

## Introduction

In 1985 Emo Philips shared a story. He saw a man on a bridge preparing to jump. He told him to not jump and tried to engage him in a conversation. “Do you believe in God?”, he asked. “I do.” “Me, too! Are you a Christian or a Jew?” “I’m Christian.” “Me, too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?” “Protestant.” “Me, too! Which denomination?” The man said he was Baptist. “Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” He was Northern Baptist. “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?” “Northern Conservative Baptist”, he said. “Me, too!”

At this point Emo Philips was starting to feel a real connection with this man, really thinking he could help him. “Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?” “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” “Me, too! Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” The man said he was Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912. Emo Philips could only look at him and scream, “Die, heretic!” as he pushed the man off the bridge.

This Emo Philips joke highlights a sad reality. As followers of Jesus we are called to the love the Lord with our hearts and our minds. Having great affection for the Lord without seeking right and true doctrine is not loving the Lord well and seeking right and true doctrine without great affection for the Lord is also not loving the Lord well. On the one hand you have an empty and shallow faith while on the other you have a cold and heartless faith, and neither is genuine faith in the Lord. Both our hearts and our minds must be stirred up to pursue the Lord.

We tend to see groups lean one way or the other. It is difficult to maintain a balance between seeking theological correctness and loving the Lord with our hearts. If we allow the balance to tip in either direction, we will soon begin pursuing either an empty-headed emotional form of worship or we will pursue cold-hearted theological precision that replaces worship altogether. Neither honors the Lord.

Emo Philips’ joke works because we can all see the tendency to split hairs and divide. Despite all the areas of agreement in which he responded with delight, “Me, too!”, minor disagreements divide the church Jesus prayed would be united.

Surely, there must be a standard, though. Surely there is a base level, what CS Lewis called, “mere Christianity”, without which one is not a Christian. To be clear: we are not justified by right doctrine. We are justified by faith in Christ. . . but who is Christ? What is faith in him? What does he save us *from*? There has to be a base level of understanding for any of these things to make sense.

Christians have long recognized this. This was the impetus for the formation of the Apostles’ Creed and it led to a clearer understanding in the Nicene Creed. As we continue our topical series “Beyond Labels: Who Is New City?”, we will look at the fifth label in our rubric. New City is lower-case o orthodox, not capital O Orthodox.

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We are . . .  
catholic, not Catholic  
reformed, not Reformed  
baptist, not Baptist  
presbyterian, not Presbyterian  
orthodox, not Orthodox  
charismatic, not Charismatic  
Christian, not christian

As I've said, our desire in this series is not to poke fun at or to demean any of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our aim is to clarify who *we* are, and more importantly, our aim is to make much of Christ. We're in Colossians 1 this morning.

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<sup>Col 1:3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Colossians 1:3–8

## Trinitarian

Paul begins this letter by expressing his thanksgiving for the Colossians, and his thanksgiving is directed to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 7 he says Epaphras told him about them and their love in the Spirit of God. We are immediately confronted with our Trinitarian faith.

As Christians, the orthodox faith we have received is Trinitarian. When we talk about the Trinity it is extremely important that we do not wander too far from the language ironed out at the Council of Nicea. We believe in one God, not three. There is only one God, yet this one God exists in three Persons. At this point critics often turn to math to try to disprove the Trinity, claiming that because  $1+1+1=3$ , and because there is only one God, the Trinity cannot be true. If we're going to turn to math we have to at least use the right operator, for  $1*1*1=1$ .

We believe in one God who eternally exists in three Persons. These Persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. The Father is God but is neither the Son nor the Spirit. The Son is God but is neither the Father nor the Spirit. The Spirit is God but is neither the Father nor the Son.

This is how our God has revealed himself. To reject this self-revelation is to reject God. To deny any aspect of God's self-revelation is to make up your own god who seems to have a lot of similarities with the one true God. Let me illustrate this.

Imagine we met for the first time. You asked me if I were married and I told you I'm married to Dawnae. You respond, "Oh, I know Dawnae! She was born on March 16!" Yes, that's the one. You continue to clarify who she is: "She graduated from Cornerstone with a degree in Psychology." Yes! "She has three kids and one grandkid." Yes, we seem to be talking about the very same Dawnae. You then say, "She was born in Wales!" Um. Nope. Dawnae was born in Korea.

If you were to insist that Dawnae was born on March 16 and graduated from Cornerstone with a degree in Psychology and has three kids and a grandkid but was born in Wales, you would not be talking about my wife, no matter how many apparent similarities there are. There is simply no way to change the basic fact that my wife was born in Korea. Maybe you were simply mistaken. When corrected, however, if you continue to insist that she had been born in Wales, you are not talking about my wife.

