


## Knowing Christ

If I asked you write down  what you consider to be two or three greatest threats to Christianity in America today, what would pick? For some it might be the seismic cultural and political shift away from a Judeo-Christian consensus to a more thoroughly secular, progressive and pragmatic vision of America. Others might point to the collapse of moral authority and the triumph of militant tolerance that polices language and marginalizes and criminalizes statements of moral disapproval as “hate speech.”

Most would probably include a smattering of ideological *isms*: communism, secularism, humanism, postmodernism, scientism, materialism, consumerism, mysticism, wokeism, and on and on.

All of these are real and pose significant challenges to God’s people navigating life in two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world—life in these United States. Jesus warned us not to be surprised when the world hates his church. Jesus’ followers have *always* existed in a hostile spiritual environment. We are in the world but not of the world; against the world yet for the world.

But as difficult as our world is, the challenges to faith that arise from within the church itself are equally as great, if not greater. For instance, the American church faces a significant crisis as a consequence of failed assumptions about how churches grow. For a long time many churches have relied on an attraction model. The right programing, upscale facilities, good coffee, hip worship and entertaining preaching will draw people to like us and to join us.

These are assumptions we simply absorbed as how things are, or ought to be. We didn’t sit down and adopt them as planned strategies. They simply seeped into our social consciousness as the kind of thing everyone knows. It’s an assumption that shaped many of my own approaches to ministry.

Any or all of those things may be significant in creating a more welcoming atmosphere inside our church building. And they may remove unnecessary stumbling blocks to those who visit. But there are two problems inherent in those assumptions. The first is that in striving to becoming a really up to date church, the kind of church everyone would want to join, we can end up focused on seeking acceptance from our peers in the surrounding world and in the process we become less bold about proclaiming the essential strangeness of the gospel we profess to believe out in the world where it needs to be heard.

Brett McCracken writes: “Few things are worse for the individual Christian’s soul—and the broader Christian witness—than the quest for cultural acceptance. To consciously pursue credibility among the “cool” and applause from the cosmopolitan elite is, almost always, a step in the direction of theological compromise and spiritual atrophy.

...it’s a problem that keeps popping up. Why? Because our fallen flesh is stubbornly drawn to the idol of respectability.

Whatever culture a Christ follower happens to be in, the temptation is to be an insider rather than an outsider, acknowledged rather than dismissed, respected rather than ridiculed, a high-status power player rather than a powerless pawn.”

The Bible teaches that the power of the gospel—boldly proclaimed and authenticated by loving relationships within Christ’s Church—is what draws people to Jesus. Everything else matters but must be subordinate to proclaiming Jesus crucified, risen and coming again.

The second problem with our assumption is that the world has turned. We now live in a time in which fewer people identify as faithful followers of Jesus. The pool of people “just like us” is shrinking dramatically. A recent PEW Survey revealed that in the last ten years, the number of people who identify as evangelical has declined 6% to just under one-quarter of the American population. Of those, only half attend services weekly.

In his forward to the book, *How To Talk About Jesus Without Being "That" Guy*, EdStetzar writes, "There are many people (particularly those who are more secular) who have a general sense that the church is not the solution; in fact, they believe it may be part of the problem."

In such an age that we have entered, Church decline will continue if we do not figure out how to effectively talk about Jesus with highly resistant unbelievers around us, invite them to trust in and follow Jesus, baptize them and teach these converts everything Jesus commanded us. In America, that is harder than it's ever been before.

But there are other internal challenges to church congregations that threaten to draw us away from faith and from faithfulness to our profession. And here we come to the heart of what we want to consider from the Book of Colossians.

For one thing, the evangelical church still affirms salvation by grace, but we have pastors and teachers who in the name of biblical standards and personal holiness subtly teach as though it's entirely up to us to please God by our own rigorous efforts. We're still trying to figure out what it means to live by grace, discerning the difference between a performance-based, rule-driven Christianity and the freedom of Spirit-empowered obedience to Christ that extends the same grace to others that we have experienced.

I love that fact that here at Calvary you have learned the importance of erring on the side of grace. Without compromising your convictions, hang on to that!

