

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> September 2023 at 9.00 am and 1030 am

# PROCLAIMING THE TOTAL ADEQUACY OF CHRIST TO A FALTERING CHURCH

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church

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COLOSSIANS 1:15-28

### READINGS:

#### Colossians 1:15-28

The Supremacy of the Son of God

**15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on**

earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 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 and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation - 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Paul's Labour for the Church

**24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness - 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

**28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.**

### **Luke 10:38-42**

At the Home of Martha and Mary

**38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister**

**has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”**

**41 “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”**

## **SENTENCE FOR THE DAY**

**Satisfy us in the morning O Lord with your constant love. Teach us to know how few are our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. Psalm 90:14,12**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The famous Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte, was known as an appreciator. He loved to write postcards to people, thanking them for some kindness ... or blessing ... they had brought to his life.

Those messages often brought a touch of encouragement to a heart ... just when it was needed most.

**Appreciation is great medicine for the soul.**

And I have to say my wife **Katherine** is quite exceptional in this regard also. Her cards are legendary and always bring a smile to many faces.

The Apostle Paul was a great encourager, and the Letter to the Colossians is a good example of his grace and generosity of spirit.

In the reading this morning ... Paul gives thanks for what Christ has done in the lives of the Colossian Christians.



And it is interesting to note ... when you recall that Paul wrote this letter in prison ... his attitude of thanksgiving is even more wonderful.

Like Paul, we should be grateful for what God is doing in the lives of others.

And as Christians, we are all members of one body (1 Cor. 12:12–13). If one member of the body is strengthened, this helps to strengthen the entire body.

If one person experiences a blessing from God, it will help to encourage all of us.

**OK, SO LET'S DIG A BIT DEEPER ... AND LOOK AT THE CONTEXT ... AND THE INTENTION ... OF PAUL WRITING THIS LETTER.**

It seems to be one of the facts of human nature ... that a person thinks only as much as ... they need to.

Some of us prefer:

- **magazines** ... to text books
- **news headlines** ... to exhaustive investigative journalism

- **brief devotional commentary** ... to carefully thought-out systematic theology

And it is not until a person finds their faith opposed ... and attacked ... that they really begin to think out its implications.

It is not until the Church is confronted ... with some dangerous heresy ... that it begins to realize the richness and brilliance ... of historic orthodox and confessional belief.

Now, when Paul wrote the letter to Colossians ... he was not writing in a vacuum. He was writing to meet a very definite situation.

You see, there was a tendency of thought in the early Church called Gnosticism.

Its devotees were called Gnostics ... which more or less means ... the 'intellectual' ones.

These people were dissatisfied with what they considered the crude simplicity of Christianity ...

and wished to turn it ... into a progressive philosophy ...

and to align it with current thinking ...



to make it more acceptable to the prevailing culture.

So, allow me to ask ... do you think the planets and stars ... have any influence over our lives today?

Is there any relationship between diet and spiritual living? Now, I am not talking here about fasting ... but about rules on eating food ... what to eat and touch ... and what not to eat and touch.

How does God speak to us ... immediately ... in our minds ... through the Bible ... through spiritual 'channeling' ... in our devotions ... listening to a sermon ... through 'special' people ... like, through a 'spiritual guru' who is in the 'know'?

Do the other religions ... and philosophical systems ... have something to offer ... to add ... to the Christian faith? To ... perhaps ... improve the Christian faith. You know, Christianity ... is a bit kind of 'yesterday', passe, isn't it?

Morally, does it really matter what I do?

What are the moral boundaries ... why do we have moral boundaries at all ... and why should your boundary be my boundary?



Why can't I do what I want ... because ... well ... I believe I am made that way?

These questions sound very contemporary. Yet they were the very issues ... that Paul dealt with in his magnificent letter to the Colossians.

I believe ... we need this important letter today ... just as they needed it back in A.D. 60 ... when Paul wrote it.

