

COLOSSIANS: AUDACIOUS HOPE IN A MIXED-UP CULTURE

AN INTRODUCTION

Nine days to go, and Barack Obama will become the 44th President of the United States of America. He is an impressive man. He is also an inspiring writer. His first book, 'Dreams from my Father' has been described as a "his masterpiece." His second, written in 2006, has an appropriate title for someone about to enter the White House. It is called '*The Audacity of Hope*' - *Thoughts on reclaiming the American Dream*.

Over the next months we will be working systematically through the writings, *not of Barack Obama*, but of another great man who could "write a bit". I'm talking about the apostle Paul and his letter to the Colossians. The working title of this series is '*Audacious Hope in a Mixed-Up Culture*.' I trust you will see why as the weeks unfold. But here's one clue – it's *not* about the American dream.

Today I want to ask some introductory questions to prepare the ground.

1. What is the value of systematic exposition?

To "expound" scripture is to explain and apply its meaning after thorough study. It is what Jesus did on the Emmaus road with two disciples after His resurrection. (Luke 24v27-32.)

You can do this with a single text, but what is the value of expounding a whole book from the Bible?

1.1. It encourages the study of what God has said rather than trumpeting our own opinion. It is the opposite of having a good idea and looking for a Bible passage to back you up. Instead it allows God's Word to shape our thinking.

1.2. It provides a wide range of teaching from God's Word. It prevents teachers carefully selecting what they will or will not teach. It also protects them from any charge of aiming teaching at specific people, because they simply tackle issues as they appear in the text. And a systematic approach steers us all away from just picking our favourite subjects or texts, and neglecting uncomfortable Bible teaching.

1.3. It helps us develop a theological framework. When he was pastor at the Millmead Centre in Guildford, David Pawson was renowned for his systematic exposition of books of the Bible. Long before podcasts, thousands listened to tapes of his messages. When I was a young student at Spurgeons College, I cheekily asked David, who was visiting us, how much of his one hour fifteen minute sermons he expected his people at Guildford to remember a week later. His answer stuck with me. He said he didn't expect them to remember much of the detail or to trot out his explanation of every Bible passage. But he did expect that, over the years as people sat under his ministry, they would

know how to handle Scripture with integrity and develop a theological framework which helped them see how everything fitted together.

1.4. It stimulates Christians to read their Bible systematically, rather than have a haphazard approach. There are different ways of doing this of course. Some like to read through the Bible in a year; others read a chapter of the Old Testament and a chapter of the New each day. Some use Bible reading notes. Don't just open your Bible at random each day. The likelihood is, if you don't have a systematic approach you will not open your Bible much at all.

1.5. God loves us to take Scripture seriously; when we do the Holy Spirit is active in us and among us. Over the years I haven't found that systematic expository teaching thwarts the Spirit from speaking in a timely and penetrating way week by week. God's Word can still come with prophetic power and be accompanied by signs of the Spirit's presence.

2. Why devote time to Paul's letters?

- What is so special about Paul?

Second only to Jesus Himself, Paul is of immense significance. One third of the New Testament is by him or about him.

Born in Tarsus, Paul was a man steeped in three cultures. First he was born a Jew; he studied Jewish law under the renowned rabbi Gamaliel; and he was a Pharisee. Second, he was fluent in Greek, the language of the ancient world and therefore he was able to write and speak to people of many nations. Third, his father was a Roman citizen, so he inherited certain privileges which became useful during his travels and trials.

Although Gamaliel was a moderate rabbi, Saul (as he was then) was not! He started out convinced that Jesus and his followers were impostors and a threat to the Jewish faith. He became the first anti-Christian missionary, pursuing believers and having them put in prison. He colluded in the killing of Stephen the first Christian martyr. But, on his way to wreak more havoc in Damascus, he was overpowered by a dramatic encounter with Jesus Himself.

This proved the turning point of his life. For thirteen years he kept a low profile until Barnabas invited him to join him in Antioch, and from there Paul began a series of pioneering journeys to different nations and cities with small teams, preaching the gospel and planting churches. In the process he suffered many trials and imprisonments; eventually he was executed in Rome.

Paul was a great man on so many levels, and his writings have influenced every generation. Great figures in church history point to his letters to explain the transformation in their thinking, men like Augustine (4th century), Martin Luther (16th century), John Wesley (18th century) and Karl Barth (20th century). This has made Paul one of the most influential figures in history, especially in Europe. His letter to the Romans sparked the Reformation, which in turn has affected every aspect of European culture.

