

**JUNE 19 2022**  
**Colossians 1:1-14**  
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I became a Christian in 1996 in a strong evangelical Anglican Church in Adelaide. Our church was actually very similar to many evangelical, non-traditional churches that I'm sure you're familiar with.

It's interesting looking back because I didn't hear about the New Creation: a physical resurrection to a renewed, glorified creation. I heard a lot about going to heaven when you die. It made me think about images of Gary Larson comics with an old grey haired "god" and insubstantial people who have grown wings and float about playing harps.

I remember going to a TEAR conference where we were encouraged to really engage with social justice in the name of Jesus. But in our Evangelical church TEAR and social justice was seen as a sideline to the real work of the gospel. There was little value in it. But it was also seen as almost a dangerous distraction from the real gospel. In our circles, it was the churches who didn't value the Bible, who may not have even believed that Jesus actually rose from the dead, the "liberal Christians" who were into caring about the environment and social justice. For instance the church of Mary Magdalene was quite a liberal parish theologically, but their ministry amongst the poor, people with mental illness, and homelessness was very well known and only quietly supported by a few from our church. There was a big divide - either you believed in the Bible and that Jesus was the only way to salvation and that's all that really mattered OR you didn't believe the Bible had authority and that Jesus rose from the dead, but you believed that the church was all about caring for the created world - the environment, and the poor and needy.

In our church, when preachers taught about Jesus saying "blessed are you who are poor", it was usually interpreted that he must mean the "spiritually poor". The interpretation of Jesus reading the scroll and proclaiming he'd come to release the captives, proclaim recovery of sight for the blind, set the oppressed free - was all interpreted as spiritual captives, spiritually blind, spiritually oppressed. But could the simple meaning of the text be part of the picture as well? Could Jesus actually mean, blessed are you who are materially poor? (Luke 6) Could he have come to relieve literal poverty as well as spiritual poverty? Could he have been calling his followers to continue his mission of literally setting oppressed people free and bringing physical healing?

I believe this kind of division between Bible-believing and those upholding the earth and it's people was quite widespread - not just an anomaly in Adelaide. Is that right?

Thankfully today it seems the two sides are coming together - in that Bible-believing churches and Christians are realising that it's a Biblical mandate to care for the planet and for the inhabitants of the earth. But how did the church become so misled on this stuff? And where we see these same divisions and confusions cropping up today - how do we address them?

Paul addresses this issue throughout his letter to the Colossians. We will be looking at Colossians for the next 8 weeks, so in today's sermon we'll do some ground work for the coming series.

Paul wrote Colossians to a church that was planted by his friend Epaphras. The city of Colossae was about 160km East of Ephesus, a strategic city where Paul spent over 2 years preaching and teaching. Paul was in Ephesus around 52-54AD. Ephesus was central on a trading route between the East and the West. When Paul stayed in Ephesus, Acts 19 tells us that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Epaphras was from Colossae but heard the gospel from Paul in Ephesus. And he went back to Colossae and shared the gospel which started the church there. I presume that there were many others like Epaphras who were travelling to and from Ephesus and went to their home towns in a similar way, but we don't have all of the stories. Colossians written to the believers in Colossae while the church there was less than 10 years old.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians you're going to hear reasoning and arguments against some incorrect ideas and heresies that had begun to develop. The Truth of Christ is applied to Paul's life, to the incorrect ideas, and, to how people live as Christians.

The false ideas and theologies influencing the Colossian church came from early philosophers including Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. These three philosophers were a big influence on the thinking of the Greeks and Romans of the time. At Pentecost a few weeks ago I shared about the Greek culture and language that spread after Alexander the Great conquered huge areas around the Mediterranean. Part of that culture that spread was a dualistic view of the world and more specifically gnosticism. Gnostics believed that people could be saved by some secret knowledge (gnosis in greek). What Paul encounters around the year 50AD is early gnostic thought, but these ideas have influenced the world and the church even to today.

What we see in Paul's letter to the Colossians is anti-dualism. Paul's way of thinking, and the Bible's way of thinking is holistic, not dualistic.

So, what is dualistic thought? And what is holistic thought?

Much like the Greek and Roman 'gods' we see in the movies and fables the gnostic 'gods' have a heirarchy. The ultimate power or "god" gives birth to the next lot of 'gods' below, then they are all paired up males and females who also produce offspring, have fights and are unfaithful to their partners. The Gnostic hierarchy starts with the ultimate "god" who is pure and light, and as the pairs of so called "gods" descend further and further from the ultimate "god" they are closer to the darkness. It is one of the gods furthest from the light, furthest from purity that creates, usually in some sinful way, a physical world. So you can see how dualistic thinking makes sense to them. The dualism of the gnostics says that the spirit is good and matter is evil. Immaterial things are pure and good and the physical things are base, wicked and immoral. Spiritual things are holy, pure and light, whereas physical matter is dirty, sinful and dark.

Sometimes we read a dualism into Paul's letters that isn't there. His talk of the flesh and the spirit can be read in a dualistic way, but Paul's thinking was a lot more holistic, integrated. Paul's way of thinking was in keeping with the Old Testament, Hebrew way of thinking: everything physical was also spiritual. Physical and spiritual things are integrated. There isn't a great divide between the spiritual and the physical. To a dualist the idea that an eternal God would become flesh, enter into His own creation, suffer and die is unthinkable. But to Paul, and the Bible that is one of the most central fundamental beliefs.