**Firstly, Let's consider the City of Colossae**



**Colossae** was one of three cities located about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. The other two cities were **Laodicea** and **Hierapolis**, Colossians 4:13, 16.

Now, this area was a meeting point of East and West ... because an important trade route passed through there.

At one time, all three cities were growing and prosperous, but gradually Colossae slipped into a second-rate position.

It became what we would call a small town. Yet the church there ... was important enough ... to merit the attention of the Apostle Paul.

All kinds of philosophies mingled in this cosmopolitan area, and religious diversity abounded.

There was a large Jewish colony in Colossae, and there was also a constant influx of new ideas and doctrines from the East.

So, it was fertile ground for religious speculations and theological challenges to the infant Christian church.

**Secondly, what about the Church?**

Colossae probably would never have been mentioned in the New Testament had it not been for the church there.

We notice the city was never named in the Book of Acts ... because Paul did not start the Colossian church ... nor did he ever visit it.

But Paul had heard of their faith - Colossians 1:4, 9 - yet he had never seen these believers personally - Colossians 2:1.

So, here was a church of unknown people, in a small town, receiving an inspired letter from the great Apostle Paul!

We know that during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, at least two men from Colossae ... were brought to faith in Jesus Christ - Epaphras and Philemon - Philemon 19.

**Epaphras** apparently was one of the key founders of the church in Colossae, for he shared the Gospel with his friends there - Colossians 1:7. He also had a ministry in the cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea - Colossians 4:12–13.

And we know **Philemon** had a church meeting in his home - Philemon 2.

You may be thinking ... there is a good lesson for us here: God does not always need an apostle, or a “full-time Christian worker” to get a ministry established.

Nor does God need elaborate buildings ... and extensive organisations.

Here were two laymen ... who were used of God ... to start ministries ... in at least three cities.

And it appears that it was God’s plan for the Christians ... in the large urban areas like Ephesus ... reach out ... into the smaller towns ... and share the Gospel.

**But thirdly, there was a Crisis brewing in Colossae**



So, I ask the question ... why did Paul write this letter to the church in Colossae?

The answer, because a crisis had occurred that was about to destroy the ministry of the church.

Do you think churches can be destroyed by a crisis ... a theological crisis?

Can a church falter ... and collapse ... because of disagreement on what is considered ethical ... and appropriate behaviour ... on what is holy ... and what is sinful?

And what ... do you think ... is the role of leadership ... if things are brewing up?

Now, by comparing Paul's prison letters, we can arrive at the following reconstruction of events.

So, what was the heresy that threatened the peace and purity of the Colossian church?

Well, it was a combination of Eastern philosophy and Jewish legalism, with elements of what Bible scholars call Gnosticism.

This term comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means “to know.” (An *agnostic*, for example, is one who does not know.)

The Gnostics ... were the people who thought they were ... “in the know” ... when it came to the deep things of God.

They considered themselves the “spiritual aristocracy” in the church.

To begin with, this was and is a heresy ... and it promised people such a close union with God ... that they would achieve “spiritual perfection.”

Spiritual fullness ... could be theirs ... only if they entered into the teachings ... and ceremonies prescribed.

There was also a ... “full knowledge” ... a spiritual depth ... that only the initiated could enjoy.

Now, it was claimed this “wisdom” ... would release them from earthly things ... and put them in touch with heavenly things.

Of course, all this teaching was ... human-centred philosophy ... based on traditions ... and not on divine truth, so Paul writes in Colossians 2:8.

**8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.**

Interestingly, it grew out of the philosophical question, **“Why is there evil in this world if creation was made by a holy God?”**

Now that is a great question.

As the philosophers speculated and pondered, they came to the false conclusion ... that matter was evil: God is holy but matter is evil.

Their next false conclusion was that a holy God could not ... come into direct contact ... with evil matter.

And they believed ... in a powerful spirit world.

