

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L.W. Johnson

FIX YOUR MINDS ON CHRIST (PART I)

Serious thought, serious theology, serious worship, all of which constitute Biblical and Historic Christianity, are seriously missing in what is today called Evangelicalism. This is not to say that Evangelicalism is not taken up with some serious issues. Evangelicals continue to stress the place of God in our national life, our Judeo-Christian heritage, prayer in schools, the right to life, and the ever popular, family values. So why am I calling this a part of *worldly Christianity*? Because much of Evangelicalism is not driven by a passion for God's truth, but by the *politics* of the day. Much of Evangelicalism has become an informal religious establishment that, in the words of David F. Wells, "derives its power not from its theology but from its culture."¹ Without a theology that has God's truth, God's Word as its center, a civil religion (which is what Evangelicalism has largely become) also forfeits its theological heritage for a pot of cultural and political pottage. What is so distressing is that most Evangelicals appear to be completely oblivious to this capitulation to the culture of the day. There is another dimension to the kind of worldly Christianity that pervades so much of contemporary Evangelicalism – the role of entertainment in the church. Entertainment and what calls itself worship, have become not merely interspersed, but often indistinguishable. Evangelicalism has failed to recognize that modernity (that which characterizes our culture) is a pervasive reality that intrudes on virtually every aspect of life. From time to time, modernity is highly visible in certain forms of atheism or in the breakdown of sexual morality and the like, and Evangelicals are quick to point out the danger, and this is to be expected. But for the most part, modern culture is viewed a safe place in which to practice faith. "That means we are influenced by ideas we do not notice and therefore are not aware of their effect on us. Or, if we see the effect, we find it difficult to discover the cause."² In one of the recent polls that we have alluded to, 75% of the Evangelicals surveyed could not give even a brief doctrinal explanation on what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. What's wrong? Evangelical Churches have jettisoned theology and, as such, lack discernment. This is a spiritual capacity, the ability to see *through* life, to see it for what it really is. Christians who have been taken captive by our therapeutic culture imagine that the chief end of man is not to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but to improve our own private inner disposition, and that the church exists to provide them with personal satisfaction and to give inner tranquility to their tactic lives. They want psychological wholeness, marital bliss and integrated families. If God fails to provide us with this kind of prosperity and success (consumer's satisfaction) then we become cynical and disillusioned. The best description for what I am describing is "Mall Christianity." In the mall, everything is for us, for our comfort and enjoyment, for our satisfaction, and so many Christians have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well. The pattern of this world is seeking to conform the Church, and it is hard to recognize the world's schemes and even harder to dislodge them from the church once it has taken root. Indeed, without a powerful theological vision as its antithesis, these cultural currents are impossible to resist. Remember the words of 1 John 5:21, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." How do we

avoid the snare of idols? We are told in Heb. 12:2 to be “looking unto Jesus” (ESV). The NIV reads “fix your eyes on Jesus.” The Apostle Paul, in Colossians 3:1-4 likewise shows us the true Christian approach to having our minds and imagination rightly oriented to *the things above* with specific reference to Christ.

I. THE EXHORTATION TO THINGS ABOVE (Col. 3:1-2)

A. The exhortation to seek.³ Paul’s view of things is directly opposed to the modern view of things. The modern life is a secular life, engrossed in the fleshly, the material, the psychological, and occasionally the philosophical things. Entertainment and indulgence are glorified in the media—on the pages of the newspapers, on television, in the literature—and the church is not unaffected. Entertainment is the key to success in the religious world, too, and evangelicals, sadly, are often the ones leading the parade. In fact, evangelicals are in the vanguard of the secularizing of our society, while all the time decrying it. Paul followed in the steps of our Lord who said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal”(Matt. 6:19-20). The exhortation to seek the things above begins with the conditional clause, “if ye then be risen with Christ.” The construction is such that the apostle does not doubt the fact that the believers have been raised with Christ. The “if” is that of the assumption of the reality of the statement, as is plain from verse twelve (cf. v. 20). The apostle, then, assumes their resurrection with Christ, and on the basis of it calls upon them to “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” A person seeking after divine things is in itself remarkable, for elsewhere Paul says, “there is none that seeketh after God” (cf. Rom. 3:11). Here, however, he refers to a seeking believer, not a seeking unbeliever. This is the only human search for God, and it is divinely initiated and motivated (cf. Phil. 2:12-13). The present tense in the verb, “seek,” indicates that this is to be a constant attitude. But what are the “things which are above”? Well, one thing we can say is this: They are things where Christ is at home, and where Christ is at work, or heavenly things. In this context, however, Paul had these three things in mind. (1.) He wished the Colossians to avoid the legalistic ceremonies and regulations of the Gnostic Judaizers, which forced them to grovel in earthly rules (cf. 2:16-23). The ceremonies, and the taboos, are dead! (2.) He wanted the Colossians to avoid the earthly lusts, the fleshly, materialistic, and humanistic passions, to, which he refers, in the following verses (cf. 3:5-17). (3.) He was urging the Colossians to pursue the paramount things, the things that get “top billing in heaven”, to use the terms of the day. The psalmist would put it this way, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (Psa. 42:1).

