

Colossians 1:12b-20.

It was a good church that Paul had heard about from his friend, Epaphras. Faith, hope, and love characterized it, but no church is perfect. The city of Colossae was located deep within the melting pot of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As new ideas melded with old philosophies and religions, the culture had influenced these believers.

After celebrating all that is good about the church in Colossae, Paul will begin in these verses to address some of his concerns.

Hyphens aren't worth much, are they? Sure, they connect words for the sake of grammar. Forget one or improperly use another, and the consequences aren't earth shattering... unless we're talking about a hyphen that's part of an equation at NASA. Such was the case with the spacecraft, Mariner 1.

NASA had developed a program in the early 1960's to study Mars, Mercury, and Venus. The program's first spacecraft, Mariner 1, was an unmanned vehicle launched on July 22, 1962. However, within a few minutes of launch, it failed to respond to ground commands and was ordered destroyed.

In all the handwritten pages of equations used to program Mariner's onboard computer, one equation had a significant error. It was the omission of a small line above a single letter. That little line resulted in a wrong set of mathematical solutions, and those solutions caused the spacecraft to overcorrect for minor variations. Thus, it's been said that Mariner 1 was "wrecked by the most expensive hyphen in history."

Doctrine is often like that hyphen—it doesn't seem like much. Many say that as long as you're a good person who loves other people it shouldn't matter what you believe. Others say if a church is filled with warmth, it shouldn't matter what it's Statement of Faith reads. Well, just like the hyphen that brought down Mariner 1, doctrine always has practical consequences. Truth matters.

"IS DOCTRINE REALLY IRRELEVANT, DIVISIVE, UNSPIRITUAL, AND BORING? NO, DOCTRINE IS INEVITABLE"

— KEVIN VANHOOZER

The Colossian church looked good as Paul wrote this letter, but it was starting to compromise with the culture in ways. Some of the most fundamental doctrines seem to have been shifting: Who is God

the Father? Who is Jesus? What is a sinner, and how does Jesus save? Let's see what Paul had to say as he delved into this.

GOD THE FATHER

COLOSSIANS 1:12-14

Paul begins with a bit of theology: God the Father is the One who "qualified [the Colossians] to share" in all the blessings of salvation (v. 12). Whatever errors the Colossians had started to believe, Paul reminded them that no one is "qualified" to spend an eternity with God. In the presence of a perfectly righteous and holy Judge, we're qualified for one thing: hell.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said that sinners are: separated from Christ, alienated, strangers to God, hopeless, godless, far off from God, darkened, ignorant, hardened in heart, callous, etc. (Eph 2:12-14, 4:17-19). When you begin to piece together all the Bible says about mankind, the picture isn't flattering. We've offended God, and by nature we keep offending Him. We're sinners (Rom 3:10-18). This means if God never chose to initiate salvation, reaching down to make a man or woman qualified to be with Him, no one would ever be with Him. *Sola Gratia*—salvation is by grace alone.

Ephesians 2:4-5—"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."

God qualifies His people to be with Him forever. Unlike training where you work to make yourself more qualified for a sport, God does all the qualifying to fit His people for heaven.

But how? Paul says God "delivered us from... and transferred us to" (v. 13). The Father delivers sinners from the kingdom of this world and transfers them into His own kingdom. Motivated by love, God qualifies sinful men and women to become His own. It's a picture of adoption (Gal 4:4-7; Eph 1:4-5).

Can't God make all this happen because He's God... and He can do whatever He wants? No—He's righteous; we're sinners. Being just, God can't wave a wand and magically make it all go away or pretend sin never happened. It happened, and the only way for God to remain just while justify sinners is to become the sinner's substitute (2 Cor 5:21). He paid our punishment that we might go free.

Christian Theology

Paul wanted the Colossians to know these truths right from the start. God died for their sins. He received their penalty, and He placed upon them His holiness to make them qualified or fit to be with Him. Thus, it's only through Christ that "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (v. 14).

Now, if God did all of this on my behalf as a Christian, what am I supposed to do? Give thanks (v. 12).

GOD THE SON **COLOSSIANS 1:15-20**

No two Christians will agree on everything. We may not see eye-to-eye on the kind of music appropriate at church, for instance. We might even disagree on the particulars of a few doctrines. Does it matter? Yes, but not all errors carry the same consequences. To be wrong about the number of angels able to dance on the head of a pin isn't the same as being wrong about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Big difference.

Is Jesus God? Did He rise from the grave? Is He alive and seated in heaven today? The Colossians had started listening to people with different thoughts on important questions. These people weren't part of a certain religion; rather, they were open to a smorgasbord of religions. It seems they combined bits of eastern mysticism with elements of Greek philosophy, Judaism, and the Christian faith. By the second century, this hodgepodge would become known as Gnosticism.

Against all that was swirling about in Colossae, Paul stated that Jesus is God. The deity of Jesus Christ is shown in His ability to create all things and in His ability to redeem sinners.

CREATOR (V. 15-17)

Gnostic writings spoke of Christ, though as a created being or an emanation from God. Some said God had given the Christ-spirit the ability to create. Most taught that Jesus was a man, one whom the Christ-spirit had rested upon in some strange way.

So, who is Jesus? According to Scripture, "He is the image of the invisible God" (v. 15). As a mirror reflects the face of a man, so the Son of God perfectly reflects God the Father. That's why the Lord could say, "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). As God, Jesus Christ has all the attributes and abilities of God. Namely,

He can create. The Gospels tell of Jesus turning water into wine, healing the lame, and restoring sight—creation-like miracles. What did He do prior to these? He turned nothing into something when He spoke the universe into existence (Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2).

Paul reminded the Colossians that in Jesus "all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (v. 16-17). That's powerful. To this day no one knows how "all things hold together" when in fact they really shouldn't. As physicists peer inside the atom they can't adequately explain why like-charged electrons fail to repel and explode apart. Maybe they'll explain it better someday? Maybe, but the fact remains that behind all we ever see or touch is the God who creates and keeps it all together. This God is Jesus Christ.

REDEEMER (V. 18-20)

The Gospel of Luke tells about a Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner (Lk 7:36-50). Many entered the home to hear the exchange, as was customary. Yet, a prostitute also arrived. Having believed in the Lord as her Savior, she heard Jesus say, "Your sins are forgiven... your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Lk 7:48, 50). And the crowd who heard these words gasped, because no one can forgive sin but God alone.

Jesus claimed to be God. He taught with the authority of God, and He forgave sin as God. Paul wanted the Colossians to hold tightly to this, because Jesus wasn't someone beneath God. He wasn't one of many deities. No, for in Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (v. 19). Jesus Christ, fully God *and* fully man.

In these verses, Paul said Jesus is the head of the church, the heir of all the Father has, and the redeemer of man. All we read here points to the utmost height of rank—God Himself. Being God, Jesus called a people out of this world to be united to Him by faith. Being God, Jesus is entitled to all that God has. And being God, Jesus is able to forgive sin by means of His death.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that Jesus Christ is fully God and man. It is as we sing at Christmas: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail, th'incarnate Deity!" A right understanding of God and the gospel isn't just a hyphen. It's everything, and it makes a difference both in this life and the one to come.