

# JESUS, BE THE CENTRE

## Colossians 2v1-8

When people hear you talk about “church” I wonder what they think. Some of our guests at last Sunday’s baptisms were probably surprised by what they found. There are some popular misconceptions about what church is – and of course, there are different denominations and styles of church. This is one reason why an increasing number of churches are keen to communicate via websites who they are, what they believe and what their aims are. You will find them using terms like - Mission, Vision, Core Beliefs, Values and Philosophy of Ministry. It might be helpful to quickly give some definition to these terms because we find them being used in different ways. This is what I understand by them anyway.

The “**Mission**” of a church should be essentially the same as every other, i.e. to proclaim the good news of Jesus and make disciples. Matthew 28 v18,19 gives us the best mission statement of all.

The “**Vision**” of a church is more specific and describes the particular assignment a church has from God. So for us, our vision is to plant vibrant Spirit-filled churches in Northumberland. We talk about “Changing the landscape by planting churches.” This is the reason for working up into the Aln Valley right now. This afternoon we have the first of our new monthly Sunday afternoon public events up there.

“**Core beliefs**” are truths we understand to be central to biblical Christianity and therefore indispensable for any church. The Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith is a good guide to our core beliefs.

“**Values**” describe specific biblical principles which shape the kind of church we want to be. They are principles we believe to be important but which other churches may not see the same way as us. So we sometimes speak of “values and distinctives”. We have listed ours in the ‘Getting On Board’ booklet. These things are important for people thinking of joining the church. We are asking: Is this the kind of church you want to be part of?

“**Philosophy of Ministry**” tends to describe how we put our vision and values into practise. In other words - this is how we do things around here - and also how we *don’t* do things.

These terms are useful to give some definition to what we mean by being “church”. But if we were pushed to say in *just one word* - who we are and what are we all about, what makes us tick and what is at the centre of everything – we should be able to do it. We only need to say “JESUS”. In our portion of Colossians today we see this very clearly. Paul tends to use the title “Christ” (Messiah) – but it is Jesus he is referring to. From these verses I want to highlight some things which indicate that Jesus really is at the centre of a church. Let’s do a health check on ourselves as we do this. Here are *three characteristics of Jesus-centred churches*.

## **1. They have Jesus-centred leadership. (v1-4)**

The church at Colosse had been pioneered by Epaphras, but he looked to Paul for wise apostolic counsel about the church. In fact he is with Paul, visiting him in prison at Rome at this time. So Paul writes - not like a professional consultant - but as someone who cares about the church. **v1: I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.** "I am agonising for you". This word was used for the strenuous efforts of an athlete preparing for the arena. How did he struggle for them: in prayer and by giving support and wise counsel to Epaphras. In this church we are convinced that apostolic input is essential for our health. From the very beginning we have had a warm relationship with Ian Galloway at City Church Newcastle. As elders we spend quality time with Ian; this builds in accountability and means we get plenty of encouragement and wise counsel.

**v2 -4: My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.** Paul was very clear that his aim was to direct them to Christ, not himself. He didn't want them thinking about him more than Jesus, or becoming dependent on him, or listening to him before Jesus. Paul goes on to warn the church not to accept leadership which directs them away from Jesus.

**v4: I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.** One of the marks of ill health in a church is people becoming dependent on someone or something else. It can happen quite subtly. This week, in Pastoral Theology lectures, I covered the phenomenon of the 'Shepherding Movement', which began with a group of gifted men in Fort Lauderdale who submitted themselves to one another in mutual accountability. They then talked of a work of the Spirit binding their ministries together for life. They began to teach on authority, submission and discipleship, and published a magazine: 'New Wine'. They taught that every person needed to submit to another person – a shepherd, and that all of your major life decisions should be submitted to this person. The key question of the time was "Who is your covering?" This movement began with an honourable aim but as it spread it ended up with people being controlled. This amounted to spiritual abuse and it came to be called "heavy shepherding." They also taught about "Covenant" relationships. i.e. when you enter into a discipleship relationship it is permanent, and more broadly, when you join a group of believers this is also permanent. You are in covenant and if you leave the fellowship group you are breaking covenant – breaking covenant with God! This effectively enslaved many, making them dependent on their shepherd and resulted in cult-like isolation.

**v8: See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.** "*take you captive*" is an unusual

expression - it was used of a slave trader carrying off his victim. Let's make sure none one carries us off away from Jesus.

## 2. They are people joined together by faith in Jesus. (v5)

**v5: For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.** Paul is commending the church. But notice what he praises them for as a church. It is for their faith in Christ. Paul is reflecting the heart of Jesus here. Jesus was always looking, first and foremost, for faith. Hebrews 11v6 says that without faith it isn't possible to please God.

