
Cultivating a Biblical Spirituality

Colossians (various texts)

Introduction

Greg

We have been using the last couple of months to talk about and present the vision to expand our facilities here at the Chapel. Pastor Russ spent several weeks helping us to get a Biblical and God-honoring perspective on expanding and giving. Two weeks ago, Pastor Dan began a new series of messages intended to help us understand the ministries we have at the Chapel. The morning messages give the Biblical justification for these ministries. The evening messages give the strategies we are currently using to implement those ministries, and to cast the vision of what those ministries could be in the new facility. Along with that vision is how we are planning to implement that vision.

On that first Sunday, Pastor Dan helped us to see the ministry of evangelism. Last Sunday, Pastor Russ helped us see the ministry of exultation. And today we are going to look at the ministry of edification.

There is a lot being said these days about “purpose.” Nearly every organization is challenged to formulate a mission and vision statement and to elucidate its “reason for existence.” The premise is that ‘the better one understands the purpose for your existence the more effective one will be in accomplishing and performing these tasks.’ In many ways the Bible speaks this same language and challenges us to first know who we are as Christians and then to live our lives in accord with this knowledge.

That is one reason that here at Clearcreek Chapel we have a formal mission and purpose statement. We put it in our bulletin every Sunday. It reads:

By God’s grace and through His Word, we will cultivate in the hearts of God’s people a passion for the supremacy of God magnified in love for Him and manifested in love for one another. We carry out this mission through exaltation, edification, and evangelism.

One of our “purposes” is that of edification. Edification is one of the terms that the Bible uses to describe progress in the Christian life. Other terms that are used are growing, walking, farming, building etc. One term frequently used today is that of developing a “spirituality.”

The problem with this term is that there are many competing views as to exactly what is a true Christian or what is true Biblical spirituality. This is a problem today because in writers and thinkers who are non-Christian, they use the idea of spirituality as an ‘inner sense of peace’, a ‘healthy self-awareness’, a ‘feeling of awe’ or a ‘sense of dependence’ especially to something bigger than ourselves.

Dale

This morning we want to present a framework for understanding and then developing what is true “Biblical spirituality.” We are presenting this together to demonstrate in a very tangible way that there is a strong relationship between our ministries. We both are involved in overseeing ministries that make significant claims to building and maintaining a Biblical spirituality. The Edification of believers is both preventative and recuperative. We want to build lives that can withstand the onslaughts of the world and to be able to recover when we find ourselves overtaken in sin. We hope that this unusual presentation method is not distracting but will keep you interested as we explore this concept of true Biblical spirituality.

It only makes sense that we should seek the Scriptures as to the source of our understanding as to what a true Christian spirituality looks like. We have often made the statement that: ”John is the most spiritual person I know...” What did you mean by that statement? Come with us as we examine several passages in the epistle to the Colossians to gain a better understanding and begin to cultivate a Biblical Spirituality.

(Pray)

Content: The Image of God

The first thing we must recognize is that there is a “content” to this spirituality. It is “something”. It is something that is describable, identifiable and visible. Let us read a few passages from the epistle to the Colossians as we identify what this spirituality looks like.

First, keep in mind that in most of Paul’s letters he is writing to correct some error that is either infiltrating the people to whom he is writing, or he is confronting them about their local ministry. There is much written as to the nature of the “Colossian heresy” but for our purposes today we can simplify it as representing an alternative spirituality. In order to rectify this problem Paul has much to say as to what true spirituality looks like and we are proceeding in a “theological reading” of the letter to uncover those kernels of truth that are embedded in this letter.

First, from Colossians 1:9-14:

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In verse 9 we see there is a “spiritual wisdom and understanding” to grasp and in verse 10 there is a “knowledge of God” to increase. In fact in Colossians 1:28-29 we

find Paul toiling to present people “mature” in Christ. For Paul in this letter it is this connection to Christ that is what life is all about. Colossians 3:1-4 ends with the phrase “Christ, who is your life.” There are other texts in this letter that echo this thought, including 2:17 where it says “substance belongs to Christ.” And when we go back to 1:15 we find that Christ is the image of the invisible God.

Other connections throughout Scripture should also fall into place. Genesis 1:26,27 has important implications for a proper understanding of biblical spirituality. It reads:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This text tells us that we were made in God’s image. We could just as easily understand this as saying that we were made “as” God’s image. What is an “image?” It is a visible representation of something else. An image stands in the place of something. We were created to represent God in his creation. We were endowed with gifts and characteristics that specially enable us to be a physical presence of what God is here on earth. This is the purpose for which we were created Therefore a true Biblical spirituality must have as its content a connection to the character of God. We are to be God’s representatives here on earth and to accomplish this task in its intended way we must know and have a relationship with the God whom we are to representing. The connection to God is sometimes why the Bible refers to appropriate living as Godliness (being like God), or Christ-like-ness (being like Christ) or is called Spirituality (being like the Spirit). Each of these terms is used to convey to us the comprehensiveness of our lives and how our lives relate to our understanding of the Trinity.