B. The exhortation to set our minds⁴ on things above. Paul begins this section, as Bishop Lightfoot suggests, by saying, “You must not only seek heaven; you must also think heaven.”⁵ As Augustine said, the soul is not where it *lives*, but where it *loves*. James Sire put it this way, “The Christian mind does not begin with a world view, not even the Christian world view. It begins with an *attitude*. Granted that attitude is rooted in the Christian world view, it is nonetheless first of all an attitude.”⁶ Heaven is to be the guide of life below. Thus, we are to accumulate possession in heaven (cf. Matt. 6:20). We are to value popularity with heaven (cf. John 12:43; 2 Tim. 2:4). The pleasures of heaven may be enjoyed even in the here and now (cf. Psa. 16:11). And we are to rejoice in our status in heaven (cf. Luke 10:20) and look forward to the prize of heaven (cf. Phil. 3:13-14). The basic reason for seeking heaven is not because of the pearly gates and streets paved in gold, but because heaven is “where Christ is”. The expression “seated at the right hand of God” points to the centrality and supremacy of Christ in

the heavenly realm. Paul, of course, is not suggesting that temporal things are to have none of our attention, for that would be to say that we should have nothing to do with this life at all. What the apostle rejects is the *orientation* towards the world to which the Christian no longer belongs.

II. THE FOUNDATION OF THE EXHORTATION (Col. 3:3)

- A. Our death is past. The apostle writes, “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” The ground of this text is again the covenantal union, or the representative union, of the believers with Christ, their Head. With Him, we have died (cf. 2:20). It is said that a believing Christian had put on his tombstone only these simple words, “Born Twice, Died Once.” Having died with Christ in His death, we shall not see death in its awful reality, as Jesus Himself said (cf. John 8:1). The physical death that we die is simply the means by which we pass into His presence. For those outside of Christ their tombstone should read, “Born Once, Died Twice.”
- B. Our resurrection is past. As Paul states in verse one, we have risen with Christ. That is our spiritual position (Cf. Eph. 2:6). Our bodily resurrection shall take place at His coming again.
- C. Our future is assured. Paul writes, “your life is hid with Christ in God.” The clause suggests the thought of *secrecy*, for the secret springs of our life are hidden in God, from whom come all our aspirations, hopes, and enablings. The clause also suggests the thought of *identity*, for our ultimate relationship to God is known by God, being hidden even from the view of the saints themselves. The grounds for Paul’s admonition to aim at the things above, not those on earth, are twofold (v. 1, 3): first, the Colossians died to that old order with its elemental spirits (2:20), its ascetic and enslaving regulations, visionary experiences and useless will-worship. Second, as those who have already been raised with Christ they now participate in his resurrection life. So their lives are to be different. Their interests are to be centered on Christ; their minds, aims, ambitions, in fact their whole outlook, are to be centered on that heavenly realm where he reigns and where their lives truly belong. The continuous ongoing effort required for such a cast of mind does not come automatically. That realm above is to be sought diligently (and in contrast to any false seeking of heavenly experiences by the advocates of the Colossian “philosophy”) for this is where Christ is, seated as king in the place of honor.⁷

III. THE CULMINATION OF THE EXHORTATION (Col. 3:4)

- A. The manifestation of Christ. The hidden life, Paul says, has its future unveiling. The root of spiritual life is found in the cross, but its fruit includes participation in the coming of Christ. As Paul says, “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (v. 4). The “Sitting One” shall come. The Greek text by its use of an indefinite conjunction, rendered by “when”, suggests no specific date for His coming, but it plainly states that He *will come*. Christ is called by Paul in verse four, “our life”. He is that. He is our life in the sense that He stands for us as our Head, with His life given to us in regeneration, reckoned to us in justification, nourished in us by sanctification, and manifested at His coming in glorification.
- B. The manifestation of Christians. Two remarkable phrases are here, “with him” and “in glory”. In fact, “with him”—“in glory”, makes a good exposition of what heaven essentially is, to be with Him in glory. What a glorious hope we have!

