

INTRODUCTION

PRAYER:

We pray for Your Presence, Great Lord, though our belief is that You are always present with us – far more, and far more attentive, than we ever realize. Yet, though we trust it, it does not seem right to take it for granted. Among other things, we are expressing our need for You – our awareness that if You do not surround us and love us and help us, nothing we do or think or say will matter in the least.

We have been thinking about and moving toward *The New Church* for months now. We suspect and hope that You are in it, and behind it. And we are each seeking our own part to play. So come, Lord Jesus! Direct and heal and inspire us ... to be Thy new people. In the name of Jesus we pray it, in gratitude and in love. Amen.

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I need you to be on the same page with me. Not to agree with all my many little opinions, but to agree that we need to be better informed than in any previous time in the history of the church. It is tougher in some ways to be an apostle and an advocate of the Christian Faith than ever before. Partly this is because there are so many versions of the Christian Faith. And partly it is because there are so many non-Christian faiths of great merit, and they each have more and better spokespersons than ever before.

Thousands of people have access to the Internet and its information. The days are gone when you could simply mouth the platitudes or the party line of a neighborhood church you grew up in and get away with it – that is, still be effective. The church has always had teachers, so this isn't all entirely new. The early pilgrim churches always called a pastor *and* a teacher. They knew they needed both if they were to be prepared, and if they were to learn and grow. But over the years, many churches have stopped expecting their members to be well-informed, or to care about anything beyond a twenty-minute sermon that was often filled with stories of a very questionable origin.

In any case, I am hoping to lead *The New Church* back into serious study, without neglecting relationships, prayer, or faith. For the time being, at least, the Wednesday Night Class will be about background material for the Sunday morning sermons. There is time in a class setting to get into details and support information for things that are just stated or assumed in a sermon. Why do we care about background information? Some of you already do, a lot. Some of you probably think this is unnecessary, or even boring. But in our kind of church, it is easy to turn things off. You all have “off” switches and even delete buttons, right?

The reality is that in order to understand almost any comment, we need context. We need background information. When I am in a conversation with Mariana, whether we are in total agreement or serious argument, the conversation always comes out of a long history of shared experiences and past conversations. We can no longer start from scratch no matter how hard we might try. Everything she does or says reminds me of a long chain of things I have heard her do or say many times before. And of course vice versa. “From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse...” (Silver) So if one of us actually says something different or unlike all the things we have said before, it often takes half an hour to realize that it doesn’t fit into any of what we were expecting to hear. It may even take several conversations before it actually breaks through to the other one that this is a new communication that will not fit into the usual assumptions. By the way, that was happening all the time between Jesus and His disciples. Until he commented, perhaps in disgust, “You cannot put new wine into old wine skins.” It will burst the skins. When the old skins burst, we call that conversion.

But bursting skins, conversion, and lives being transformed – that is the Holy Spirit trading us up another level for “New Life.” Such things we cannot do for ourselves. On our own levels, we can care, study, pray, and try to be ready and willing. Even so, everything we are reading in the Bible is coming out of an already-established history and context. And to the degree that we are unfamiliar with this history and context, we are in serious danger of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what the biblical authors are trying to say. Sometimes we flat out will not hear the biblical story because we don’t “agree” with what is happening, or we don’t like what we consider to be the character flaws of those involved. In other words, we try to force the Bible to be saying what we want to hear. Otherwise, how else could we use the Bible as the authority we need to back up and support our own purposes and our own point

of view? Of course, if our perspective at the moment turns out to be a passing fad, then when the fad passes, the Bible – to those who were paying attention to us – will seem to be either an irrelevant old document, or the core of a false and misleading religion.

This may not seem very serious to you at first blush. But have you ever noticed what some leaders who believe in what they call “peace” try to do with Joshua, or King David? And if they are willing to warp and misrepresent Joshua and King David, why would we trust them to tell us anything straight about Jesus, or Paul?