- What is so special about Paul's letters?

Paul is undoubtedly the most influential letter writer of all time. Here we are, still taking serious notice of what he wrote. Why? Because from the earliest days these letters were considered to carry apostolic authority and thus the authority of God Himself. Another apostle, Peter, refers to Paul's letters as "Scripture". (2 Peter 3v14-16)

Jesus Himself had said that when the Spirit came He would reveal more of the significance of His coming. (John 16v12-15) This is the best way to understand Paul's letters. The Holy Spirit Himself was the inspiration behind Paul's theology and practical instruction. Yes he had a brilliant mind, but his letters are not read, studied and taught today because they are clever but because God inspired them.

But it needs to be emphasised that they were *real* letters to *real* people - not theological tomes, doctrinal creeds or abstract philosophical essays. Read them in J.B. Phillips' paraphrase, or 'The Message' to recapture something of their original freshness.

These letters were written to be read out loud. Many of the people who heard them would not have been able to read. Whole families including children would have listened as they were read. They were written to churches on a mission; they were dynamic letters full of truth and practical instruction intended to galvanise the churches and equip them for their mission.

In fact, writing and sending letters to people at a distance in the first century was unusual because there was no Postman Pat or red box at the end of the street. Letters were usually written by state officials and the wealthy because it was very expensive. You needed to employ someone to travel and carry your letter. So there had to be an important reason for writing a letter. And there was as far as Paul was concerned! Apart from travelling himself, it was the main way he could follow up and encourage churches and individuals.

Paul's letters are also among the longest written at that time. Letters in the first century would usually be short enough to fit on one sheet of papyrus, about 20 words. Long letters required several sheets to be joined up. Paul's average letter length was 1,300 words, and Romans has 7,114 words! These are substantial letters with important things to say.

Sadly there are no "first editions" of Paul's letters in existence. There are no copies with his autograph at the end of it. The originals have all long since perished. But from the beginning they were cherished, re-read, copied and passed on. In due course they were collected together and arranged according to size, thirteen in all, nine to churches and four to individuals – and finally included in the writings regarded by the church as the word of God.

3. Why select Paul's letter to the Colossians?

This letter was written around AD 60 while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. (Acts 28v16-31) One of his visitors, Epaphras, had pioneered the Colossian church and this sparked Paul's letter. At the same time he wrote letters to Philemon (very personal) and Ephesians (a circular letter). We even know the name of the postman who delivered these letters – Tychicus.

Colossae was populated by people of many nationalities; it was what we call a *pluralistic society* with people of many beliefs and religions. At Colossae you could find animism, astrology, Greek gods, Roman gods and mystery religions like Gnosticism. There was a whole mixture of ideas and philosophies and lifestyles. Some advocated strict abstinence from sexual activity and emphasized fasting, while others encouraged immorality and indulgence. Those with a Jewish faith were legalistic and entranced by all things mystical, especially angels as intermediaries. The church was struggling with all this. How could they communicate their faith? Some of these different ideas and beliefs were even beginning to filter into the church and dilute the gospel. So much of this is familiar to us today.

3.1. We live in a pluralistic society alongside people of many faiths and none. The Prince of Wales has said that, on his Coronation, he wants to be named Defender of *Faith* rather than Defender of *the* Faith. Post-modernism has brought a pick-and-mix approach to religion and the promise of your very own, tailor-made, idea of God. There are few absolute truths. If it's true *for you*, then that's OK!

3.2. We now have many secular substitutes for God, like football. The new cathedrals are Old Trafford, Anfield and St. James'; Park. Hands are raised, songs are sung, and money is willingly given, and you proudly confess your allegiance! One lad asked on 5 Live which team he supported said, "*Arsenal, for life!*" That's commitment. Football has all the marks of a religion.

3.3. We also have the most popular western religion: "Me! Me! Me!" "*I am the most important person in the universe. I can be your own God! I am in charge of my own destiny!*" And the great Self-Help machine is at hand holding out the promise of wealth, health, success popularity, fame and therefore happiness – at a price.

3.4. Meanwhile the church is marginalized and the subject of constant attack in the media. This year I predict that evolutionary theory verses God as Creator will be huge because of the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of his 'On the Origin of Species.' The church is also being infiltrated by the values of secular humanism. The C of E is facing a massive crisis following the appointment of Gene Robinson, the openly gay, non-celibate priest as bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire, USA. Some churches are embracing modern values citing "cultural relativity", while others are embarrassed about fundamental doctrines - some evangelicals have questioned the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement.