CONCLUSION: True life, then, is found in seeking and setting our minds upon “things above,” the things concerning Christ as He is seen in the Word of God, and not in the reckless enthusiasm of the worldling for the fleshly and worldly things, nor in the shallowness of Christian occupation with so-called “healings,” “visions,” “prophecies,” and other suborthodox

experiences. At the risk of giving offense I am going to point to two factors that in my opinion have had a very negative impact on Evangelicalism this century—especially as it pertains to Paul’s admonition in this text. The first one is what Alan Morrison identifies as the rapid spread of Pentecostalism, “At the close of the twentieth century—as a result of the crusading marriage of Neo-Pentecostalism, Roman Catholic Charismatic ‘renewal’, and syncretistic liberalism—various shamanistic, occult practices are being advocated by an increasing number of churches around the world...the Charismatic Movement has unwittingly provided a convenient foundation-shaking foothold for Satan through which he can seduce gullible believers into hankering after the mystical, inveighing them into utilising ‘Christianized’ occultic and psychic practices within the Church itself.”⁸ The second is more recent but has had a tremendous impact on the Evangelical church—the church-growth movement that promotes growth for growth’s sake and uses every innovation possible to accomplish growth in the same way a business would. ⁹Charles Colson tells about an evangelical church that decided it needed to grow in membership. The pastor first commissioned a market survey. It found that many people were turned off by the term “Baptist”. The church changed its name. The survey showed that people wanted accessibility, so the church put up a new building off the freeway. It had beamed ceilings, stone fireplaces, and no crosses or other religious symbols that might make people feel uncomfortable. Then the pastor decided to stop using theological language. “If we use the words *redemption* or *conversion*,” he reasoned, “they think we are talking about bonds.” He stopped preaching about Hell and damnation and shifted to more positive topics. Sure enough, the church grew. “There’s a spirit of putting people over doctrine,” gushed one member. “The church totally accepts people as they are without any sort of don’ts and dos.” In abandoning its doctrine and its moral authority and in adjusting its teaching to the demands of the marketplace, the church embarked on a pilgrimage to postmodernism.¹⁰ No Christian experience is genuine, if it is not wedded to the words of Scripture. Whenever the church abandons its obligation to seek those things above (to pursue the knowledge of Christ and to think rigorously like Christians) she ends up being led astray by the spirit of the times. Cultivate the hidden life through the reading and studying of God’s Word, through communion with God in Christ over that Word in the Spirit, and in obedient response by faithful and loving concern for the saints and the lost.

ENDNOTES

¹ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 76. This is the sequel to his *No Place for Truth: or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). I cannot recommend too highly these two books. I am deeply indebted to Wells’ analysis of the present state of Evangelicalism.

² Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Regnery Gateway, 1990) p. 7.

³ The Greek word ΖΗΤΕΩ “seek” has particular reference to the orientation of the human will. It describes not just one aspect of life, but the decisive direction of the will, as a settled conviction cf. discussion in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* III ed. C. Brown (Zondervan, 1971), p. 532.

⁴ The Greek word ΠΡΟΝΕΩ expresses not simply an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will; it has to do with aims and the motives underlying them cf. P.T. O’Brien, *Colossians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), p. 163.

⁵ J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (rpt. Zondervan, 1959), p. 207.

⁶ J.W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God In the Ways We Think* (IVP, 1990), p. 15.

⁷ Cf. O’Brien, p. 171.

⁸ A. Morrison, *The Serpent and the Cross: Religious Corruption in our Evil Age* (K & M Books, 1994), p. 424.

⁹ Os Guinness in his very perceptive book *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity* (Baker, 1993), p. 90 makes this insightful observation, “For all who are committed to church growth and eager to use the best of modernity, it is sobering to realize the lengths of God’s iconoclasm. As the Scriptures show, God is not only against the idolizing of alien gods but he is against his own gifts when idolized. The fate of the tabernacle and the temple are both a warning to megachurches built not on rock but sand.” (p. 90).

¹⁰ As cited in G.E. Veith, Jr. *Postmodern Times* (Crossway, 1994), p. 212.