Many times, the disconnect between what the Bible is saying and what preachers, teachers, and “good church members” are *claiming* it says is merely amusing. *Gehenna*, as we have all had to learn, is the name of the garbage dump outside the Jerusalem wall. Was this originally Jesus’ humor? I think so. Some things in life belong on the trash heap. If God didn’t burn away some of the things that just don’t work – things that mislead us – we would all soon be buried in the refuse. But by the time we get to Dante’s *Inferno*, and the thousands who have tried to use the fear of Hell as a way to control people, clearly all the humor has long since been driven out of it.

Behind the desire to understand what the biblical writers are trying to say, there is also the issue of authenticity. People in our time are always asking, “How much can I trust the Bible?” I think that for the most part, this questioning is coming on two levels:

- 1.) **FIRST LEVEL:** Is what we are reading in the Bible really true? (That is, factual, accurate, reliable.)

This is a many-dimensional and lifelong question. Life is bigger than “true or false” exams. Faith is bigger than facts, and religion (like all dimensions of meaning, purpose, or love) is always asking for choices, decisions, convictions, and conclusions long before all the evidence is in, and long before we have any mathematical certainty or precise conclusions. Faith (trust) is always a form of “betting your life” when it is still risky business to do so. None of us would ever take a “leap of faith” if it were not for the grim alternative: to spend our lives on the sidelines, never to know any commitment or meaning or purpose in our lives. So in time we come to realize that the question about “Is the Bible really true?” is actually an inane question. It’s not that we don’t want to ask this question. It’s that this question is not relevant to real life. “Is your wife (or husband) really true?” Well, maybe too good to be true, at times. But not all the

time. Is she faithful? To me? To God? To the cultural expectations of the society around us? Or have I reduced the concept of faithfulness to sexual behavior?

In some ways I may seem to be merely playing word games. But the reality is that this question is too big to be handled in a simple fashion – unless I’m not serious about the question in the first place. “Is your wife true?” “Yes.” Oh good, now we can get back to golf or the movie or whatever. But have we said or learned or claimed anything meaningful?

Is the Bible true? Such a question has no understanding of life or what real life is like. Do the authors and players in the biblical drama believe that what they are telling us is true? That is, have they bet their own lives on it? That is about as close as we can come to a meaningful question. And this question is not always easily answered either. However, if we come to earnest conviction or conclusions about this, at least that gives us usable information. I would, however, suggest that most of us don’t give a blanket reply to this question; that is, we don’t lump the Bible and all of its writings together and give one answer. I, at least, trust the Apostle Paul far more than I trust the author of Ecclesiastes to be telling me important information about God or to be giving me any useful information about the Christian Life. And from there it gets fascinating, but rather complex, for any thoughtful person.

2.) SECOND LEVEL: Is the record itself what it is claiming to be? (That is, are the authors, dates, and circumstances what they appear on the surface to be claiming?)

On this level, we have been getting mayhem for over two hundred years. Well, longer than that really; whenever we stopped being content to just take the priest’s or the preacher’s word for it, it got tougher. Most of us are grateful that we can ask questions and go searching for the precepts and principles we intend to build our lives around. So the questioning may be right and relevant, but the jaundice in all directions is enormous.

If, for instance, I read a book on archaeology, what am I learning? I may be getting some information about what is found in the dirt at an important place in biblical history; as all of us now know, traces of what happened long ago are often left in the layers of dirt beneath ancient cities, etc. That’s wonderful, and fascinating. But there are other far more prominent traces being left by whoever wrote the book itself. If the author is a conservative Christian, I get told that the archaeological

evidence proves that the biblical record is accurate. If the author is a liberal scholar, the very same archaeological dig may be used to claim that the biblical information is in error, or at least in doubt.

So what do I learn from archaeological evidence? Among other things, I learn that the conclusions drawn from what is found in the dirt are not nearly as precise or certain as is usually assumed. I may learn more about the warfare between liberal and conservative scholars than I do about archaeological evidence. For some years I just assumed that the liberal scholars were more reliable (objective and free from prejudice). But that only reflected my own prejudices. So it gets complex. Today, archaeological evidence depends primarily on which book you pull off the shelf. Everybody is sincere, so you flip a coin to decide who you trust to tell the story straight. Or you become an archaeologist yourself and spend years on real digs, learning to find and read the evidence. That way at least your prejudices will be your own.