They also held to a form of astrology ... and believed that elemental spiritual forces ruled life... influencing affairs on earth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *A Note on the “Elements of the Universe”* (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)

The phrase the “elements of the world” (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) appears three times in Paul’s letters (Col 2:8, 20; Gal 4:3; at v 9 the parallel expression τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα, “the weak and beggarly elements,” is used) and while it is of considerable



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importance for an understanding of the heresy propounded by the false teachers at Colossae, and the apostle's answer to that false teaching, its meaning has been disputed since earliest times as Bandstra has shown in his history of the exegesis of these passages (*Law*, 5–30, especially 5–12).<sup>1</sup>

The majority of commentators this century have understood the “elements of the world” in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements. From early times the stars and powers thought to control the universe were worshiped and given offerings. Later in the Hellenistic period this homage was justified by pointing out that man was fashioned from the same elements of the cosmos.

The term στοιχεῖα was applied, as we have seen, to the physical components of the universe—earth, fire, water and air (PhiloQuis 134; cf. 2 Pet 3:10, 12). In Hellenistic syncretism the teaching about the elements was “mythologized” so that they were thought to be under the control of spirit powers. Along with the stars and heavenly bodies these were described as personal beings believed to control man's destiny. At a later time the *Testament of Solomon* can describe the “elements” as the “cosmic rulers of darkness” (8:2), while the stars whose constellations controlled the universe and in particular man's fate were also styled “elements” (στοιχεῖα; Ps-Calisthenes 1, 12, 1). Men must not only possess knowledge about these elements but also reverence these principalities and powers submitting to the rules and regulations imposed on one's life. (Because of contextual considerations in Col 2, Lohse, 99, and others have argued that too much weight should not be placed on the lack of explicit usage of τὰ στοιχεῖα as “elemental spirits” in the pre-Pauline writings.)

Although in Judaism worship was offered to the one true God, increasing prominence was given to angels. Jewish apocalyptic literature had already associated angels closely with the heavenly powers. According to Jubilees 2:2 each of the elements had its own angel to rule over it, while in 1 Enoch 60:11, 12 reference is made to the spirits of the various natural elements (cf. 1 Enoch 43:1, 2; 80:6; 2 Enoch 4:1, 2, etc). Three times in the NT (Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19 and Heb 2:2) the Jewish tradition regarding the angelic mediation of the law (absent from the Pentateuchal account of the law-giving) is mentioned, and in Galatians 4:3 some close connection between (or identification of) these angels and the στοιχεῖα is required.

It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these στοιχεῖα were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man's access to God's presence. One way they could be placated was by rigorously subduing the flesh so as to gain visionary experiences of the heavenly dimension and to participate in their angelic liturgy (see the discussion on 2:18). By this the devotees gained fullness of salvation, reached the divine presence and attained the esoteric knowledge which accompanied such visions. Christ had in effect become just another intermediary between God and man. See O'Brien, P. T. (1982). *Colossians, Philemon* (Vol. 44, pp. 131–132). Word, Incorporated.

Added to these spiritual speculations ... was a form of Jewish legalism.

So, the teachers believed that the rite of circumcision was helpful in spiritual development Colossians 2:11.

They taught that the Old Testament Law, especially the dietary laws, were also useful in attaining spiritual perfection, Colossians 2:14–17.

And definite rules and regulations told them ...; what was evil ... and what was good, Colossians 2:21.

Since to them ... matter was evil ... they had to find some way to control ... their own human natures ... in the pursuit of perfection. And two different practices resulted.

One school of thought held ... that the only way to conquer evil matter ... was by means of rigid discipline and asceticism, Colossians 2:23.

The other view ... taught that it was permissible ... to engage in all kinds of sin ... since matter was evil anyway!

And it appears that the first opinion was the predominant one in Colossae: rigid discipline and asceticism.

Now, I hope you can see how this kind of teaching undermined the very foundations of the Christian faith.

I am spending a bit of time on this ... this morning ... because, I believe, we have a somewhat similar situation here in New Zealand ... where there are competing cultural, religious and spiritual beliefs ... and practices ... abounding in everyday life.

