"The 'Core' in Corinth"

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Without the incarnation of Jesus, we have nothing to offer the world.

Colossians 1:13-20
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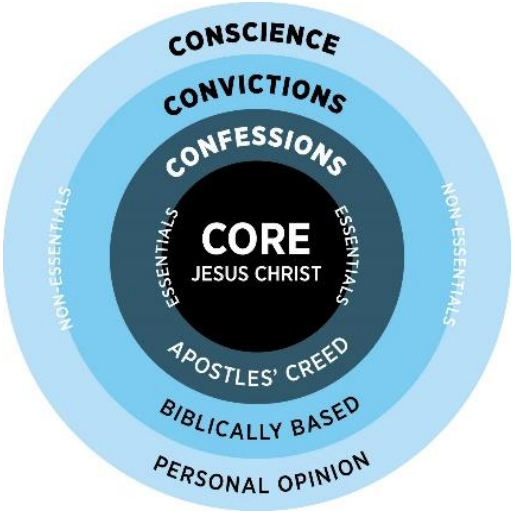
What's essential?

I'm not sure where the phrase originated, but sometime in the last few decades every organization it seems started to talk about "core values." These are the unchangeable, bedrock principles of an organization. Strategies, goals, people may change. Core values don't. Today we're going to talk about the "Core" in Corinth.

With churches, at least in my experience, it's more common for newcomers to inquire, "What do you believe?" That's especially true if the church name is not one of familiar ones. Around here they are Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, maybe Catholic.

Few people know what "Reformed" means. I tell them if they want the short answer, we are cousins to the Presbyterians.



If they want a longer answer, I might put them to a diagram that we've been using to clarify our beliefs as long as I've been pastor here, or almost thirty years. Over the next four weeks, we're going to look at this diagram in some detail, from the inside out.

The first clarification is between what is essential and what is non-essential. That's a

critical distinction in so many areas of life. We've spent most of the last three weeks with our daughter, son-in-law, and newborn granddaughter in Wilmington, NC.

It's really interesting to observe the new ideas and tools for caring for a baby these days. Did you know babies now need a "baby wipe warmer"? My kids got cold cloths on their bums. Our daughter also found this device called an Owlet, which wraps around Avery's foot and alerts Jeni's phone if Avery's pulse or oxygen level drops. Now that could actually be a life-saver.

But babies for thousands of years have been cared for without baby warmers and Owlets. There are in my observation three essentials for babies – a full tummy, a clean diaper, and somebody to hold them. Other things might be important but you can live without them.

Corinth has *one* non-negotiable center: Jesus. He is the "core" in Corinth.

Wouldn't every church say that? I hope so, and I'm not trying to say that we are "better at Jesus" than other churches. Or that we get Jesus fully.

I'm just emphasizing today that this is a community of people who unashamedly seek to keep Jesus at the center of everything. We chose a brief passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians to say why.

It's humbling to preach on this theme. It's so far beyond me. This past week our son Phil was all over the news wires for a scientific paper he published for NASA on potential high-tide flooding in the 2030s due to a "wobble" in the moon that happens every 18 years. I can understand the basics of the news stories which have been dumbed down for the average person – but when I read Phil's paper I'm quickly lost in ideas and language that's way over my head. I feel that way preaching on Colossians 1.

Jesus alone solves the sin problem (13-14)

We picked up our reading in an admittedly odd place. The paragraph starts in verse 9 with Paul's prayers and thanks for the believers in Colosse who will read his letter. Our focus is not so much on his prayer for them as it is on where he ends the prayer. He ends it with a critical point about the centrality of Jesus.

We can't get to who Jesus is and what he has done for us without some context. The "he" in verse 13 is not Jesus, it's "the Father" (12) who has made it possible for these believers "to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light."

This "kingdom" language connects what we call the Old and New Testaments. It would be easy to get off track here, so let's keep it simple. God's kingdom is where God reigns, and the understanding of that kingdom progresses significantly from the Old to the New Testament. The "kingdom of light" does not have borders or boundaries, nor does it spread through military or political power.

