

Why Paul wrote to the Colossians

Colossians 1:1-2

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma

If I were to use one word to describe why Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colosse it would be "syncretism". Syncretism is where people try to blend together the ideas of different religions. It often happens because after a person is converted to a new religion he is still in the context of the old religion. It is well known that many of the native Africans who are converted to Christianity still hold on to many aspects of their old beliefs. That's because they are still in the context of their old lifestyle. Their environment, their friends, their culture, is still part of the old belief. Do you realise that that sort of thing is now happening in Western society? We used to think our culture was Christian. Not any more. Things have changed very rapidly. People in your local neighbourhood could be Christian or Muslim, Hindu or New Age, agnostic, atheist. A common saying these days is "It's important for every one to have faith- whatever that faith may be." Now, we live in this pluralist environment and it affects us. We want to be tolerant and sensitive to everybody. We don't want to be arrogant and bigoted about our beliefs over others. The result can be that we syncretise our faith. Like the Anglican Archbishop of Perth who wrote that all faiths lead to God. Christian folk can get confused. They try to hold onto their Christian faith, while trying to assimilate other ideas that seem to have some merit. A 1993 Gallop Poll found that while many folk retained some beliefs in traditional Christianity, 25% believed in reincarnation, 25% in the influence of astrology, 40% believed in a 'life force'. A young man approached a minister in the United States saying he believed in the inerrancy of Scripture, Reformed theology and reincarnation. He liked the Bible, John Calvin and Shirley MacLaine. And the inconsistency didn't bother him. In the United States there are about 1750 daily newspapers and 1220 of them have horoscopes. Are you one of those who have a look at a daily or weekly horoscope, checking to see what the stars tell you? Does the inconsistency bother you?

"Paul, an apostle." I am astounded time and again how relevant the Bible is. Because, what is for us a very modern phenomenon, this issue of syncretism, is precisely the issue Paul is dealing with in this letter to the Colossians. In our text we

have the introduction to the letter. Verse 1 *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..."* It is important to realise that Paul had never visited the church at Colosse. Verse 7 tells us that they learned of the gospel *"...from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf..."* His work probably came as a result of Paul's missionary activity in nearby Ephesus. Acts 19:10 tells us that as a result of Paul's daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, which went on for two years, *"... all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."*

"by the will of God." Now the believers in Colosse would have heard of Paul, but since he is going to correct their syncretism, he reminds them of his authority. He doesn't write to them as a private individual offering them an opinion, nor as a chairman of a Synod committee giving their well-reasoned views. He is an apostle of God, called to state the truth God had made known. An apostle was one who had actually seen the risen Lord Jesus, as Paul had done on the road to Damascus, and who had been commissioned by Christ Himself to establish the church. Paul underlines this authority by saying *"...by the will of God."* He was not appointed by a church session or synod committee. His was a divine appointment.

Apostolic authority. Now in our post modern days talk of truth and authority makes a lot of people uncomfortable. We prefer opinions, different viewpoints, and individual experiences. We don't want any authority to lord it over us. But Christianity is a revealed religion, not a matter of opinions. We come to know God by Him revealing the truth about Himself and how we are saved through Jesus. Truth is established by God's authority through His chosen apostles. There is a definite right way and wrong way. That which follows God's revealed will is true. That which denies God and His way is false. So right from the beginning Paul is laying the foundation for what he has to say to the Colossians. Paul sends this letter from prison (as 4;3,18 make clear "Remember my chains."). But he is not alone, he has Timothy with him. And Epaphras has been to see him, and tell about the situation in Colosse.

"the holy and faithful." In verse 2 we see Paul address the church: *"To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: ..."* For a church that's about to stray off course, he addresses them with remarkable respect. Rather different to how it's often done today. We can be quick to criticise and point out all the faults, to assume

hidden agendas and devious motives. The church at Colosse was far from perfect. In fact it was in serious trouble. But Paul still speaks with astonishing spiritual courtesy. He speaks first of their spiritual character. He says they are *"holy and faithful"*. By 'holy' he does not mean they have reached a certain level of saintly behaviour. The word 'holy' means 'set apart'. In spite of all their imperfections and failures, from God's point of view they are 'set apart' for him. They are special to him because of Jesus. They are God's own people, his own children. They are marked people. Marked out as belonging to God. Paul also recognises them as being 'faithful'. They are firmly committed believers who want very much to be loyal to Jesus even if they are being very misguided about lots of things.