The content of true Biblical spirituality is the character of God. As we go back into Colossians to 3:5-11 we see a description of what this content does not look like and then what it does:

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Other passages in the New Testament have this same form of what it does not look like and then what it does. The classic is Galatians 5:16-26 where in the context of

“Spirit” we see fruit of the Spirit. Again what is listed are the qualities that we are to express if we are to properly image God correctly.

Practically this means we are to immerse ourselves in Scripture and to contemplate deeply on the character of God so that the content of our spirituality is truly Biblical.

Greg

Connection: (The Cross of Christ)

But there must be a connection, a way that this character can become real in our lives. This is necessary because our role as image-bearers was damaged at the fall and continues because of our current sin or sins. Our state of fallen-ness and our innate propensity to sinning is a barrier to imaging God. We already noted that the content of image-bearing is to reflect the character of God and our characters are defaced in such a way and to such an extent that we are totally unable to become the image-bearers of God.

In Colossians 2:8-15 we see our sins compared with death and this death being put away by the work of the cross.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

It is the work of the cross and its function as a sin-offering that allows us to be made alive (or recreated to be effective image-bearers if you will...) and cancels the penalty of our sins.

Back in chapter 1 we had Paul presenting fruit and growth as connected to the gospel (1:5,6). And indeed the gospel, the good news of the change that occurs because of the death of Christ, is the energy of true Spirituality. The connectedness to the gospel is what enables a true spirituality to occur. In 1:21-23 we find the essentiality of the gospel:

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel

that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Without the cross and the gospel we are alienated, hostile and evil. But our hope in the gospel brings us reconciliation and allows us to be holy and blameless. When we hear the words holy and blameless in our current context what do we hear? Do we not hear words that can be used to describe God and his character? Can we see that the gospel enables us to be images of this God?

It is this connection to the cross that is being emphasized in the text of Colossians in that he is constantly referring to our position as somehow connected to Christ. Just a quick survey of some of these passages will give you a sense of this thought's importance in Paul's understanding of the Christian life. In 1:15-20 Paul emphasizes Christ's uniqueness as the quintessential image of God, the goal of history and the source of all peace.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

He continues this emphasis in 1:28 "mature in Christ," 2:2 "God's mystery which is Christ," 2:12 "raised with him (Christ) through faith," 2:20 "if with Christ you died," 3:1 "if you have been raised with Christ," and many other illusions. A true Biblical Spirituality can have no other true content than the character of God whom we are to represent. A true Biblical Spirituality can have no other connection to us other than through the cross and the One who made the cross the way to reconciliation with our God.

Dale

Compulsion: (The Power of the Spirit)

This brings us to the next aspect to understanding a true Biblical Spirituality. Once we grasp that our "spirituality" is to be the image of God in the created world, and it is essential that this image be recreated in us through the work of the cross, we recognize that it is only through the work of the Spirit that this can become a reality in our lives. True Biblical Spirituality is accomplished in a continual manner by the energizing activity of this third Person of the trinity. We hope you now have seen that true Biblical spirituality requires a full-orbed Trinitarian approach to theological thinking with references to Father, Son and Spirit to bring out its full implications to our living.

Paul's text to Colosse, because of its specific emphasis and situation, does not refer to the Spirit as much as its sister letter we have in our Bibles as addressed to the Ephesians. In Colossians 1:8 he refers to their lives as having a "love in the Spirit" but beyond that he is driving home the Christ-centered spirituality that is evidently an issue for the church, either as an internal concern or an outside attack. In Ephesians he tackles many of the same themes. Many commentaries include both letters together because of this commonality. And in Ephesians, he does speak expressly of the work of the Spirit in the growth in the Christian life.

In two passages in this letter we can gain some sense of the essentiality of the Spirit in this model of Biblical Spirituality. First of all, in Ephesians 1:11-14 we see the connections that Paul makes with our status of being "in Christ" with the work of the Spirit.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Paul, in this section, connects our salvation not only with our connectedness to Christ but also with the work of the Spirit. Our position is secure because of the Spirit's work. It is the Spirit that makes the work of the cross a reality in our lives until we receive "possession of the inheritance" in its completeness. The Spirit's work is "how" God works all things after the counsel of His will and brings us into conformity with His will. We have no connection to this work without the work of the Spirit.

