

## PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

One more sermon this coming Sunday, one more class next Wednesday, and we will be leaving Colossians for a while. We will go to some Bible stories for the rest of the summer – what I call “Review & Renew.” Then sometime this fall we will get into Ephesians.

So three things pending: Gnosticism, Principalities & Powers, and Syncretism.

Books have been pouring off the presses for years now about Gnosticism. Walter Wink alone wrote three books about “the principalities and powers.” In the circles of Christian proclamation and influence that I hear most frequently, syncretism (the fusion of two or more separate forms) is highly approved and taught. Syncretism has become a shorthand synonym for the homogenization of all religions. Other people realize that it really is not the case that all religions are saying the same thing, but they insist that all religions are equally viable. That is, all religions lead to God – and presumably to human “salvation,” whatever that means.

With such complex and important topics, clearly we should be planning to spend all our class sessions for the rest of the year on these subjects. But Paul covers all of them in Colossians in a few passing comments. I think I like his pattern better. It seems to me that we don’t solve any of these issues with arguments or debates. On the other hand, we do need to be aware of the impact they are having on life all around us. And of course, Paul is saying to the Colossians: “Stay focused on your relationships with Jesus. Trust Him, and follow Him.”

Now, you have all been studying Colossians for at least a couple of months, so I probably don’t need to clue you in to any of this. But just in case:

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”* (Colossians 1:15–20 ESV)

There are endless other passages to be considered of course. The interesting thing is that in this one passage, Paul hits all three items.

1.) Gnosticism: “[M]aking peace by the blood of His cross” is anathema to any correct-thinking Gnostic.

2.) Principalities & Powers: There is talk of principalities and powers (thrones) in Romans 8:38, Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 2:15 (and other places too). But you can pick it up in the passage just cited: “... *whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.*”

3.) Syncretism: Jesus is not just one among many fine spiritual leaders, at least not from Paul’s perspective. He is “preeminent,” and the entire passage reeks of claims meant to outrage any politically correct or syncretistic advocate.

Let’s take a brief look at each of the three. If I’m lucky, maybe I can get away with it and move on. Meanwhile, we have introduced the topics in case we want or need to return to them.

Let me start by asking you a friendly question. If you wanted to get interested in birding (bird-watching), what are some of the very first things you would do? Well, you might go outside to see if you could see some birds. That would quickly help you to realize that you needed some help. Then you would realize that it would help if you could see the birds better. If you are like most of us, you would probably waste some money getting an inexpensive pair of binoculars and then try to “make them do.” This blunder has even caused some people to give up bird-watching fairly quickly because if you can’t really see the birds, it isn’t very interesting for very long. If you want to turn that into a parable about biblical studies, it isn’t hard to do. “Some seed fell on inexpensive binoculars (or cheap-shit theology). But after a couple of trips into the field and not being able to see very much, the desire to watch birds was choked out.”

But if you retained your interest, you would end up with a pair of really fine binoculars. After that you might end up joining a church – oops, I mean an Audubon Club or some group of bird-watchers who like to go birding together and talk about opportunities, experiences, photography, and all the things that matter to birders.

Well, I have been more profound than I intended. One of the early things you would do, if you got interested in birding, is buy a field guide. If you have a good field guide, then, if you do see a bird, you have some chance of identifying it. Now, there are lots of field guides for birders. All of them are helpful to some degree. But they range from sort of helpful to superbly well done. Roger Tory Peterson put together some of the best early field guides. (Roger Tory Peterson is not to be confused with Eugene H. Peterson, you understand, who has put together some great field guides for Christians.) Roger Tory died in 1996, but in his honor there is now a new Peterson Field Guide (2008) that is superb. More parable coming. I started birding in May of 2004, long before this new Peterson Field Guide had been published. At the time, David Allen Sibley was publishing the best field guide for birders. I spent hours appreciating and being helped by Sibley's work. But it would have been easier and faster if I could have started off with the new Peterson Field Guide. Only it wasn't published yet. But when the new Peterson Field Guide came out, should I have stayed with Sibley, just to show appreciation and loyalty? Lots of Christians take that kind of approach.

Getting to the real point: Do you own a good Bible dictionary? There are fancy four- and five-volume Bible dictionaries, but they are expensive and hard to "take into the field." A good one-volume Bible dictionary will give you (like any field guide) inadequate information on any one subject, but a wondrous array of information – enough to get you started – on nearly any bird you happen to see. Who was Abishag? Bingo. What is Gnosticism? Bingo. Where can I find biblical references to the principalities and powers? Bingo.

I strongly recommend that you buy two Bible dictionaries, one from the conservative camp and one from the liberal camp. It is both helpful and instructive to have the two sources to compare. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* is very good for the liberal camp. The *New International Bible Dictionary* is a good choice for the conservative camp. There are lots of others, of course. Just a word to the wise, if you want it.

