with virtually nothing changed.'**

The weakness of the message of the gospel has also limited the passion it ignites. In many places in the church in America, it might be best to re-title some old hymns to reflect the triviality of our faith: *I Surrender, Some, Fill My Spoon, Lord, Oh, How I Like Jesus, He's Quite a Bit to Me, I Love to Talk About Telling the Story, Take My Life and Let Me Be, Where He Leads Me, I Will Consider Following, Oh, for a Couple of Tongues to Sing, Blest Be the Tie that Doesn't Cramp My Style.* It has fostered a discipleship of convenience and not commitment

We have been guilty of calling people to Christ with a gospel that only says, **'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'** [which He does and He has] but it is a gospel that is centered on you – not Christ. God does have a wonderful plan – and **His wonderful plan is to glorify His Son among all the nations, for all the ages to come – and He loves us enough to invite us to participate in His plan and give us a strategic commission in Christ to bring it to pass.** How compelling was the message of Christ you first received? Did it captivate you with the amazing hope and implications of His righteous reign for you and for the nations? Or was it more about the possibilities of personal fulfillment by adding Christ to your life? Was it a gospel that focused on Christ, who is all and all-sufficient, a supreme Lord in whom all things in Heaven and on earth find their goal and consummation? Or was it confined to good news about a good God ready to help you live a good life, with the prospect of being good eternally?

The popular gospel is manifestly therapeutic. It guarantees the enhancement of personal relationships, or the development of human potential, or the healing of the inner child – but it does not press us into Christ. It is a **privatization** of the gospel – **a shaping of the Good News to emphasize answers for personal hopes about success in relationships, or the healing of emotional scars, or even advancement of personal careers.** Ultimately, that gospel will not save you – that gospel will not inspire a passion for the glory of God and the supremacy of Christ – that gospel will not cause you to go and sell all and follow Him – that gospel will not cause you to treasure Christ above all things – that gospel will not ignite a passion to live so as to make the nations glad in God.

Larry Crabb writes: **Unbelievers do not see Christ as their greatest treasure. Neither do most Christians. We live as blind people, chasing after the light we can see – the satisfaction that blessings bring – and not valuing the light we cannot see – the glory of Christ. More is available to us in Christ than we dare imagine. We settle for so much less. We taste Him so little.** Larry Crabb

The gospel is the good news precisely because it brings us to Christ. Not to shallow, sentimental, scaled-down versions of Jesus – but to Christ, the One who reigns supreme over creation and history and the church. Do you see this Christ? Is this the version that has won your heart? Is this the one who is the treasure hidden in the field – the one we go and sell all we have just to buy? The significance, the reality of everything, on earth and in the heavens is summed up in Christ. ***In Christ, the reality of God entered into the reality of this world. Nothing counts with God, except His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who is completely pure and holy before Him. Where He is, there God looks and has His pleasure.*** Martin Luther

This is why Paul ends his prayer for the saints in chapter one this way: *giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* We have been **redeemed, qualified, delivered and transferred** into the kingdom of His Son! The emphasis is on His Son – not our well-being. His Son – not our comfort. His Son – not our convenience. His Son – not our contentment. O we have all of those things – in Jesus Christ, His beloved Son. But we need to get our eyes off of us and onto Him.

We have been **redeemed** in Christ – *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* Bought out of the slavery to sin and self and the sentence of death. We've been **qualified** in Christ - *giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.* That is, in Christ, we have been competently made and empowered by the Maker to share in the grand inheritance of all those whom Christ redeemed. And we've been **delivered** out of darkness and **transferred** into the kingdom of His beloved Son. Nothing in that language points to us as the focus of the gospel – it all points to God's beloved Son – Jesus Christ. The issues that confronted the Colossians were not so different from the issues that confront us today. There was a tendency then as now to diminish the centrality and supremacy of Christ in favor of lifestyles and philosophies and convenience and personal preferences. So Paul confronts this head-on.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. First of all, **Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.** He is the God-Man. If He were only man, then He is irrelevant to our thought of God. If He were only God, then He is irrelevant to our experience of human life. Jesus, the incarnation of God, God in the flesh, shows us what God is. And as a man, He shows us what man was meant to be.

He is also the firstborn of all creation. A superficial reading here might suppose that He is part of creation – *the firstborn of all creation.* Like saying this pulpit is of wood. But that is not what Paul is saying because in the next verse he says that all of creation came into being through Him. ***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.*** If Paul were trying to say that Christ was merely the first-born created one he would not then support it by saying that He created all things. Obviously if He was created He couldn't be the Creator. He is the first-born of all creation in the sense that He is **over** all creation. As the creator of all things He stands outside creation – as the first-born of all creation, He enters into His creation – Immanuel, God with us.

Notice the things created that Paul emphasizes out of the all things that are created by Christ. Not only the visible and invisible things of the universe – the stars and comets and black holes and nebula and galaxies of the heavens – and the mountains and rivers and seas and animals and plants and humans on the earth – but also – *thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.* Why would Paul single these out to mention here? Of all the things he could have mentioned – he chooses to mention specifically thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities. And if we have read our Bible we know that Paul knew that rulers and authorities include evil, supernatural powers that are bent on the destruction of God's creation. In chapter 2 verse 15 Paul tells us that Christ triumphed openly over these evil forces by disarming them and holding them to public ridicule on the cross. And in Ephesians 6 he tells us that our battle here is against these same *'rulers and against authorities, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies.'* Ephesians 6:12 Although they have been defeated at the cross of Christ, and believers are completely secure – they still exist to do much harm in the world. ***But the point Paul is making is that even these evil powers were created by Christ, and through Christ and for Christ.*** Now before you get in a theological tizzy – let's look at three little prepositions.