Another challenge facing the church is the significant population inside American Christianity that embraces an identity as *Red Letter Christians*. Many of these wrongly equate concern for doctrinal integrity and biblical orthodoxy with unholy dogmatism or ideology.

Tony Campolo, who puts himself in the Red-Letter camp, describes Red Letter Christians this way: "By calling ourselves Red Letter Christians, we refer to the fact that in many Bibles the words of Jesus are printed in red. What we are asserting, therefore, is that we have committed ourselves first and foremost to doing what Jesus said."

Many Red Letter Christians do not believe that all parts of the Bible are equally valid, nor that inspiration applies equally to the entire text of Scripture. What Jesus said matters most, they argue, so they are dismissive of those parts with which they disagree.

One outcome of this thinking sounds like this online contributor: “Only when Christianity comes to terms with the values of enlightenment, free-thought, respecting the rights and dignity of an individual irrespective of his/her gender, sexuality, religious view and combines these values with the great teachings of Christ, that is, to love people and not judge them, will Christianity survive. Otherwise educated and enlightened souls will have no other way than to leave Christianity altogether.”

Red Letter Christians comprise one voice among many who in one way or another disregard the authority and integrity of the whole Bible as Divine speech, and place human reason as the arbiter of their religious convictions.

Still another seductive voice within the evangelical community teaches what we call the health and wealth gospel. You’re a child of the King and God wants you to live your best life now, like a prince or a princess. All you need is enough faith.

Another disturbingly common distortion has absorbed a mushy kind of faith best described as **therapeutic, moralistic deism**. These don’t get hung up on inconvenient details but have reduced Christianity to belief in a kindly, generic god who wants you to feel better about yourself and be a nicer person.

All of these trends and voices and many more exist within the evangelical faith community and pose threats to a vibrant, spiritually healthy, growing Christian Church.

They are not new. From the very beginnings of the church, Christ’s Apostles warned against similar challenges. Paul’s letter to the Church in Colossae came primarily in response to false teachers who had slipped in, convincingly teaching a pseudo super-spirituality: a noxious blend of philosophical nonsense, spiritual mysticism and legalism.

In chapter 1, Paul laid a firm foundation in truth:

- the message of forgiveness from the Father who has transferred us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son
- the *supremacy* of Jesus as Creator and Lord of all he created;
- the *sufficiency* of the gospel giving us a secure hope through faith in Jesus.

Paul was passionately committed to this message and was driven by a desire to serve everyone he met by seeing them become fully-devoted, fully-developed followers of Jesus.

In chapter two of Colossians, Paul begins to take up the burden of his warning. ▶“For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ▶I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (Colossians 2:1-5 ESV).

Paul's burden comes right out of his calling. In the last verse of the previous chapter, Paul said: ▶“For this I toil, **struggling** with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29 ESV).

Then look at verse one of chapter two: ▶“For I want you to know how great a **struggle** I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face...”


Paul continues to expose his heart for the believers in Colossae. His struggle—both in prayer for the Colossians and in writing to them—is to ▶put courage back into their hearts by **calling them to loving unity built around the centrality of knowing Christ.**

You see, dealing with error—teaching that deviates or distracts from the centrality of Christ—is discouraging, potentially divisive work within a church family.

For instance, in my previous church we had a man who had served well as an elder in our congregation. He and his wife had deep roots in the church and loving connections with many other families. He was a gifted communicator who sometimes preached for us, and highly educated. But when he went public with an unorthodox way of understanding certain moral convictions and practices about gender and identity, we had to take actions to protect the church.

This work was unsettling. It mattered that the congregation be “knit together in love” as we sought to come to a “full assurance of understanding.”

Controversy over unorthodox teaching is never merely an exercise in academic rigor. Nor is it we engage with the same detachment with which we take out the trash. It is always highly relational, and relationships are always complex, entangled. That has frequently been a personal challenge for me as a teacher focused on the *task* of communicating truth. In times when truth is challenged—especially in times when truth is challenged—the Body of Christ needs to draw closer together in love.

Only then, **together**—and *together* is such a critical word—can we  “...reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Paul intends that our hearts be encouraged as we are knit together in love, with a view to the riches of full assurance of understanding that leads to a complete knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ himself.