Paul wrote in the Greek language but thought more like a Hebrew. The (lowly) creator god in a gnostic hierarchy was as far removed as possible from the pure god that all the other gods spring from. Whereas the Lord God, the true Creator of everything not only spoke and created everything, but He moulded people out of the dust of the earth, he stooped down and breathed the breath of life into the people. In other words, our God is not distanced from His creation. As you'll hear next week, He even stepped into His creation, becoming one of us, and he didn't hold his nose with disgust as He did so, he was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus.

Paul addresses the dualistic ideas in his letter, cutting through the rubbish and bringing the fact that a good God, who loves his creation worked by sending his Son who became fully a human being. This God does not hate physical matter. He delights in it. This God is not repulsed by darkness but shines His light to reveal the truth. This God doesn't give secret knowledge to a limited few who fly up to the heavens when they die. The true God loves us, and gave himself for us to rescue us from the dominion of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of His Son, Jesus.

Dualistic ideas still persist today. Dualism is why we had cartoons when I was growing up where Tom and/or Jerry would die and instantly grow wings, floating up to the clouds. In gnostic thought, if you had the key, the secret knowledge then when you died the spark of divinity inside you would float up to some sort of heavenly realm. But if you didn't have the secret knowledge you would be cast back down to the evil physical world.

Does it really matter if your view of the world has been skewed into this dualistic division between spirit and matter? The thing is, it's not just a philosophy or way of thinking, but it impacts the way you live out your faith in this world. It influences the way you perceive Scripture and the character of God and therefore has eternal consequences. Just think of the parable of the sheep and the goats where Jesus says those who failed to care for the least on earth actually rejected him so he will reject them. So if your dualistic mindset has caused you to ignore the needs of those around you and focus purely on spreading the message of Jesus in words, you may find your salvation in jeopardy.

To really care for the poor is uncomfortable and unfashionable because it comes at personal cost. So it can be a lot easier to read the gospels through a dualistic lens and down-play Jesus' commands to us to share what we have with those in need, to the point of it upsetting our comfortable lives.

— getting into today's passage

In Col 1:1 Paul addresses the letter from himself and Timothy who is a brother in the Lord. He notably addresses the people of the Church of Colossae as God's holy people, faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

Even though incorrect teaching had crept into the church Paul doesn't give up on them. He recognises that truth trumps lies, that God's light triumphs over darkness and the gospel is more powerful than any false teaching that they have heard. They are God's holy people.

He greets the Church with the grace and peace of God the Father. God is the source of grace: unmerited favour and the blessing of peace which surpasses understanding.

After his brief greeting Paul tells the Colossians how he prays for them.

He always thanks God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when he prays for the Colossians. Why? Because he has heard of their faith in Jesus, the love they have for all God's people, the faith, and love that spring from the hope stored in the realm of God which they heard about when they heard the true gospel. This isn't the so called gospels that other people are preaching, it is the true message that Epaphras preached.

Paul recognises these signs of the Colossians' true Christianity - faith, hope and love, this trio of characteristics that show up many times in the New Testament. He tells them that he has been praying for them continuously ... that's quite a challenge to us. He prays continually for God to fill them with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives. He wants them to be filled with the ever-deepening truth that Epaphras shared with them. And continue in that same way, rather than being sidetracked by the secret truths on offer by the dualistic gnostics. Or being led astray by the lies of the philosophers or even those who insisted that they keep the Jewish OT law.

In our society today there's certainly no shortage of philosophies that we could get sidetracked by... just scroll your Facebook feed! Staying on track with the True Gospel takes continuous prayer and deliberate attention. Otherwise we can easily start to wander off track into other worldly spiritualities without even realising it.

Paul makes clear that any of the false teaching that sounds so spiritual is nothing compared with what Jesus has accomplished for us. He has delivered us from darkness, evil, powers, dominions, principalities and transferred us into the kingdom of Jesus. As members of his body, brothers and sisters of Jesus, subjects of His kingdom, we come under his rule of love and grace. Through the grace of God we can live lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing him and bearing fruit for him. Christians, in the strength, power and endurance of the Holy Spirit can live this new life.

We grow in the knowledge of God. That is, not knowledge about God. We don't just grow in the information we believe about God but we grow relationally with God.

If I read a biography about my wife Joh, I can learn a whole lot of things about her, but I only truly know her through the give and take of relationship. I truly know Joh when I share my life with her and she shares hers with me. We must talk to each other and listen to each other. In the same way, this is vital for our relationship with God.

I encourage you as we move through this short letter to the Colossians. Spend the 10 minutes or so that it takes to read this letter at least once a week ... although, imagine how much you can let the word of God dwell in you richly if you read it once each day! Just imagine if you heard this great letter and let God's word take root deep in your heart. If we all spent 2 minutes praying to hear from God, 10 minutes or so reading this short letter, and then another few minutes praying as a result of what you've read. Then our prayer lives will go deeper with the God who loves us, our knowledge about God and knowledge of God will be enriched and we'll have a fantastic word from God on our hearts as we go into the world each day.

Let me lead us in prayer ...