We are sometimes left thinking ... what is my Christian faith ... in our diverse and pluralistic world?

... back to Colossae, to begin with, these heretics ... and we name them as such from within the Christian tradition ... attacked the person and work of Jesus Christ.

To them, Jesus was merely one of God's many "emanations" and not the very Son of God ... come in human flesh. of sun as substance with light and heat as emanations.

But the Christian understanding of the incarnation ... means God is with us (Matt. 1:23) ... however, these false teachers claimed ... that God was keeping his distance from us!

Significantly, Christians believe ... that when we trust the Son of God, there is no need for intermediary beings – spiritual beings, spiritual guides, stars, planets, minor and major gods (with a small 'g')!

Christians are rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of the Son.

So, there is no need for intermediary beings.

... and as the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century insisted ... there is no need for saints, priests, bishops or popes

... to be between the believer and the Lord!

Paul also clarified other ... crucially important matters of Christian thinking.



- In his work on the cross, **Jesus Christ settled the sin question** - Colossians 1:20 ... we are forgiven through his atoning sacrifice ... and
- Jesus completely **defeated all satanic forces** (Col. 2:15).
- Christ also **put an end to the legal demands** of the Law (Col. 2:14–17)
- In fact, **Jesus Christ alone is the Preeminent One!** (Col. 1:18; 3:11)
- Paul summarises it this way ... all that the believer needs ... is Jesus!

He went on to say:

- **Matter is not evil**, and
- the **human body is not evil**
- To be sure ... each person is born with a fallen human nature ... that wants to control the body ... and use it for sin; but the body itself is not evil.
- If that were the case, Jesus Christ would never have come to earth in a human body
- Nor would he have enjoyed the everyday blessings of life as he ministered on earth ... such as attending wedding feasts ... and accepting invitations to dinner
- So, diets and disciplines ... which can be good for one's health ... have no power to develop true spirituality ... allow me read in Colossians 2:20–23

**<sup>20</sup> Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: <sup>21</sup> “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? <sup>22</sup> These rules, which have to do**

**with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. <sup>23</sup> Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**

And as for **astrology** with its **elemental spiritual forces** ... Paul denounced this with vigour.

He said ... on the cross, Jesus won a complete victory over all satanic powers ... Colossians. 2:15

**15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.**

I think Paul is helpful here ... for us today ... and that he makes a very powerful comment on contemporary culture ...

He says Christians do not need to turn to the elemental spiritual forces of the world, and we read Colossians. 2:8, 20

**8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the**



**elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.**

And we should listen again to chapter 2 verse 20

**20 Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules:**

In this case, it refers to the beings that (according to the Gnostics) controlled the heavenly bodies that... in turn-controlled events on earth.

Now, I am sure you are aware ... there are aspects of contemporary culture in New Zealand ... that promote ... a return to elemental spiritual forces and principles.

While I think we all appreciate ... a diverse and culturally rich country ... I have to say that some of its religious and spiritual beliefs ... come into direct conflict ... with Paul's teaching in Colossians.

For example ... cooking food or using incense sticks and offering them to gods (small "g") ... is precisely what Paul spoke about ... as elemental spiritual beings and principles.

And if we are tempted to ... **consult horoscopes** ... and **implicitly trust elemental spiritual forces** ... we are according to Paul ... embracing the dominion of darkness ... from which Christ has set us free.

Now ... in the church in Colossae ... this false teaching was a deceptive combination of many things:

- Jewish legalism,
- Oriental philosophy,
- pagan astrology,
- mysticism,
- asceticism,
- and even a touch of Christianity.

You see, there was something for everybody, and this was ... what made it so dangerous.

The false teachers claimed that they were not denying the Christian faith, but adding to it, which thereby lifts Christianity it to a higher level.

They offered fullness and freedom ... a satisfying life ... that solved all the problems that people face.

Do you think we have a similar issue today?

I believe we do ... and it is just as deceptive ... and dangerous!

