

BETHEL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP
FAIR LAWN, NJ
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Pastor Ron Blankley
“THE WORD OF CHRIST”
Colossians 3:16

This past week the New Jersey Motor Vehicles Commission sent me a renewal application for my driver’s license. They are requesting that I complete both sides and personally bring it to one of their Motor Vehicle Agencies, preferably before my current license expires. They are also reminding me that I will have to pay a new four-year fee, if I can verify my identity and place of residence. They will want to see my current license and at least one secondary document, my social security card, and a utilities bill that is post-marked within the last sixty days.

But for people like me, there is something else they will require. I have a driving restriction that is clearly noted on the front of my license. On the back of my license, that restriction is spelled out: “Corrective lenses required.” The problem is that I am terribly near-sighted. If I were to remove my glasses, everything beyond the front end of the car would go out of focus. (Its called blurred vision – really blurred vision!) So for your protection and mine, the folks at the MVC will also want confirmation that I’m still wearing my corrective lenses.

By way of analogy, when it comes to local church life, there are far too many Christians whose concept of worship is seemingly out of focus. Controversies abound on how “to do” church, and “worship wars” among the saints are unending. That’s why the passage before us this morning is so remarkably relevant. It provides us with one of the rare insights into how the early church worshipped. As such, it serves us well as a Scriptural lens, bringing a central ingredient of genuine worship into clear focus.

Let’s keep in mind that the contextual emphasis of this entire passage is upon our communal fellowship as members of “one body” and our mutual obligations to one another (vv. 12-17). The “garment of godliness,” with which we are to clothe ourselves, impacts our relationships with one another (vv. 12-14). The “peace of Christ,” ruling in our midst, is to serve as an arbitrator when disputes and conflicts arise (v. 15). In the same way, “the word of Christ” must also dwell among us, exercising its authority and power within the life of our gathered fellowship and worship (v. 16).

In my view, the clearest translation of this important text is reflected in the New American Standard Bible. By using this translation as our guide, three inter-related elements of local church worship will clearly come into focus.

1. Assimilating the Word (v. 16a)

The Word of Christ “probably refers to the teaching about Christ as well as the words of Christ Himself, which were part of the oral traditions passed on to believers in the early years . . . before the Gospels had been written” (ESV Study Bible notes). Today, this “Word of Christ” is revealed in the totality of God’s Word, and says Paul, must dwell among us richly. His point is that we must give the Word of Christ the highest priority and place within the communal worship of the Church.

Warren Wiersbe, a long-time pastor and commentator, rightly points out the importance of

viewing modern day worship through this corrective lens of Scripture:

There is a danger today, as there was in Paul's day, that local churches minimize the Word of God. There seems to be a lack of simple Bible teaching in Sunday school classes and pulpits. Far more interest is shown in movies, musical performances, and various entertainments than in God's Word. Many saved people cannot honestly say that God's Word dwells in their hearts richly because they do not take the time to read, study, and memorize it. (Be Complete, p. 133)

The reason for all of this is fairly obvious. Judging from the predominant themes in so many pulpits today, obsessive preoccupation with ourselves (and our problems) have usurped the place and preeminence of Christ in the life and worship of countless churches!

2. Singing the Truth (v. 16b).

By following the translation of the NASB, it becomes evident that one of the ways we let the Word of Christ dwell in our midst is by our teaching and admonishing one another *with* (or by means of) psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Clearly, Paul envisions such singing not simply as a means of extolling God, but also as a way of educating His people.

With this understanding, this passage then parallels Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5:18-20. In the latter passage, the hymns and songs are the outgrowth of the filling of the Spirit. In Colossians they are the result of the deep assimilation of the Word of Christ. Word-filled Christians are Spirit-filled Christians, committed to "addressing one another" (Eph. 5:18) and "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16) by singing the truth. Songs that are Biblically grounded and theologically substantive are a vital part of our communal worship.

Again, this significance of all of this has not gone unnoticed by Wiersbe:

I am convinced that congregations learn more theology (good and bad) from the songs they sing than from the sermons they hear. Many sermons are doctrinally sound and contain a fair amount of biblical information, but they lack the necessary emotional content that gets hold of the listener's heart. Music, however, reaches the mind and the heart at the same time. It has power to touch and move the emotions and for that reason can become a wonderful tool in the hands of the Spirit or a terrible weapon in the hands of the Adversary. (Real Worship, p. 137)

3. Responding to grace with thankful hearts (v. 16c).

As noted in the previous message, there is always so much to be thankful for, which is one of the reasons there is such an emphasis on thanksgiving in this brief letter (Col. 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16,17). No matter what our personal circumstances may be, when we enter into worship and focus on God's grace extended to us through the merits of Christ, gratitude will always surface within our hearts. That's why the word translated "thanks" is the same word that is also translated "grace" throughout the New Testament. They are the closest of kin. But adversity and anxiety do have a way of blurring our spiritual vision, which is precisely why we need the Scriptural lens of Colossians 3:16 to keep us focused on genuine, Biblical worship!