This is a kingdom where we are what we are created to be – free and whole and real – fully realizing all that it means to be created in the image of God. Paul seems to adopt language here that parallels the people of Israel being freed from Egypt into their own sovereign land – free from the darkness of slavery and tyranny and false gods into a place of their own where they could worship the one true God. But their story became one of constant voluntary return into the darkness. We saw last week in Ephesians how there is a personal, unseen spiritual force always at work.

In Jesus God has rescued us from that spiritual darkness and brought us into the kingdom of Jesus – "the Son he loves," Paul calls him in verse 13 – probably reflecting the Father's words at Jesus' baptism. In him, Paul continues, "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (14). These are two powerful and pivotal words in the New Testament. One comes from the language of the slave market. Redemption is the purchase price for a slave in order to free him. It's the manumission of a slave. Forgiveness is the language of the courtroom. It is the judge's decision to release a prisoner from bondage.

You'll never get why Jesus is the Core until you make this personal. If sin is just "little white lies" or perfectly justified reactions to the idiots who surround you – or if someone else's sins are SO much worse than yours – then Jesus can easily become like a warmed up baby wipe. He just makes life a little more comfortable. But if you ever get that you were a slave on the auction block because of sin, and Jesus paid the price so that you could be free – or that you were rotting in a dungeon because you deserved it, and Jesus is your "Get out of jail free" card, you'll understand why Jesus must be our Core.

We have to grasp both the problem of sin and the solution to it if we are to claim our core value. We have to keep Jesus central or all we're offering in the church is a watering can during a drought, or a piece of bread during a famine or a Band-Aid over an amputation. Only Jesus can permanently tear down the Berlin Wall of sin so that God can see us as if we've never sinned because Jesus' blood paid the full price.

Jesus alone lets us see God (15-17)

Starting in verse 15, most scholars see a poem, not prose. Whether it's a poem Paul wrote or borrowed is a matter of debate, but in the end it doesn't matter. Paul's use of repetition and rhythm creates the same effect as if he were using **bold print**, *italics*, <u>underline</u>, large font, or ***<u>all of them together.</u>***

Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (15). When we see Jesus, we see everything that God is. This is so basic to Christian faith that it almost seems trite to say it, but we can't therefore not say it. That would be like forgetting to say that McDonald's does hamburgers or Chick-Fil-A does chicken. They may do other things, but you know their core. That Jesus is God-in-flesh is our core. Without that basic truth,

we have nothing to say. Let me say it again: Without the incarnation of Jesus, we have nothing to offer the world.

Everything that God is, Jesus is. But he is God "made visible" to us – God in the flesh, God just like us, fully God made fully human. In the pages of the Gospels, we can "see" God – how he thinks, who and what he cares about, how he responds to life the way we live it – from weddings to a cross, from poverty to wealth, from being thirsty and tired to enjoying a lavish banquet, from encountering prostitutes to self-righteous religious snobs. Only Jesus in all the history of humanity lets us see God in the flesh.

The phrase "firstborn over all creation" has created some debate and even confusion through the centuries. In its literal sense it means the first offspring born to a human or animal. In this sense Mary "brought forth her firstborn son" (Luke 2:7). What the rest of the New Testament does with this word is to apply it a more figurative sense – that the firstborn has rights and dignity and rank and authority, especially in the ancient world. Jesus is over all creation because he was there first. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, triumphing over death.

Paul then expands on Jesus' God-ness. "For in him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rules or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him" (16). Paul's poem is as exhaustive and inclusive as possible. Nothing exists that didn't come from Jesus. When you worship him, you worship the Creator. Before there was primordial life, there was Jesus. Before there was dirt, there was Jesus. Before there was water or ocean, there was Jesus.

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (17). The ancient confessions of the church insist "There never was a time when he was not." That Paul can declare this of a baby who once suckled at his mother's breast, who pooped in his diaper, who teetered and toddled until he learned to walk, who gibbered and babbled until he could form coherent words, who played in the streets of Nazareth and had to be tutored by his father to use a hammer and saw, who went through puberty, who was just as human as you and I, is nothing short of the greatest miracle – greater than creation itself – that the Creator would become one of us.