When we make Jesus Christ ... the Christian revelation ... only part of a total religious system ... or philosophy ... we cease to give Christ ... the preeminence.

This was the fundamental point in Paul's letter to the Colossians.

The Christian faith teaches that:

- God is near us, that
- God made all things good (though they can be used for evil), and that
- Christ has delivered his people from the powers of darkness - Colossians 1:13)

The heresy ... that Paul was countering ... turned the world into a frightful prison, while Jesus came to bring freedom.

These false teachers tried to change people from the outside, by means of diets and disciplines. But true spiritual growth ... comes from within ... through the rebirth and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

The church today ... I believe ... desperately needs the message of Colossians.

We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean **“one religion is just as good as another.”**

Some people ... try to take the best ... from various religious systems ... and manufacture their own private religion.

To many people, Jesus Christ is only one of several great religious teachers ... with no more authority than any other.

Christ may be prominent, but he is definitely not preeminent ... in their thinking.

So, once again ... we live in an age of “syncretism.”

Our culture is trying to ... harmonize ... and unite ... many different schools of thought ... and come up with a superior religion.

It is in short **“making God in its own image”**.

And our churches, sadly ... are in danger ... of diluting the faith ... in their loving attempt ... to understand the beliefs of others.

Islam, mysticism, legalism, Eastern religions, non-Christian spiritualities, asceticism, and philosophical systems abound in contemporary Aotearoa.

We note they are not openly denying Christ, but they are dethroning him ... and robbing him ... of his rightful place ... of preeminence.

Now, Paul is exercised in his thinking ... and worry ... for the church in Colossae ... he warns:

- “Lest any one should beguile you” - Colossians 2:4
- “Lest any one spoil you” - Colossians 2:8
- “Let no one therefore judge you!” - Colossians 2:16

**FINALLY, I WANT TO SUMMARIZE THE ADEQUACY OF CHRIST ... BY RECOUNTING A TRUE STORY FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.**



Just over a hundred years ago (in **1893**), the famous **World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago**, and an astronomical number of people, especially in those pre-automobile days, some twenty-one million, visited the exhibits.

America, and particularly Chicago, which had risen phoenix-like from the great fire of 1873, was showing off to the rest of the world.

And the show was good.

Among the features of the Exposition was the **“World Parliament of Religions,”** in which representatives of the world's religions met to

share their best points and perhaps come up with a new world religion.

D. L. Moody saw this as a great chance for evangelism. So, he commissioned evangelists and assigned them to “preaching posts” throughout the city.

He used churches and rented theaters.

He even rented a circus tent to preach the Word.

But Moody’s friends wanted him to attack the “Parliament of Religions,” however he refused, saying, “I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that people will turn to him.”

D. L. Moody knew that preaching Christ preeminent - the peerless, supreme, all-sufficient Christ, clearly presented - would do the job.

And indeed, it did. The “Chicago Campaign” of 1893 is considered to be the greatest evangelistic work of Moody’s celebrated life, and thousands came to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, R. K. (1989). Colossians and Philemon: the supremacy of Christ (pp. 29–30). Crossway Books.



You see, this approach was actually nothing new, ... but a time-honored approach ... which goes all the way back to the early Church ... and is especially evident in the section from Colossians considered in this morning.

It presented Christ as the One ... who has first-place in creation ... and in the Church.

The Gnostics had their own version of the “Parliament of Religions” ... because they considered Jesus ... to be only one of thousands of emanations ... from the great unseen God.

According to them, Christ was not the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), but only the beginning rung in the ladder to the true God.

Paul, writing to the Colossians, believed otherwise.

He believed that **Christ is Lord of all, or he is not Lord at all!**

This is what he taught so positively ... and beautifully. So, Verses 15 to 23 of chapter 1 ... are the most closely reasoned presentation ... of the supremacy of Christ ... anywhere in the Bible ... and perhaps, therefore, ... anywhere in the world.

**AMEN**