Paul's answer in this letter is simply to bring the believers in Colossae back to the Lordship of Jesus, and to what it means to live a holy life. Not complicated is it? In the midst of all our formulas for church growth, styles of church service, keys to revival and our strategies for church planting – Paul's simple call is the most important one of all. Let's keep Jesus central to everything and let's live lives worthy of Him.

As a devout religious monk Martin Luther tried every practise he knew in seeking peace with God. He prayed to three saints every day, flogged himself until he fell unconscious, climbed holy steps in Rome on his knees, but it was no good. When he turned his back on all of this his Father Superior asked him: *"If you take away relics and pilgrimages and prayers to the saints and all these devotional practices what will you put in their place?"* Luther answered: *"Christ. Man only needs Jesus Christ."*

This is our conviction too. What people around us need, more than ever, is Jesus. This is the message of Colossians. Our "audacious hope" is Christ Himself. He is at the centre of *"the hope stored up for you in heaven."* (1v5) He is our good news, *"the hope held out in the gospel."* (1v23) This audacious hope is one for every people-group, the answer to every man and woman's deepest need and longing. *"God has chosen to make known among the nations the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory".* (1v27)

John Wilthew. January 2009

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MESSAGE SUMMARY:

1. What is the value of systematic exposition?

To “expound” scripture is to explain and apply its meaning after thorough study. But why work through whole books of the Bible?

- It encourages the study of what God has said.
- It provides a wide range of teaching from God’s Word.
- It helps us develop a theological framework.
- It stimulates Christians to read their Bible systematically
- God loves us to take Scripture seriously; when we do the Holy Spirit is active in us and among us.

2. Why devote time to Paul’s letters?

What is so special about Paul? Second only to Jesus Himself, Paul is of immense significance. One third of the New Testament is by him or about him. His life was transformed after an encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. He travelled widely among Gentile nations planting churches, suffering for his efforts and eventually being executed in Rome. Paul was a great man on so many levels, and his writings have influenced every generation.

What is so special about Paul’s letters? From the earliest days these letters were considered to carry apostolic authority and thus the authority of God Himself. Peter refers to Paul’s letters as “Scripture”. (2 Peter 3v14-16) Jesus said that when the Spirit came He would reveal more of the significance of His coming. (John 16v12-15)

- They were *real* letters to *real* people - not theological tomes.
- These letters were written to be read out loud to the gathered church: they were to galvanise the churches and equip them for their mission.
- Writing letters to people at a distance in the first century was unusual, but it was the main way Paul could encourage churches and individuals.
- Paul’s letters are also among the longest written at that time. These are substantial letters with important things to say.
- From the beginning they were cherished, re-read, copied and passed on.

3. Why select Paul’s letter to the Colossians?

Because of the issue Paul was addressing and how he did so.

Colossae was populated by people of many nationalities & thus many beliefs and religions. How could the church keep & communicate their faith in such a culture?

- We too live in a pluralistic society alongside people of many faiths and none.
- Meanwhile the church is being marginalized and is the subject of constant attack. It is also being infiltrated by the values of secular humanism.

Paul’s answer in this letter is to bring believers back to the Lordship of Jesus, and to what it means to live a holy life. What people around us need, more than ever, is Jesus. This is the message of Colossians.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How do you go about reading your Bible? Do you have a regular system or pattern that suits you? What parts of the Bible do you turn to most, and what parts do you tend not to look at much?
2. Paul's conversion experience was dramatic. Can you recall any other examples of dramatic conversions – people you know, or maybe others you have heard or read about?
3. Some people are good at writing letters of encouragement. Have you ever received such a letter? (Perhaps you even kept it.) Do you think there is still a place for writing such letters now that e mails and text messages seem to have taken over?
4. Look at John 16v12-15. How might these words of Jesus be relevant when considering the significance of Paul's letters?
5. Imagine you are a group of first century believers meeting in a home in Colossae and you have just received a copy of Paul's letter. Using a modern paraphrase (The Message perhaps, or J.B. Phillips's) read through the whole letter in one sitting, sharing the reading around the group. Then give your first impressions having heard the letter. What stood out for *you*? Did you even sense God speaking through it to you in some way as it was read?

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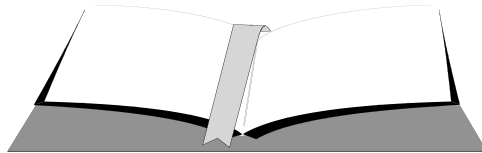
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