Paul uses military terms here: **"firm"** is description of a solid line of soldiers in battle formation; **"orderly"** was used to describe a rank of soldiers, each in his appointed place, and alert for the word of command. There is an echo here of Roman military discipline. They were famous for it. It was a key to their success. The indiscipline of other armies required them to be chained together. But the Roman military needed no chains, they were trained and disciplined. They also knew what the penalty for desertion was: crucifixion! So, Paul commends the church for being firm and orderly like well trained soldiers – but *not out of fear*; they were joined together *by their faith* in Jesus.

Every healthy church faces spiritual attacks of some kind or another. Paul writes about this "spiritual warfare" in Ephesians 6:10-18. It is worth reminding ourselves that that was *a message for the church* not for isolated individuals. Paul's reference to the shield of faith underlines this. *"In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."* There were two types of shield used by Roman soldiers – the first was a small round buckler, which was very light; the second was a door-like shield made of wood protected by thick leather and metal. This was especially designed to combat fire arrows. It is this second shield Paul has in mind. Soldiers were trained to use their shields together, in the famous tortoise formation. Once separated, the soldiers were vulnerable to arrows.

Ours are shields of "faith". The *"flaming arrows"* this scripture refers to are sudden attacks of various kinds, which are designed to inflict pain and distress, and rob us of spiritual health. e.g. temptation, persecution, doubt, conflict in the church, bitterness, depression, sickness, tragedies. We must stand together, firm in faith. When one of us is under attack, we are all under attack. We stand together. We need each other. But our strength is in looking in faith to Jesus together.

## 3. They grow because of Jesus. (v6,7)

There is a lot of emphasis today on church growth. Some years ago it even became something of a science i.e. if you do this and that, and don't do the other, your church will grow. There is a big emphasis on numerical growth and size of congregation. For some it is *the* sign of how well you are doing. In the New Testament there is certainly plenty of numerical growth but you don't find



## Message Summary

# JESUS, BE THE CENTRE

### Colossians 2v1-8

Many churches are keen to communicate on their websites who they are, what they believe and what their aims are. You will find terms like these:

- **Mission:** every church has essentially the same mission - to proclaim the good news of Jesus and make disciples.
- **Vision:** this is more specific and describes the particular assignment a church has from God. e.g. planting vibrant Spirit-filled churches in Northumberland.
- **Core beliefs:** truths we understand to be central to biblical Christianity and therefore indispensable for any church.
- **Values:** (or “distinctives”) describe specific biblical principles which shape the kind of church we want to be.
- **Philosophy of Ministry:** tends to describe how we put our vision and values into practice. In other words - this is how we do things around here.

These terms are useful to give some definition to what we mean by being “church”. But if we were pushed to say in *just one word* - who we are and what are we all about, what makes us tick and what is at the centre of everything – we should be able to do it. We only need to say “JESUS” (Paul tends to us to use the title “Christ” / Messiah) Here are three characteristics of a Jesus-centred church.

#### 1. They have Jesus-centred leadership. (v1-4)

Epaphras the leader at Colosse and the church sought Paul’s apostolic input. So Paul writes to them, not like a professional consultant - but as someone who cares about the church. In this church too, we are convinced that apostolic input is essential for our health. Paul was very clear that his aim was to direct them to Christ, not himself. He warns the church against following leaders who do not direct them to Jesus. It is very serious if people become dependent on someone else. It can happen quite subtly. e.g. The ‘Shepherding Movement’ in the 1970’s.

#### 2. They are people joined together by faith in Jesus. (v5)

Paul is commending the church for their faith in Christ. He uses military terms: “**firm**” is description of a solid line of soldiers in battle formation; “**orderly**” was used to describe a rank of soldiers, each in his appointed place and alert for the word of command. The Roman army was famous for its discipline, but it was based on fear of punishment; Paul commends the Colossians for being firm and orderly because of faith, not fear. Every healthy church faces spiritual attacks of some kind or another. See Ephesians 6v10-18. Paul’s reference to the shield of faith underlines that he is writing to churches not individuals. This shield was door-like and was especially designed to combat fire arrows. Soldiers were trained to use their shields together in the famous tortoise formation. Once separated, the soldiers were vulnerable. Ours are shields of “faith”. “*Flaming arrows*” are sudden attacks on the people of God of various kinds e.g. temptation, persecution, doubt, conflict in the church, sickness, tragedies. We must stand together, firm in faith. When one of us is under attack, we are all under attack. We need each other. But our strength is in looking in faith to Jesus together.

#### 3. They grow because of Jesus. (v6,7)

There is a big emphasis these days on numerical growth and the size of your congregation. For some it is *the* sign of how well you are doing. In the New Testament there is certainly plenty of numerical growth but you don’t find any