A little later in the letter, Paul ties the work of the Spirit with the progression and expression of this hope in our daily lives. Look ahead to 2:11-22.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the

apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Our lives are ones of peace as citizens of a new country. We have a new constitution governing our behaviors that unites us on the basis of the cross and then, changing the metaphor, we are being built into a temple. This “building” should cause us to hear concepts involving process and direction toward a goal. We build by putting something together with an end in mind. Indeed we are to be a “temple” for God. Remember the temple was the “physical representation of God on earth” for the Israelites. It was where they met with God and He dealt with their sin and challenged them to go forth with His message of forgiveness. Now we, by the power of the Spirit, are being built to work this task of being God’s presence in this world, (again, might we say we are to be God’s image?).

Greg

Continuum: (The Growth in the Word)

This idea of building brings us to our last point of the morning, which is a true Biblical Spirituality involves a continuum. It requires and involves a process that is growth toward this goal of imaging God aright in this world and then perfectly forever in glory for His glory. But the text of Colossians makes it clear that this constant transformation does not occur as some magical detached event. It becomes true in our lives as we live and learn, as we engage our minds and activate our hearts, as we soak up His Word and squeeze out its implications.

This connection to His Word is found in a careful reading of Colossians 1:3-8.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Paul thanks God for their hope (since he heard of their faith and love). They heard (and know) this hope because of the “word of truth” which he identifies as the good news which then is described as “bearing fruit and growing.” The growth is connected to the message of the Word. Let’s not compartmentalize the Bible into passages of rules, passages of plans, passages of stories and then somehow find a narrow section we label as “gospel.” Let us hear the Bible from Genesis to Revelation conveying the great story of redemption. Its message is that of grace and good news,

release and reconciliation from our rebellion and its center on the wonder and work of our Savior Jesus Christ who is pictured as the great center of God's purpose from his creative Word, through his re-creative act on the cross to his final re-creation of the cosmos at the end of the age. When we see gospel in Colossians we are hearing a word that connects us to the entire canon of Scripture and its role in our growth and change and fruit-bearing in the world. In 1:25 Paul wants the "word of God fully known." Knowing (which he calls hearing and understanding in 1:6) is central to our maturing (this is another word that should bring to mind ideas of process and change). Indeed when we get to the section of the letter where we find examples and exhortations about the practical out-working of our position in Christ we see these words in 3:1-4:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

In "setting our minds" on things above we ask questions like Who is God? What is he like? What has he done? What does he want of me? How can I be like Him? How can I reflect the work of His son? This "setting our minds" in verse 1 is the introduction to then "put to death" in verse 5, and "put on" in verse 12. We make much of hearing and understanding of the Word here at Clearcreek Chapel. It is because we take seriously our roles as God's image bearers and then the connection that being that image of God requires an understanding of what that image looks like. We can only know the image of God from what he has revealed to us about himself. Yes, he has revealed Himself in His acts of creation and His deeds of providence and history, but these can only be correctly interpreted in the light of His propositional revelation which adds and unerringly interprets these events. We must come to Him as we understand His Word. Manifold errors and problems develop when we try to distance ourselves from the Word. And when we distance ourselves from the Word, we create an image of God that is somehow more "personal" or contemporary. But that image is not the image of God revealed in the Scriptures.

So what does this mean as we approach ministry here at Clearcreek Chapel. This series is intended to bridge the potential gap between "ministry" and "ministries." It is kept in the forefront of our thinking so that what we do for the kingdom is firmly grounded in how we think about the Word and how we accomplish its mandates. Tonight we will elaborate upon discipleship ministries and show how we intend to cultivate and maintain Biblical Spirituality in each of our lives in the intentional and focused ministries here at the Chapel. Please return to hear Greg, Dale and Devon share our vision of Discipleship ministry.

But this understanding has direct implications to each of our lives. Lets close by asking ourselves several pointed questions.

Conclusion

1. Do I desire to image God in his creation?...to my family?...to my co-workers? ...to my friends?.....to my neighbors?
2. Am I connected to God's character through the cross? Am I dependent upon his grace for my sins and inadequacies each day? Have I made that commitment to Jesus as my Savior and the King of my life?
3. Am I dependent upon the power of the Spirit to make this real? Am I trying to achieve this spirituality in my own strength and abilities?
4. Do I spend time in His Word and make every opportunity to hear the Word as it is taught in the ministry of the Chapel? Or do I find excuses not to regularly learn myself and to bring my family under His Word?

May this be a growing reality in each of our lives from now until preeminence of Christ in everything is clear and complete forevermore!