It seems to me that in my own lifetime, more and more people have come to the “general conclusion” that nothing in the Bible is authentic. That religious and biblical writings are not to be trusted. That none of them are what they say they are or what they appear to be. And whether intentional or not, this is the impression that most liberal scholarship has been giving. Many liberal scholars have not themselves come to this conclusion, but we are frequently reading “summation statements” about what they have said, not what they have *actually* said. (We are in too much of a hurry to read very carefully what *anybody* has written.) So a great deal of our information is sort of a “popular, shorthand version” of what is actually being said and written. This adds much to the confusion and assumed conclusions of a vast industry of scholarship and biblical studies going on in our time. How many books come off the presses on such subjects every month? Nobody can begin to keep up with the religious field, never mind all the other areas of importance and interest. A surprising amount of accepted information about Christianity and biblical scholarship is coming into the culture by way of interpretation and “crib note” summations from the media: magazine articles, newspaper articles, television programs, Internet articles. After a while it comes to be “common knowledge.” Yet the common knowledge is often full of misinformation mixed with propaganda and unproved theories. This is hardly a sure foundation for discarding all religious conviction.

Most of us would also acknowledge that there is much to be questioned in any tradition, including our own. But a great many of the

questions and challenges that are circulating in our time can be much better answered than the questioners will easily admit. In the majority of instances, the Bible is far more authenticated than discredited. But there is no way to know this without digging into the challenges and replies for ourselves. This seems at first like a daunting task, but of course it gets easier as we become familiar with the terrain. And this kind of task is common to human life. For instance: Which child is telling the truth? If we don't want to fly blind, we have to start "looking into it." Sometimes it quickly becomes obvious; sometimes it's much more subtle than that; often we get a mixed picture. A child is often telling the truth from their perspective, but it's not the whole story. And always in human life there are mixed motives and occasional strains of self-interest. Why would we expect biblical studies to be different? Are there not humans doing the studying and telling us their conclusions?

For me, part of the interest in learning the details is that the Bible often ends up being stronger and clearer than it was before all the endless details were being questioned. In the current reality, if you do not get some familiarity with such things, you often wonder if your own beliefs are a house built on sand. That means you will often keep silent in conversations when you should be speaking. And of course that means you will not always be correct in your opinions or about the information you contribute to the conversations. Are all the other people correct about all that they are contributing to the conversations? Sometimes we jump in as a way to grow and learn. Sometimes people will try to "put us down" for saying something in error, or for saying something that didn't come out the way we meant it. But they are not God either. Even blunders can illuminate things in many instances. So let us try to seek the truth without getting our egos so involved that we can neither hear, speak, nor learn.

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Paul's letter to the Colossians is going to be the primary source of our sermons and classes for a while. And Colossians is a very good illustration of many of the very issues we have just been talking about. Who are the players? Who is writing this letter? From where is the letter being written? And what is the letter really about?

There is a wide array of answers being given to each of these questions. There is no certain proof to support any of the answers. Real life is usually that way. We get evidence, but, as we have all discovered, different people can come to different conclusions from the same evidence.

We get probability. If a thing seems probable to me after serious and careful consideration of all the available information, I go for it. That is, I hold that probability to be the truth, until or unless new evidence comes along that makes it improbable. I have friends who consider this to be a very flimsy approach to life or truth, yet I also note that they are mere spectators of life where it matters the most. But if there are areas of life where they have become participants, they are also working off of the principle of probability.

To be sure, intelligent people can draw different conclusions. Then it is often the case that, trying not to sound too certain, we get such tenuous and careful comments that the maze only grows more and more confusing. How can we be clear without sounding so dogmatic that it tends to shut down the conversations?

I will start out by giving you the clarity of my own conclusions. Later on I will tell you something about why I have arrived at these conclusions, and you can argue with them all you like. I may even help you to argue with some of them. But in all likelihood I will keep returning to my own conclusions. After all, I did not come to them lightly, or in most cases carelessly. And I nearly always mix theory and theology with experience. That does not make me right. But it often means that I do not easily change my mind. Not about things I have checked through over and over – for years. Naturally, what I am preaching and teaching is based on the picture that these conclusions give me. You are duly warned. Hopefully that means you will jump in and see the drama behind the study of Colossians, and you will discover that it is all far deeper and more meaningful than most people realize.