## 1.) GNOSTICISM

There were many different schools of Gnosticism in the second, third, and fourth centuries A.D. I have no intention of taking us into a detailed study of such things. It's not hard to get information on Gnosticism if you are interested. The Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi Library are now famous as Gnostic writings. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain much information about an early Jewish Gnostic sect (the Essenes) active before and during the time of Jesus. Most of you have Internet access, and Google has endless information on most subjects, though some of it of dubious accuracy.

For our purposes, I simply want to say a few basic things. Gnostic thought has some common theories. It did not like the connections between Jesus and His very down-to-earth and humble origins. So it separated Jesus from Christ. Jesus was a human being – therefore physical, therefore corrupted – and too low to save us. Christ was a totally spiritual being. (Of course, “Christ” was not a name, but a title: the anointed one, the expected king in David’s line. But never mind accurate information; Gnosticism was after “knowledge” (wisdom), not correct information.) According to Gnostic thought, the true God is pure spirit and dwells in a realm of pure light. God is totally separated from the dark world, which is evil. All matter is evil. The separation from matter, from evil, from the physical is absolute.

Of course, the god who created the world (of matter – the physical realm) was an evil god (a demiurge). The Old Testament, and Jewish history, was rejected as too tainted to matter (if you will forgive the pun). The Cross was therefore a charade. The Jesus side of the Christian story was only to fool the uninitiated. Christ did not really suffer on the Cross; He was a spirit being *above* all such physical experiences. *Jesus* may have suffered on the Cross, but Christ did not. It was a charade to fool the evil powers. The true Christ only *seemed* to be body and mind, and came to bring knowledge of the spiritual realm of light and to reunite us with the true God. Gnosticism linked the aspects it considered valuable in Christianity with Greek philosophy, Eastern religion, magic, and astrology. No doubt you can already understand why there ended up being a theological war between Gnostic groups and other Christian groups who honored Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, and who believed that the life and teachings of Jesus were also sacred, and that the Cross and the Resurrection were central to the Gospel.

## 2.) PRINCIPALITIES & POWERS

In Paul's view, principalities and powers (thrones, authorities) were all created by God, and all had important and very beneficial purposes. But they had "fallen" – had been corrupted – and now served an evil (broken, alienated) purpose. Instead of furthering God's rule and being obedient under God, they served purposes of their own – often satanic purposes. Satan, after all, is a spirit being who had "fallen" – that is, who in pride had become alienated from God. (The essence of "pride" is "I am self-sufficient and do not need you." Can you imagine such an attitude?)

Often the "powers" were seen to have two dimensions: an inner spiritual dimension, and an outer institutional dimension. Paul always insisted, of course, that true authority could only come from God (the Author), and that the principalities and powers could never outrank Jesus. But in the meantime, they could do enormous damage because, with counterfeit authority, they had great influence and control over what was going on in our world. What is intriguing to some of us is that Paul gives us a window into the mind-set of much of the first-century perspective. And this makes it clear that the Gnostic perspective was not shared by most Christians of the time. Neither the physical realm nor the spiritual realm was free from evil. And neither the physical realm nor the spiritual realm was all bad. God created the world – *"and saw that it was good."*

Even today we keep running into careless assumptions that if we are "spiritual," we are fine, we are okay, we are doing good. Dream on!

*"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

From Paul's perspective, all the biggest threats are spiritual. The spiritual is mightier than the physical, and therefore more dangerous. Satan started out as Lucifer – "light bearer." "The Gnostics don't know what they are talking about," Paul would have said. Light is no guarantee against pride or apostasy or disobedience. And sometimes the humble things of earth and of the physical are faithful, true, and obedient to God in incredibly beautiful ways.

So any power, authority, or institution that becomes idolatrous (ceases to worship and serve God) is demonic, and it tries to control or destroy anything or anyone that does not serve it. But any power, authority, or institution that *does* try to serve and worship God is a servant of God, and as such, it is bringing benefit and blessing to any who come in contact with it. We cannot name a good power that could not turn evil. We cannot name an evil power that cannot be redeemed and turned toward God. Most people do not think this way. Paul did, because of Jesus.

He has such respect for the spiritual, Paul claims it is never “flesh and blood” – never the physical – that is our true problem. We are in bondage to – under the influence of – forces greater than we are. And unless we come under the influence of Jesus, who has even more authority than the principalities and powers, we cannot extricate ourselves. But we must never forget that our potential – our possibility – for redemption is real. Paul’s encounter on the Damascus Road had branded that deep into his very soul. We never know when an enemy may turn into a wonderful friend, a true brother or sister in Christ. Never be dupes, but never lose hope either. *“Be wise as serpents, but innocent as doves.”* (Who is the wise serpent? Who was head and leader of all the Seraphim – the winged serpent clan of Jewish mythology that was the highest order of all the angels? Oh yeah, thanks for reminding me: Lucifer. And someday, when the time is right, Jesus will convert even Lucifer.)

