

“The Supreme Concern”
Colossians 2:1-5 (NRSV)

W. E. Sangster, a rather well-known British preacher-pastor, was once interviewing applicants for the Methodist ministry when an interesting young man presented himself before the committee. When it came his time to speak, the would-be preacher said he felt he ought to explain that he was rather shy and not the sort of person who would set the Thames River on fire – that is stir up the city. Dr. Sangster responded with consummate wisdom:

My dear young brother, I’m not interested to know if you could set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is this: if I picked you up by the scruff of your neck and dropped you into the Thames, would it sizzle?
(John R. W. Stott, Between Two Worlds, 1982, p. 285)

Dr. Sangster was looking for something Pauline, something apostolic, something passionate in the young candidate. So, too, I remember my favourite teacher at Knox College, Toronto, a fine preacher-pastor himself, Professor **Allan Farris**, saying this was the very thing he and congregations were looking for in ministers.

The apostle Paul, and others who followed after him, were above all, passionate preacher-pastors. It is said that when George Whitefield’s preaching was getting people out of their beds in Edinburgh, a man on the way to hear him met **David Hume**, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic. Surprised at seeing him also on the way to hear Whitefield preach, the man said, “I thought you didn’t believe in the gospel?” To which Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does” (Clarence Edward McCartney, *Preaching Without Notes*, 1976, p. 183).

In Colossians 2:1-5, Paul states his specific concerns for the Colossian church. Up to this point, this is by far the most personal part of the letter. In expressing his concern, he models for us what and how our hearts ought to feel for the Christian Church.

1. The intensity of Paul’s concern (Col. 2:1).

“For I want you to know **how much I am struggling for you**, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face” (2:1). In mentioning **his struggle** to share the gospel, Paul again uses the word

“agon” from which we get the word “agony.” The word derived originally from **the place where the Greeks assembled for their Olympic games**, a place where **they “agonized”** in such sports as wrestling and footraces, which they strenuously sought to win. So, too, Paul was struggling, agonizing, or fighting for the faith with everything he had.

What makes **this agony** all the more remarkable is that he’d never once personally visited either of the churches he mentions, or their neighbouring churches. Aside from Epaphras, Philemon, and perhaps a few others he’d met in Ephesus, he’d never seen the Colossians or the Laodiceans. He had no idea of what these people looked like; he knew nothing of their personalities; yet, **he agonized for them**.

Why all this strain for people he’d never seen? Because he was sure he was **God’s chosen “instrument”** to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). His formerly stony old heart had been replaced with an apostolically passionate heart, which beat with love for the despised Gentiles. It was like the heart of the English shoemaker, **William Carey**, some eighteen centuries later, who made a leather globe so he could pray for a world still unseen to him. Ultimately, Carey’s world-class heart propelled him to India and he became one of the earliest founders of the modern missionary movement.

But there was even **more behind Paul’s intensity of concern**. For he and the Colossians **shared the same relationship with Christ**. He also shared in the faith delivered to them through Epaphras. All of these elements contributed to his dynamic, agonizing **struggle in spirit** for them.

Perhaps one ought to mention **the agony of his persecution**. After all, he was in prison when writing this letter. Wherever Paul went, there was conflict: riots in Ephesus, beatings in Philippi, stoning in Lystra, shipwreck at sea; “dangers everywhere” were the order of his days (2 Cor. 11:23-28). Then there was **the agony of hard work**. Paul often worked at making tents so no one, beside himself, would have to bear the cost of his ministry (Acts 18:3). It was a “**struggle**,” as he put it, to work “night and day” so as not to be a burden to anyone, to be free to present the gospel (1 Thess. 2:9). In addition there was **the agony of caring for his converts**; he was often anxious about how they were doing (2 Cor. 11:28). I suspect there were nights when Paul tossed and turned as he thought about his converts and empathized with their ups and downs. But, most of all, **he often agonized in prayer for them**. That’s where the real fight was (and is)!

That's what believers do for those among whom they minister. They fight the good fight. They agonize over the flock. They slog it out. And, above all, they pray. Paul told the Colossians that that was exactly what Epaphras was doing for them,

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus.... He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills. For I testify that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hieropolis” (4:12-14).

It is **this kind of intense agony** to which we are all called, whether we are missionaries or merchants, pastor-preachers or ordinary Christian people. If we have an agonizing, intense heart like Paul's we won't just pray fervently for our own friends or for our own little fellowship groups, or even for the church we happen to attend. We will pray for our neighbourhood and for our community. We will pray mightily for other churches in our city. And we will pray powerfully for the Church Universal, for believers and unbelievers, scattered all over the world.

2. **The heart of Paul's concern** (Col. 2:2-3).

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3).

Perceptive Christians have always known that the key to spiritual well-being is an increased knowledge about and focus on Christ. **John Calvin** said, “Faith is a sure and certain knowledge of God's favour in Jesus Christ ...” (Institutes of the Christian Religion).

Less than a month before **C. S. Lewis** died, he wrote this letter to a little girl:

Dear Ruth ... Many thanks for your kind letter, and it was very good of you to write and tell me that you like my books; and what a very good letter you write for your age! If you continue to love Jesus, nothing much can go wrong with you, and I hope you may always do so (Letters to Children, 1985, p. 111).