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So, unless you already have convictions and conclusions of your own, start from mine. Here we go ...

The letter to the Colossians was written by Paul. Huge probability. Colossians was written from Ephesus; about 54 or 55 A.D. Paul was in prison at Ephesus at the time of the writing, and wrote the letters to the Ephesians and Philemon at approximately the same time. (We haven't yet said that Ephesians was probably Paul's letter to the Laodiceans. But we will come to that, and to the reasons for thinking that this is probable.) You may not realize it, but we have just cut through a maze of books, articles, and seminary classes. But that is where we will start.

Paul sent three letters to the region of Colossae at the same time: Colossians, Philemon, and a letter to the Laodiceans (one town over from Colossae), very possibly the letter we know as Ephesians. Paul sent these letters by personal messengers, Tychicus and Onesimus. That is, these two traveled together and delivered the letters to the churches at Laodicea and Colossae, along with a personal letter to Philemon, who lived in Colossae and in whose house the Colossian church met. It was Paul's stated desire that the Colossian congregation and the Laodicean congregation would exchange their letters. He wanted everybody in the area to read both. An important thing to remember is that Onesimus was the runaway slave of Philemon, the most prominent member of the Colossian church. Paul's letter to Philemon is asking Philemon to forgive and release Onesimus from slavery, and to return him to Ephesus and to Paul. This puts considerable attention on Onesimus, and of course the churches of the area (Hierapolis included) would be more than a little interested in how all this was going to turn out. Naturally the letters to the two congregations have quite a bit to say about slavery. Tychicus, we may also surmise, was not only the personal representative of Paul, but he would be an eyewitness to how things developed regarding Philemon and Onesimus.

We will get into the message and perspective of the Colossian letter at length, but I wanted to mention some of what is at stake in the current questioning of Colossian authenticity. Many current scholars are questioning Paul's authorship. I consider their arguments to be quite flimsy. Along with that, if Paul did not write Colossians (the scholars who doubt his authorship claim that Colossians was written much later), then suddenly we lose the "story line" with no adequate replacement. Did Onesimus and Tychicus still travel together but carry only the letter to Philemon? Everyone seems to agree that the letter to Philemon was written by Paul. If this is the case but Colossians was written years later, then are we to assume that Paul didn't try to back up his move to reconcile Philemon and Onesimus with support from the Christian communities at both Colossae and Laodicea? That the comments about slavery in those two letters are just random and general comments "from out of nowhere." From my perspective, such assumptions border on the ludicrous. The New Testament picture, in this instance, hangs together and makes all kinds of sense. A good deal of "modern scholarship," on the other hand, gives us a very complicated, disjointed picture that makes very little sense.

The claims that the language of Colossians is unlike other Pauline letters or that the theology is distinctly different have been challenged

by competent New Testament scholars. These objections melt away, unless we have other reasons for holding onto them. That is, the vocabulary differences between Colossians and Romans are no greater than they are between Galatians and Romans. And nobody doubts that Paul wrote Galatians and Romans. The theological differences are more easily explained in terms of the different circumstances at Colossae than by assumptions that Paul is not the author. All of us use different approaches and different wordings with different people. It does not mean we are dishonest; it means we are trying to communicate.

Let us be clear: There is no suggestion here that scholars should not ask such questions, or that they should not posit different theories to explain the questions that arise. What is being said here is that so far, the theories and suggestions that doubt Pauline authorship have turned out to be far flimsier, more complex, and more unlikely than the probability that Paul wrote Colossians as the letter itself claims. Regarding the reasons given for why someone might have lied about Pauline authorship when they wrote Colossians years later and pretended to be Paul: It's an interesting theory perhaps, but it's hardly convincing for anyone who doesn't start out wanting to be convinced. (And what possible reason could anybody have for not wanting Paul to be the author? Well, if I can say something outlandish or different or unusual about the subject, maybe I can get published and get more people to read my book, and thus further my career. Or maybe I just want to move Colossians out of authenticity so that nobody has to take it as seriously. This way more and more of us can just be doubting scholars, and nobody has to try to live the Christian Faith.) Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say, "Gentlemen, doubt everything you can, and as much as you can. But do not forget to doubt your doubts."