Similarly, anyone who claims to believe in the God of the Bible, and says he believes in Jesus who was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life and died on a cross and rose from the dead but denies that he, while remaining fully God, is distinct from the Father and the Spirit, that person is no longer talking about the one true God, no matter how many apparent similarities there are, for he's making up a god of his own design. The moment you intentionally deviate from God's self-revelation, you are no longer believing in the one true God but a god of your own making.

This is why, at its most basic level, the orthodox Christian faith is Trinitarian. If a person does not believe in one God who exists eternally in three Persons yet remains one God, that person is not a Christian. He or she may have a lot of things in common with Christians, but not holding to the most basic distinctive of Christian faith means he or she is not a Christian.

To claim to be a Christian while denying the Trinity is like claiming to be vegan while eating meat. You're missing something fundamental to the very idea of being *vegan*. You can say all you want, "But I eat *plants, too*". Sure, but eating plants is not the definition of vegan. Eating meat along with plants prevents you from being vegan, even if you eat a lot of plant-based foods. Claiming to be a Christian while not believing in the Trinity is to miss the most basic and essential truth of the Christian faith, which makes a person a non-Christian.

The most basic and fundamental truth in the Christian faith is God exists in Trinity. This is the *orthodox* faith given to the apostles and passed on to us. The word "orthodox" means "right belief", or "straight belief". To be orthodox is to have *right belief*. This right belief, however, is centered on something extraordinary. To see this, let's look more closely at our text.

## **Faith, Hope, Love**

In verse 3 Paul thanks God, the Father of the Lord Jesus, whenever he prays for the Colossian believers. Paul has never met them. He did not plant the church in Colossae; his ministry partner Epaphras did. He indicates in verse 4 that he has *heard* of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice that it isn't some ethereal, vague concept of faith, like a George Michael song—something you just gotta have. It is faith *in Christ*. It is a steadfast trust in a real Person who is God in human form. It is faith in Jesus, born of a virgin, who lived a sinless life yet

was made to be sin for us, who was crucified, died, and was buried, and who on the third day rose from the dead. Paul doesn't mean he heard they were the sort of people who were trusting, but they were *people trusting in the Lord Jesus*.

Notice how closely Paul ties faith in Jesus with love for the saints. He thanks God for having heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus *and of their love for the saints*. For Paul, genuine faith in Christ results in love for God's people. In Galatians he writes of our very real unity in Christ in spite of the very real differences between us:

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Gal 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.  
Galatians 5:6

The coming of Christ and the introduction of the new covenant had rendered circumcision—once a sign of the old covenant—a mere cultural relic. Whereas circumcision had once been a necessary part of being God's people, in Christ circumcision counts for nothing and uncircumcision counts for nothing. Notice what does count: faith working through love. Love is not the same as faith yet Paul would say that faith without love is not genuine faith.

He says in verse 4 their love is “for all the saints”. Note this is *intensive*, not *extensive*. He doesn't mean the Colossian believers love every believer everywhere. Not even Paul could know them all; he didn't even know the Colossians personally. Instead it means when a believer meets another believer, there is love between them for their shared faith in Jesus.

Here we see the catholicity of believers. To be the catholic church means we welcome and embrace all true followers of Jesus, regardless of their particular tradition within the church—even if they're Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region *Council of 1912*. Faith in Jesus results in love for all who share that faith in Jesus.

Then Paul does something unusual. He often refers to faith, hope, and love as the cardinal Christian virtues. Here he bases faith and love on hope. In verse 5 he says he has heard of their faith in Christ and therefore has heard of their love for all the saints, *because of the hope* laid up for them in heaven. He means the fullness of their salvation is yet to be revealed. Peter says God has caused us to be born again:

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<sup>1</sup> Pet 1:4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.  
1 Peter 1:4–5

The fullness of their salvation is yet to come and as Scripture makes quite clear, this fullness extends throughout the entire universe. The Lord Jesus will come again and he will re-create the heavens and the earth. Our resurrected bodies will live on earth forever with the Lord Jesus. It is because of their hope for this that they continue to trust in the Lord and they continue to love his people. Faith and love go hand in hand, and both are rooted in hope.

## The Gospel of Jesus

Paul reminds them they've heard of this hope before "in the word of the truth, the gospel". This is fascinating. They've heard the truth of God's promise of new creation, of a universe without sin and death where there will be no more crying or pain anymore. Then he says, essentially, "But you already know this because you've heard *the gospel*."