By Him all things were created – all things were created *through* Him and *for* Him. *All that has come into being exists to display the greatness of Christ.* Nothing in this universe exists for its own sake – from the smallest irritating mosquito to the most massive African pachyderm – from the gentlest saint to the cruelest, brutal dictator – from the tiniest particle of matter to the biggest star in the universe – all exist to make the greatness of Christ more fully known. All things – even these evil rulers and authorities were created by Christ and through His power – and for Him. He did not create them evil and Paul knows this. Jude writes about those angels who left their proper abode – created good, they rebelled against God and became evil. But this wasn't a surprise to God – He knew there would be sin and rebellion and evil – and with infinite wisdom He took it all into account as He planned the whole history of salvation and the triumph of grace at Calvary. So when Paul says that these rulers and authorities were created by and through and for Christ – he intends that we understand that Christ created them, knowing what they would become, ***knowing that in that very evil role they would – like all of the rest of creation – glorify Christ in that role.***

So why is it important to know this? Out of all the created things Paul could have focused on – why these? ***I believe it is because the sovereignty of God stands as a sure foundation and rock of refuge for the believer.*** The very fact that Christ is the creator of rulers and authorities means that those very entities are entirely subject to Him. ***Nothing is outside His control*** – nothing can thwart His will – nothing can effectively oppose His eternal purpose. I believe Paul wants us to have a sense – ***to see and savor the fact that the purpose of God is invincible and our salvation in Christ is rock-solid.*** He wants those believers who sometimes waver in their smallness and vulnerability to know that Jesus Christ is the final and absolute authority over all hostile thrones and powers and rulers and authorities and apart from His sovereign permission they cannot do anything. **By Him all things were created – all things were created *through* Him and all things were created *for* Him**

Theologian A. W. Pink wrote, ***As [one] sees the apparent defeat of the right, and the triumphing of might and the wrong ... it seems as though Satan were getting the better of the conflict. But as one looks above, instead of around, there is plainly visible to the eye of faith a Throne.... This then is our confidence —God is on the Throne.*** Over all our choices, over all our circumstances, over all our thoughts and dreams and wishes – over all the machinations and schemes of the enemy of our souls – stands the immutable, invincible glory of the sovereignty of the Son of God.

Back in 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son and another young Scandinavian couple, the Ericksons, from Sweden to the heart of Africa-to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They set out from the main mission station there to take the gospel to a remote area. This was a huge test of faith. At the village of N'dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who would not let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts. They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none. The only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. Svea Flood-a tiny woman only four feet, eight inches tall decided that if this was the only African she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact, she succeeded.

But there were no other encouragements. Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had had enough suffering and left to return to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N'dolera to go on alone. Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness and soon enough a little girl was born, whom they named Aina. The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina. She lasted only another seventeen days.

Inside David Flood, something snapped in that moment. He dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he snarled, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God himself."... Eventually the baby landed with some missionaries from the States. They changed her first name to "Aggie". Aggie grew up in South Dakota and married a young man named Dewey Hurst. They had two children together and moved to the Seattle area, where there was a large population of Scandinavians.

One day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had sent it, and of course she couldn't read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross-and on the cross were the words SVEA FLOOD.

Aggie jumped in her car and went straight for a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. "What does this say?" She demanded. The instructor summarized the story: It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera long ago ... the birth of a white baby ... the death of the young mother ... the one little African boy who had been led to Christ ... and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article said that gradually he won all his students to Christ ... the children led their parents to Christ ... even the chief had become a Christian. Today there were six hundred Christian believers in that one village....All because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

Aggie went to Sweden and found her father. David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: "Never mention the name of God-because God took everything from me." She walked into the squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a rumpled bed. "Papa?" She said tentatively. He turned and began to cry. "Aina," he said. "I never meant to give you away." "It's all right, Papa," she replied, taking him gently in her arms. "God took care of me."

The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped. "God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of him." He turned his face back to the wall. Aggie stroked his face and then continued, undaunted. "Papa, I've got a little story to tell you, and it's a true one. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life.... "Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you." And that afternoon, David Flood came back to the God he had left so many years ago.

There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation—the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands—the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne...for it is God upon the Throne whom we trust. Charles Spurgeon

All things were created by Him – all things were created *through* Him and all things were created *for* Him

Our gracious and Sovereign Father and Lord,

Grant that we would see and savor Your absolute power and dominion over all things in heaven and on earth. Strengthen our feeble faith with the sure conviction that nothing exceeds Your power – nothing escapes Your notice – that all things work to display the glory of Christ. Help us to see and know this Christ by whom, through whom and for whom all things, in heaven and on earth exist and have their being. May we proclaim with certainty and joy that Christ is all and all-sufficient – that He is our treasure – we want no other. Fan into blazing flame the weak and guttering candle of our love for You, O Christ! Fill us Holy Spirit with a love for You, increase our appetite for the things of heaven and enlarge our capacity for the things of God, and fill us with joy and delight in You alone, so that we who have been made glad in God would live to make others glad in You. In the precious and powerful name of 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.***