Whatever you and I **think** of Jesus Christ, our conception of him is everything. If we believe that Christ is eternal, without beginning and end, that he is creator of everything, of every cosmic speck across trillions of light years of trackless space, the creator of the textures and shapes and colours which daily dazzle our eyes; if we believe that he is the sustainer of all creation, the almighty love that holds all the planets in their courses and every atom in our bodies together, and that without him all would dissolve; if we believe that he is the lover of our souls who loves us with an everlasting love bounded only by his infinitude, and that he will one day reconcile the universe and redeem humanity to himself; then, despite the fact that life is full of trouble and suffering, nothing much will go wrong. Our vision of Jesus Christ will quicken and shape our lives. What we believe about Christ makes all the difference in the world, now and for eternity.

And **how does this knowledge of Christ come?** Through the loving fellowship of believers within the community of the church. In other words, a depth of understanding is facilitated when believers' hearts are bound together in love. **F. F. Bruce** comments: "Paul emphasizes that the revelation of God cannot be properly known apart from the cultivation of brotherly [and sisterly] love within the Christian community" (1957, p. 223).

This means that **mere intellectual comprehension** of the mystery of Christ will not bring people full understanding. **But when we are deeply loved** in practical ways by fellow believers, we experience Christ through them, and thus our knowledge of Christ is enhanced. If we are "encouraged and united in love" we will "have all the riches of assured understanding."

This is an important message for a lively Christian faith. No intellectual process will lead to a full understanding of the mystery of Christ unless it is accompanied by a love for him and for other Christians that knits us, the Church, "Christ's body" on earth, together in love. This was so for the great Reformers, **Luther and Calvin**, and for others who worked for renewal in the church. They read each other's books. They consulted each other via letters. They learned from each other. No doubt, they prayed for each other. I have just ordered and received a new book I'm eagerly looking forward to read. It's entitled: The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community (2007). Lewis and Tolkien were able to write such fantastic books as The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings because they were great friends who cared for each other and often spurred each other on, listening to each others stories and comparing notes.

So when great mutual love is present and persistent, it facilitates a growing profundity of knowledge of Christ, which in turn results in greater and greater “wisdom and knowledge.”

“... That they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:2b-3). This was also another deliberate **swing at the Gnostic heretics** who claimed to have a superior way to wisdom and knowledge. Of this truth, **Alexander Maclaren** remarked:

In Christ, as in a great storehouse, lie all the riches of spiritual wisdom, the massive ingots of solid gold which when coined into creeds and doctrines are the wealth of the Church. All which we can know concerning God and man, concerning sin and righteousness and duty, concerning another life, is in Him Who is the home and deep mine where truth is stored.... The central fact of the universe and the perfect encyclopedia of all moral and spiritual truth is Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Lamb slain, the ascended King (The Expositor’s Bible, 1903, p. 165-166).

Here’s the point: when we love Christ and love to study the Scriptures and when we love one another in the Church so much that we are “united in love” with each other, “God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself” will unfold and we will be in touch with “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The heart of Paul’s concern was that the Colossians would grow ever more in their knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ. That’s why he was so concerned with both the development of their minds and of their hearts. That’s why he presented them with such a heady, heart-felt picture of the supremacy of Christ (1:15-20). He wanted them, as he wanted all Christian believers, to know him and to love him, to allow him to fill more and more of the horizon of their, and our, lives until there is no more sky, and only he and his riches remain.

3. **The motivation behind Paul’s concern** (Col. 2:4-5).

Paul was motivated to write all of the above to the Colossians because he was concerned that **they were being led astray**.

In verse 4 we read, “I am saying this so no one may deceive you with plausible [but decidedly wrong] arguments.” The Gnostics’ clever arguments could easily lead astray those who were not knit together in knowledge and love. It was happening in Paul’s day, and it is happening in our day, especially when the means of persuasion are so highly developed. We are subject to secular subtleties, which the apostles could never have imagined. Materialism, with its luxurious promise and fulfillment of the good life here and now has taken a chokehold, squashing all thoughts of the life of the spirit and the life to come. Skepticism and scoffing abound. For our souls’ sakes, there must be a deeper, growing knowledge of Jesus Christ and what his kingdom offers and will truly bring to all who believe, and there must be a greater and greater cooperation and love among us.

That was part of Paul’s motivation.

The other part is seen in verse 5, and here we come full circle: “For though I am absent in body, yet **I am with you in spirit**, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.” Paul knew that they were in good hands, God’s hands, and that they were going to be all right. The Spirit had united both them “in Christ,” and because they all lived in Christ, God’s Holy Spirit and Paul’s own spirit was present with them, all “struggling” mightily on their behalf. Paul’s great heart positively sizzled!

Paul’s passion was that the Church might be “united in love” so it would gain greater and greater understanding and practice of demonstrating “Christ in [us], the hope of glory” (1:27b).

Let us journey toward the Son until he fills the whole sky.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Abbotsford, BC
November 8, 2009