"in Christ." In verse 2 Paul also comments on their location, both geographically and spiritually: *"To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse..."* We can say that they live in two locations at once. Geographically they live *"at Colosse"*. Spiritually they live *"in Christ"*. We mention both locations because, like us they were influenced by both. The church at Colosse was very much influenced by what they picked up from their surroundings. It was through living there and being exposed to the local folk religion that they had a problem. But their real environment, the one that should have exercised the most influence on them was Christ. The phrase *"in Christ"* is very important to Paul. He uses it eleven times in this letter. To be *"in Christ"* is not just knowing some stuff about Jesus. To be *"in Christ"* is to be in a living and real relationship with him, to enjoy intimate companionship with him. It is to allow Jesus to shape and sustain our lives in every way.

"at Colosse." Now, Colosse was a little town situated about 200 kilometres east of Ephesus (in what is today known as Turkey), in the Lycus Valley. It was a beautiful mountainous area. The main trade route used to run through Colosse but had been diverted elsewhere, so the town had lost its wealth and prestige. It had been overtaken in importance by the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13). The people who lived in Colosse were a mixed bunch made up of Gentiles and Jews. They were mostly farmers who earned their living by growing crops, farming sheep and dying and selling wool. So these people in this church were very ordinary folk. These were the ones confused with syncretistic ideas. These were the ones to whom Paul put forward some deep theological ideas, especially about Jesus. They were *"in Christ"*, so these doctrines were important to them as they dug their fields, as they tended their sheep and went to market.

The heresy. Now, the exact problem, the heresy at Colosse, has been very hard to define. Numerous scholars have had their say on what exactly was going on. But it seems the following is clear. The church was influenced by the folk around them, by the religion they had left when they were converted. The folk religion of the day was a kind of pick and mix religion which stressed religious experience. It was a mixture of Phrygian ideas on magic and Jewish ideas on angels with a stress on mystic experience. The religion dealt with the fear that characterised the town's folk's lives. Their lives were precarious and they believed that the power of magic would give them security and control over the supernatural powers. The worship of angels was central to this folk religion. People believed that venerating these supernatural beings would give them protection from harm. A lot of this angel worship was being taken up by the Jews who lived in Colosse who were also concerned with observing the special Jewish holy days and rules about eating and drinking. Add all this to a belief in Jesus and the faith of the Colossians was syncretistic, it was in danger of becoming a mishmash of inconsistencies. The resulting spirituality was one which devalued Jesus. These farmers in Colosse may not have realised the implications but in effect they were saying that Jesus was not adequate to meet their needs, to provide the security they needed from their fears. They implied Jesus need to be supported by the help of other beings, such as angels who were manipulated by magical rituals, and that faith in Jesus needed to be supplemented by other religious practices.

Christ alone. Now, to Paul that was a real perversion of the gospel, because of the way it belittled Jesus. So Paul, hearing about all this from Epaphras, writes to the Colossians to help them to really understand the truth of their faith, to profit from all the benefits that are theirs in Jesus. So he sets about in this letter, explaining who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for them. One commentator has described this letter as a "Christ-intoxicated letter". In other words this letter pointed out to them, and points out to us, that Jesus is everything and in Him we have everything. We need nothing besides Jesus, for no thing and no one can save apart from Jesus. Jesus alone is Lord. Jesus alone is the saviour. Jesus is the supreme one. (Read 1:15-20).