It's quite likely that Paul's composition or quotation of this poem is a response to whatever the false teachers were saying in Colosse. We don't know the details, but it seems like it was an early version of what blossomed into Gnosticism later in the first and into the second centuries. Gnosticism at the time seemed like it would be a death blow to Christianity. It seemed to many ancient people to be a more logical explanation of how evil came into the world. God didn't create something as bad as matter or as wicked as people can be. God created a lesser god, who created another god, who created another, and so on, until finally some lower demigod created the world we know. If that's what Paul is combatting – or something like it – he wants to be absolutely clear that this Jesus we worship, in whom God is visible to us, is the Creator.

Thus, Paul says, everything everywhere is about him, for him, and connected to him. How can we not make him the core of who we are and what we do?

Jesus alone makes church possible (18-20)

Verse 18 is the heart of why we chose this passage from Colossians: "And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn (that word again!) from the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." We could translate "everything" (18) as "all people," meaning the same as what Paul writes in Philippians 2, that "every knee will bow."

The key takeaway here is that this is Jesus' church. He is before it and after it and through it, and nothing else or no one else matters. The church is made up of people he "reconciled" to himself, "making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." We can't have God without Jesus making him accessible to us.

The point for today is that there is no church of redeemed people without Jesus as the redeemer. There is no church of rescued people without Jesus as the rescuer. There is no church of reconciled people without Jesus as the reconciler. Jesus has to be the center of all we do, because without him we are a bunch of alienated, broken, self-driven, guilt-and-shame imprisoned individuals contending for power in the kingdom of darkness. We are the Orcs of Mordor, hopelessly and haplessly serving the cause of evil.

In the cross of Jesus, however, with its vertical and horizontal beams, we are reconciled to God and each other. Peace is possible.

Reconciliation is such a critical New Testament theme. It's the opposite of enmity. Now the language is not from the slave market or the courtroom; it's from your kitchen, your living room, maybe your neighborhood clubhouse or corporate boardroom. It's about the people who are closest to you by blood or by proximity. It's about those moments where you have a heated argument and you can't stand each other, about how sometimes those "moments" turn into days and then into years. Someone you used to love and couldn't wait to be with is now someone you hope you never see again.

But then something happens – maybe the something is just time and maturity, or maybe it's a confession and apology, or maybe it's restitution or just an honest conversation. But the walls crumble and you're friends again, maybe lovers again. You laugh together, weep together, dream together of a shared future. That's reconciliation.

Paul says the reason God was pleased to have his fullness live in Jesus was so that through him everyone and everything on earth and in heaven will live in harmony. This is not the time or place to discuss universalism – the idea that everyone makes it in the end. This is simply the declaration that without Jesus we would have to live eternally in a world of conflict, rage, resentment, hatred, violence, and war – in heaven

and on earth and between heaven and earth. Jesus makes peace possible through his blood shed on the cross.

You and I don't have the power to fix all the problems between nations or political parties. What we can do is live out this reconciliation in our families and in this church. Often the hardest place to live reconciliation is with people we know the best. Thus the local church becomes a place where Jesus' core value of reconciliation is lived and seen.

Learning together

Corinth 101 starts with the Core. The class as it's designed is for those considering whether to join this church. One of their questions is inevitably, "What do you believe?" We'll go from Core to those other rings of essentials and non-essentials.

As we begin, I like to use this quote by C. S. Lewis: "The search for a 'suitable church' makes the man a critic when God wants him to be a pupil." The quote is from *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior devil is training a junior devil how to derail new Christians. When the young believer goes looking for a church, Screwtape sees an opportunity. The devil loves when Christians start comparing churches.

We'll talk about questions like these today in the class –

- Who or what can easily displace Jesus as our Core?
- How do you 'search' without being a 'critic'?
- What does it mean to be a 'pupil'?

What's a synonym for 'pupil'? Student, learner, follower, disciple. Our mission at Corinth is "helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ." The Core of Corinth is Jesus. The mission is guiding those God calls here along the path of discipleship – taking next steps is learning of Jesus.

Being Jesus' pupil is delightfully a lifelong journey. It's even more than that. I believe we'll spend eternity exploring the mystery and wonder of Jesus. I've spent a lifetime trying to learn of him, explain him, introduce others to him, help others live out their own discipleship. Sometimes, like in preparation for this sermon, I realize I'm just getting started. Today is simply an invitation to join me and never give up the quest of being his pupil. Amen.