THE LESSON OF COLOSSE: AN OUTLINE FOR STUDY
AND PREACHING

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The Colossian Christians had a problem—they were plagued with false teaching. Some, perhaps many, among them were seeking for their spiritual fulfillment outside of Christ. No doubt they were well-meaning, but they were looking for a greater level of spiritual life in the philosophy of the “basic principles of the world” (2:8), a fascination with the power of angels (2:18), an arrogant dependence upon ecstatic visions (2:18), and on-going conflict with “principalities and powers” of this world (2:15). Sound familiar? The church today is plagued by the same errors!

Paul’s letter to Colosse, then, has some lessons for us. These lessons become clearer when the development of the letter’s argument is understood. A common literary device of the day was the chiasm, so-called because when outlined into its parts it brings to mind the Greek letter chi, or χ. The thesis of the argument comes in the middle, with pairs of arguments building inward to the thesis. Paul used this device frequently, and Colossians follows this form:

Overview of the Book

A 1:1, 2 Salutation
B 1:3-8 Thanksgiving for Colossian believers
   C 1:9-18 Prayer for a walk worthy of Christ
   D 1:19-29 The fullness of Christ’s reconciliation
      E 2:1-23 Warning against false teaching (See below.)
   D 1 3:1-4 Life summed up in Christ
      C 1 3:5-4:1 Life in Christ described
   B 1 4:2-17 Greetings and prayers
A 1 4:18 Benediction

Central Message (E—Warning against False Teaching)

a 2:1-3 Burden for Colossians to know God’s mystery
b 2:4-9 Beware of man’s enticements
c 2:10-15 Complete in Christ’s triumph (See below.)
b 1 2:16-19 The vanity of man’s judgments
a 1 2:20-23 Plea to live free of the world’s principles

Thesis Section (c—Complete in Christ’s triumph)
Christ, the head of all powers, is all faith needs

Christ’s “circumcision” the foundation of our redemption

Christ’s life is the fullness & power of our new life.

Christ’s cross the means of satisfying the law

Christ, the conqueror of all powers, is our confidence

The Colossian Christians needed to learn that their sufficiency is in Christ, period! Our congregations today need to be reminded of the same lesson. Talk about angels or spirits or signs or psychology or visions and you’ll get an enthusiastic response. Talk about Christ and everyone yawns: “This again? I’ve heard it all before!” Here is a suggested outline of study through the book to confront believers with the implications of their relationship with Jesus Christ, followed by a more developed sermon outline on the central argument of the letter in chapter two. Notice how the series builds to the thesis by following the development of Paul’s own argument.

**Sermon or Bible Study Series on the Letter to the Colossians**

**Part 1  “Joy in Faithful Service”**

*Text: 1:1-8; 4:2-18*

*Key terms/phrases/concepts:* faith, hope, love, truth, faithful minister, prayer, Epaphras, grace

*Focus of 1:1-8 is love to all the saints; 4:2-18 has in view wise action toward unbelievers.*

**Part 2  “Worthy Walking in Christ”**

*Text: 1:9-18; 3:5-4:1*

*Key terms/phrases/concepts:* walk, inheritance, word of Christ, knowledge of God, preeminence, in the name of Jesus

*Since he has “delivered us from the power of darkness” (1:13), we must “put to death” sin (3:5).*

**Part 3  “Satisfying Living in Christ”**

*Text: 1:19-29; 3:1-4*

*Key terms/phrases/concepts:* Christ in you, Christ our life, Christ the fullness of God, lives hidden in Christ, Christ’s death reconciles, you are dead when reconciled, Christ is all in all

*In Christ is “the fullness” (1:19), “the hope of glory” (1:27), and in him we will find our own maturity (28), since our lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3).*

**Part 4  “The World’s Principles Fail”**
Text: 2:1-9, 16-23

Key terms/phrases/concepts: deceit, cheat, basic principles of the world, appearance of wisdom, vanity, traditions and commandments of men

⁂ This is the main warning section, and the heresy should be examined closely at this point.

Part 5 “Christ’s Complete Triumph”

Text: 2:10-15

Key terms/phrases/concepts: complete, principalities and powers, the head, he has made alive, he has disarmed, faith in the working of God

⁂ Notice the centrality of the imagery of baptism in this context, and how our understanding of baptism must be shaped accordingly.

“The Fullness of Resurrection Life” - Col. 2:1-23

Thesis: Life lived in light of Christ’s resurrection is full of blessing.

I. Full wealth is ours in the knowledge of God. 2:1-3, 20-23

A. Treasures of united love in Christ 1, 2; Jn 17:11, 13, 20-23

[Textual note: the mystery of God...Christ. cf. 1:27.]

B. Treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ 3; 1 Cor. 1:24

[Word Study: wisdom and knowledge. Herbert Carson’s explanation is excellent (Tyndale NTC, Vol. 12, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon, p. 57.).]

C. Treasures of genuine godly value 20-23; Gal. 4:3, 9-11

[Word Study: basic principles of the world. Immediate reference - the fundamental forces behind the evil of this world (cf. v. 15). Broader perspective - impoverished religion which depends on things seen for fulfillment (cf. Heb. 11:1.).]

[Translation note: “are of no honor or value, but for the satisfaction of the flesh.” No real fulfillment there, obviously!]
II. Full confidence is ours in the faith in Christ. 2:4-9, 16-19

A. Trust His sanctifying, as in His saving, grace 4-7; 1 Cor. 15:1

B. Trust His fullness & not the traditions of men 8, 9, 16-18

[Word Study: cheat. συλαγωγέω lit, carry off (as) booty or a captive; rob; fig. take control of lead astray through philosophy, the love of words, skill in speculative knowledge.]

[Word Study & Textual note: intruding into the things which he has seen. ἐμβαστεύω strictly, stand on; fig. in the NT, base one’s authority on what one has seen or claims to have seen in ecstasy or a vision. The not of the AV is absent in the best manuscripts.]

C. Trust in His substantial nourishment 19

[Word Study: nourished and knit together. Pres/pass/part’s. ἐπιχορηγεῖσθαι – “to make available necessities to help someone” - pass., to be supported. συμβιβάζω “to hold together, unite.”]

III. Full life is ours because of Christ’s resurrection. 2:10-15

A. Christ the Conqueror, basis of our maturity. 10, 15; Eph. 1:15-23

B. Christ the Circumcised, basis of our justification. 11, 14; Rom. 15:8

C. Christ Crucified & Risen, the ground of our new birth. 12, 13

1. Covenant union in His death 12a, 13a

(baptism the “circumcision of Christ.”)

2. Covenant union in His life 12b, 13b

The resurrection of Christ demonstrates to us that we are to look to Him alone for fulfillment—and that we will find that fulfillment in Him.