*“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.”* We don’t pay much attention sometimes, do we? Or maybe we simply don’t believe it.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote a story called *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. Do you know it? Lots has been said, and shown, and written, and theorized about it. Many have suggested that Tolkien was playing with the negative side of the “principalities & powers” – and why would he do that? Only the humble Hobbit had a chance to defeat the powers – which had grown too strong to be contested by any earthly power for good. Only by surrender and sacrifice was there any hope left. Only, in *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, the entire scenario was set up on the negative side on purpose. Remember?

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,  
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,  
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,  
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.  
*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them*  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

Who is the Lord of the Rings? Certainly not Frodo. Not even Gandalf. Sauron (Satan) is the Lord of the Rings.

Well, Paul was working on the other side of that same equation. He lived in a real world that showed the marks of bondage and suffering and separation all around him. But because of Jesus, and Paul's own surprising experience of forgiveness and grace at the hands of Jesus, Paul now believed in the Light:

One Power to rule them all, One Power to find them,  
One Power to bring them all and in the light –  
free and redeem and restore them.

Such is the Message we find streaming out of Colossians.

### 3.) SYNCRETISM

I preached a sermon a couple of Sundays ago about how I hoped we would deal with people from other religions and even from other branches of Christianity. I think it has become almost a truism that it is often easier to deal with people from other religions than it is to deal with people from the other end of the conservative/liberal Christian spectrum.

One of the things I did not mention, however, is that in my own experience, I am disappointed when I meet people from other religions who do not take their *own* religion seriously. I am neither surprised nor dismayed when someone disagrees with me; but when, for instance, I meet Jews who know little of Judaism and practice it even less, I find that disappointing, sad, and without much value. They may be very nice people, and usually are. But I don't have to go outside my own religion to find the shallow, the uncommitted, or the unconverted. Such people are irrelevant to any religious search or understanding. On the other

hand, the Buddhist I met back in New England many years ago is still a precious memory and experience for me. He was as serious and devoted to his WAY as I was to mine. And that meant we had a great deal to share with each other, and a great deal to learn from each other.

I also didn't mention in the sermon that I would never want a true disciple of another way to abandon their own way and come into mine. I could be wrong, but it seems to me that people who convert have not found the real heart of their own way. And I think that holds true coming or going.

Since this is my perspective and conviction, I would never pretend to a friend from another Way that I actually thought their Way was equal to or superior to the Christian Way. Besides, once we get past the polite preliminaries, none of them actually believe that Christianity is equal to their Way either. Neither would I ever want to deny or minimize who Jesus is or what He has done for me. We are called – by the love of Christ – to expand the borders of our respect and acceptance of others. *“For the love of Christ controls us.”* But that does not cheapen or weaken our own allegiance to Jesus.

So I remind you of the wedding feast of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:2) It is the culmination of the entire book of Revelation. And in one of our clearest images, it is the culmination of the entire Christian Gospel.

What do we know about the principles of getting married? Yes, I know; our society and our culture have neglected or forgotten many of the basic principles of marriage, to the point where many people who seem to be married have, in reality, never had a chance to actually experience a true marital relationship – that is, “forsaking all others”; “for better, for worse”; “two shall become one”; “honor, cherish, 'til death do us part.” Stuff like that.

Whether we like it, admit it, or not, there is a clear connection between monogamy and monotheism. Both are biblical patterns of relationship – one on the divine level, one on the human level. While human history and experience often stray from either or both patterns, it is a straying: It is a separation from the true pattern. *“You shall have no other gods before me.” “The two shall become one.”*

Strong relationships, strong families, growing old together, increasing in peace and wisdom – they do not come from promiscuity. I'm not talking about logical arguments or vague theories. Look around. Watch and see. Promiscuity is a formula for dying old and alone (at whatever age). Loyalty, true caring, deep affection, understanding, trust – they come from exclusive and disciplined focus on one mate. You can be friends with others, if you are mature, awake, and careful. You can be friends with others, if it does not take away important time or attention from the mate, and if it does not start to blur the boundaries. But there is only one mate.

Well, strong relationship with God, and strong faith families that worship and serve God together – learning the realities of forgiveness and grace, of trust and obedience – such things do not come from idolatry. Promiscuity is not helpful on either level, or to any relationship.

Why is it so difficult, vague, and confusing for some people to apply these same principles to the relationship with Jesus? Betrayal is not helpful to any relationship. The love coming to us from Jesus' side does not deserve the iffy, half-hearted, sometimes on, sometimes off kind of response that is so often recommended in our time. If we want a real and true relationship with Jesus, it is no surprise that we have to go for it all the way.

Forsaking all others. For better for worse. 'Til death do us part. Those who enter into such a relationship with Jesus never get the short end of the stick. All the tentative, fearful, "maybe we should give it a try" kind of stuff – that is all on our side of the relationship. To know what a real love-bond is like, we have to get into one. And Jesus does offer. He does invite us into one.