Lord of life. The church today needs to be reminded that Jesus alone is Lord. We today still tend to be influenced by the thinking and attitudes around us. Do we trust Jesus alone for all of life, or do we really only feel secure when we own many things,

have plenty in the bank, and have a sense of wealth and power? Are we beginning to think that other religions have their place and that there are many roads to God? If we believe Jesus alone is Lord do we show it by our constant clear witness to our work mates and neighbours? Are we striving to follow Jesus as Lord in all of life? Do we take our faith and doctrines into the office and university campus and let those teachings develop how we think and act. Are we indeed "*in Christ*"?

Being unpopular. This approach will be very unpopular in our day of open mindedness and tolerance for all religions. It will cost us. But that was precisely the issue for the Christians in the time of Rome. They challenged the popular religions of the day, especially the emperor worship, and said to all of it "No! Jesus, and Jesus alone is Lord." That too is Paul's message here in Colossians. Christ is supreme. Colossians 2:6,7 are the hinge around which this letter turns. They summarize all that comes before and outline what is to follow: "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*"

"Grace and peace." It is only when we focus solely on Jesus as Lord that we can experience the two things that Paul wishes for the Colossians in his greeting in verse 2 "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father*". Grace is where Paul begins and ends this letter. Grace is about God's favour, His deep love and care, to those who don't deserve it. Grace takes us to the heart of the gospel. It is the word that captures what God has done for us in Christ. All of the brokenness and pain, the sickness and death, the threat of terrorism and war, is due to our sin and failure towards God. And the gospel tells us that: "*we who fall short of the glory of God are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*" Push aside Jesus and where is the grace? Philip Yancey in his book writes "*From nursery school onwards we are taught how to succeed in a world of ungrace. The early bird gets the worm. No pain, no gain. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. I know these rules well because I live by them, I work for what I earn, I like to win; I insist on my rights; I want people to get what they deserve- nothing more, nothing less.*" Yancey is right in his assessment. But the church is a community where grace should flow freely, because we come into existence by grace. In Christ that is what we are on about. That is the reason for our existence- to make known Jesus is Lord and through Him is God's grace. Gordon MacDonald in one of his books writes "*the world can do almost anything as well or*

better than the church. You don't have to be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry or care for the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace". Only God offers grace and He does it through Jesus alone. In Christ we experience God's grace and the wonderful sense of "peace", "shalom". Although Paul begins all his letters with this greeting of grace and peace it is no empty formality. Christian experience begins with grace, continues in grace and will climax in grace. Peace with God and with all the creation is the great purpose of grace. It comes only by Jesus. So our focus as a church, as Paul urged the Colossians, is on one person alone –Jesus. He is supreme. With Him we have everything. But if we lose our focus and syncretise with other religions we push away Jesus. We push away grace and peace, we push away our only hope.

DISCUSSION.

Preparation. Read the sermon notes.

Readings. Colossians 1:1-8, 2: 6-20. Text. 1:1,2.

Questions.

1. Missionaries often express concern about the effect of syncretism, where, for example, native Africans, when converted, often mix together their old beliefs with their new ones. Explain what syncretism is and why it occurs. Consider whether Christians in Australia are guilty of the same thing. What influences outside Christianity affect your life? How do you deal with the inconsistencies?

2. Give an overview of the Colossians in terms of:

where they lived, their work and the people around them

how they got to hear of the gospel

their relationship to the Apostle Paul

the nature of the heresy affecting them.

3. Explain Paul's strategy for dealing with their problem in terms of:

his being an apostle by the will of God

the way he addresses them

his emphasis on Christ.

4. How badly are we affected by syncretism?

Do we trust Jesus alone or Jesus and... ?

In our multicultural communities how are we influenced by the idea that "All roads lead to Rome", that all beliefs have their place?

If we believe Jesus alone is Lord, how does that affect our approach to our work, our studies, our home life, our witness.

5. Do we struggle with the issue that Phillip Yancey raises that we live in a world of "ungrace" How does that affect our ability to live lives of grace?

6. What is our focus as a church? Is it really on one person alone, namely Jesus? Have we experienced the "grace and peace" that comes from knowing Jesus personally? How has that influenced your life?