In other words, encouragement comes as we discover and do truth concerning Jesus *together*! A great handicap of the American church is our cultural captivity to the myth of the rugged individualist. We celebrate our independent selves and declare our freedom to determine truth for our selves, by our selves.

There is a piece of this to affirm. We need to be individually committed to discovering what the Bible teaches, and with humility be able to stand by our own convictions.

But what we frequently lose sight of is the significance of doing this in community. We are one body in Christ under one Lord. We are *interdependent*, not independent. Paul made a direct link between being knit together in love and reaching "...all the riches of full assurance of understanding..." We're in this *together*!

Paul invites us to plunge together into a deeper, richer knowledge and understanding of Jesus, God's mystery.

When Paul used the word *mystery*, he was describing something that previously had been unknown or misunderstood but now has been plainly revealed. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God told his people about a coming Messiah who would redeem them and rule over a glorious kingdom. The Jewish scribes and rabbis had interpreted these promises in almost wholly nationalistic, triumphalist ways. They expected a *mega-David*, a conquering warrior-king who would crush the Gentiles and re-establish Israel as *the* world power.

They didn't understand that Messiah would have to die for the sins of his people and be raised again. They totally overlooked the part about Messiah reconciling Gentile nations to God. They missed God's heartbeat for the world.

So when Jesus came, he was a mystery to most Jews. He broke the molds of all their expectations. It wasn't until his after his crucifixion and resurrection that his closest followers began to grasp the fulness of who he was and what he came to do.

And even then, there was more to learn as God gradually unfolded his plan and purpose that Gentiles as well as Jews be formed together into one new body, the Church. God chose Paul and uniquely entrusted him with the stewardship of this mystery. Paul took the gospel to the Gentiles and advocated for their full inclusion in the Body of Christ.

In doing so, Paul made the cross and teaching about Jesus central to his teaching and ministry. So it's only natural in the face of internal threats to the faith, that Paul would *challenge the Colossians to dive deeper into what is truly at the heart of Christian faith*, to "...reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden *all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*"

I have a deep love for the Book of Proverbs, so when Paul mentions “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” my mind naturally goes there.

For instance, chapter two begins with this: ▶“My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

▶*For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding...*” (Proverbs 2:1-6 ESV).

I wonder if this was in Paul’s mind when he pointed to Jesus and said: “There. Look at Jesus. In the Lord Jesus we find all the treasures of wisdom and understanding, everything Solomon was talking about. Jesus is all the mystery you need. Jesus offers all the richness of understanding necessary for knowing God and living well in a broken world. You can never plumb the depths of knowledge and insight offered by Jesus. Jesus fulfills your deepest need.”

He still does. The Colossians were being sidetracked by cleverly framed, persuasive arguments that enticed them to invest their energies and attentions elsewhere. Writer and pastor R.C. Lucas said, “Nothing is so dangerous as feeble reasoning allied to fast talking.”

Amen to that!

We can be sidetracked in so many ways. For instance, we had a widow in a church in Oregon who was a faithful, godly woman. She had remodeled her home to create space for other widows to come and share their love for Jesus over meals and fun times together.

Somehow she got sucked into a reclusive, hyper-legalistic group that alienated her from her friends and family. She was drawn away by issues of Bible translation, and extreme rules for Christian living. She cut off all contact with our church family leaving us bewildered and grieving.



None of it had anything to do with knowing Christ better. It was divisive and in her case damaging as she retreated into a rigid, grim bitterness toward anyone who disagreed with her.

▶ Otherwise important issues become dangerous distractions whenever they displace the centrality of knowing Jesus and growing deeper in our walk with him.

Think about the issues that divide evangelical churches today. Of course we need to stand for a fully informed biblical morality and ethics, and doctrinal integrity. But many dissensions within churches accomplish little more than distancing us from the full assurance that comes from knowing Jesus in richer, more significant ways.

Don't go there. Don't get drawn away by *anything* that crowds knowing Christ to the sidelines—anybody's hobby-horse. Press on *together* "...to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

*Benediction:*

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).