Next item: The general consensus of the scholarly world until quite recently was that Colossians and Philemon (and Ephesians) were written from Rome. If so, that puts the writing at 60-62 A.D. If written from Ephesus, the date is closer to 54-55 A.D. I just want you to note the difference. Rome is a long way from Colossae – a three-month journey under normal circumstances. If Paul were writing from Rome, his suggestion that he wanted to visit Colossae (and Philemon) when he was released from prison is hard to see in any honest light. Paul clearly intended to head to Spain if he survived his Roman imprisonment. Going by way of Colossae – in the exact opposite direction – would have been plainly ridiculous. Was Paul trying to bluff Philemon with the threat

of a personal visit? There is very flimsy evidence for concluding that Paul's character was so unlike everything else we know about him.

We have barely scratched the surface. But already we are supposing that the Colossian letter was coming to a very new church. And that the issue of Onesimus running away and now returning to face Philemon face to face was a huge part of the very reason this letter was being written. And next time we will also take a look at some of the other issues that the Christians in Colossae were facing, and what their real relationship was with Paul.

Meanwhile, next week will be the last Wednesday of May, so we will take a break from our Colossians study and take our first look at what is involved in LIVING THE LIFE.

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SUPPLEMENT

Hello Friends,

Normally I would wait until the next class to make catch-up comments from the discussion questions of the previous class. But next Wednesday we are shifting to the LIVING THE LIFE topic. Meanwhile, those of you who wish might want to get going on your research regarding the last class.

I contend that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians from Ephesus, and that this letter came via Tychicus and Onesimus along with two other letters – the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Laodiceans (which is possibly our letter to the Ephesians). Steve and others of you asked about scholars who say that Paul did not write Colossians. It is true that you cannot evaluate the issues very well without hearing more than the proponents of one side. By the way, there are numerous scholars today who come from “conservative” churches and seminaries who would all say that Paul wrote Colossians and refute the claims of most liberal scholarship pretty much across the board – but on the grounds that the Bible is the “inspired word of God” and without flaws or errors. It might seem good, at first glance, for my conclusions to have so much support. But in the case of that kind of conservative scholar, none of it would be coming from the same reasoning, and the seeming agreement would quickly disappear if we asked beyond “Did Paul write Colossians?”

As it happens, you are in luck. That is, you can easily check out the position (at least in general) of liberal scholars who claim that Paul did not write Colossians. One book (fresh off the presses when I was in Omaha) will do it nicely. And the “Suggestions for Further Study” in the back of the book will give you six pages of further reading (and more scholars) to check if you are so inclined.

The book is *The Authentic Letters of Paul*. It has four authors, one of them being Roy W. Hoover, who is married to Betty Hoover, a wedding hostess and faithful member of the Monday Night Study Group at Community Church, Congregational, of Corona del Mar. You will remember, I hope, to be sensitive and careful about bringing up the subject to Betty (or Roy, if you should happen to see him).

This book suggests that only seven of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were actually written (or dictated) by Paul. And in answer to another question (I think from Barbara A.): Colossians, Ephesians, and Second Thessalonians (in addition to First and Second Timothy and Titus) are not included in this book. That is, they are not deemed worthy of time or attention in a book about “the authentic letters.” Your question was: “Even if we conclude that a letter is not written by Paul, since it’s in the New Testament wouldn’t we still pay as much attention to it?”

Anyway, this is a well-written book with many interesting comments. It carries a new translation of the letters it considers authentic, and it claims to set forth the real mind of Paul and, without the spurious writings, a clearer presentation of his message and beliefs.

Of the thirteen letters of Paul, I personally think ten are left, though I would be happy to lose Second Thessalonians. Meanwhile, realizing that I have done to First and Second Timothy what the Westar Institute has done to the rest of the Pauline corpus, I’m thinking that I haven’t paid enough attention to the letters to Timothy and Titus. It seems pretty clear to me that Paul wrote much of First Timothy but that perhaps some of it was lost, so someone “filled in” some sections to make up for what was lost. Second Timothy may be from Paul about as we find it.

Enjoy your studies.

Bruce