Far too often the gospel is reduced to "believe these things so you can go to heaven when you die". The gospel is the good news of Jesus. The gospel is the proclamation of the victory of Christ. That victory is not just merely a ticket outta here when you die. The victory of Christ is that he has defeated sin and death. This means both sin and death have an expiration date. One day death itself will die, and sin with it. It is only a matter of time.

He says the beginning of this victory has already come to them and not only to them, he says in verse 6 "in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing". The gospel has taken root in the whole world and it is bearing fruit in the whole world. That's quite a claim!

At the end of the first century—that's just 70 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ—the number of Christians was in the tens of thousands. In comparison, the "whole world" generally meant the Roman empire, with a population of 60–70 million people. That means the gospel had born fruit and had increased such that the number of Christians had grown to a whopping 0.076% of the population! Less than one-tenth of one percent of those living in the Roman empire were followers of Jesus, yet Paul claims the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing *in the whole world*. This is because Paul understood that ministry "success" cannot be measured with numbers.

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Mt 13:31 He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. <sup>32</sup> It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Matthew 13:31–32

Once the gospel started to take root, it was only a matter of time. It is because the gospel is the proclamation of the victory of Christ that Paul could say so boldly that it was bearing fruit in the whole world and increasing!

He says in verse 6 that it was still increasing among the Colossians—and not just in numbers. It was still bearing fruit. The gospel is not a thing you believe one time, then your status is changed. The gospel is the proclamation of the victory of Christ, and his victory in your life is ever increasing as you are changed and transformed into his image! The gospel continues to bear fruit in the life of the believer and it grows until one day it will crowd out all the other plants in your garden.

There is a beginning to this. Paul says they heard the word of truth, the gospel, from Epaphras. There was a specific day on which they heard and understood the grace of God in truth. There was a moment they were unbelievers and then there was a moment when they were believers. They may not know the precise moment! You don't need a date written in your Bibles. You need to know you are, right now, trusting in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus the kingdom of heaven is growing and producing fruit.

It is amazing how this gospel grows and spreads. Paul says God used Epaphras in their lives. He proclaimed Christ's victory to them. He taught them and discipled them and later told Paul about their faith in Christ and about their love for all the saints. Though it is the victory of Christ, he uses people to bring about his purposes, and his purposes are people.

### orthodox, not Orthodox

Earlier I explained the Christian faith is Trinitarian. If a person rejects the Trinity, it doesn't matter how much they claim to believe in Jesus, they do not believe in Jesus who is the Son of God in human form, *the second Person of the Trinity*. They may have a lot in common with Christians but by rejecting the most basic truth of the Christian faith, they reject the Christian faith. They substitute it with something that is Christian-like. They're eating a juicy beef burger, claiming it's the best veggie patty ever.

Simply being Trinitarian, however, is not all that it means to embrace the orthodox faith. We are orthodox because our Trinitarian faith is rooted in the Lord Jesus. We see this in our text. Paul is orthodox, for he writes of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Even more, he is orthodox because his life and ministry is centered on the Lord Jesus.

He praises the Colossians' faith *in Jesus*. Their faith results in love for all the saints because of the hope laid up for them in heaven *by Jesus*. This is rooted in the word of truth, the gospel *of Jesus*. *Jesus* promised he would build his church even as his church would start out tiny. Because *Jesus* is building his church Paul could say the gospel is bearing fruit in the whole world.

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The orthodox faith is Trinitarian and to be truly Trinitarian is to be *Christian*. We are not *Fatherian* or *Spiritian*, but *Christian*. We worship Father and Spirit. We praise them. They are fully and equally the one true God, yet the Trinitarian faith we have received is centered in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. This is because Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God.

The Father glorifies the Son. The Spirit makes the Son known. On earth the Son only did what he saw his Father doing while being empowered by the Spirit. None of the Persons who are God act independently. We do not worship Jesus at the expense of the Father and the Spirit. Rather, faith in our Triune God centers on the Lord Jesus. This is because God in Trinity has been working from before the foundation of the earth to rescue and save his people and his creation.

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God himself centered his own work in and through Jesus. Therefore our Trinitarian faith is centered in and through Jesus. We worship Father, Son, and Spirit through faith in Jesus. This is why we are lower-case o orthodox. To be orthodox is to hold to the faith once delivered. Notice that the Colossians *received* the gospel of Jesus. Epaphras proclaimed "the word of the truth, the gospel" to them. They did not invent it. So we have received that same faith. What makes us followers of Jesus is faith in Jesus, who is the full and complete revelation of God in Trinity.

We are not, however, capital O Orthodox. There are many differences but let me highlight two. Eastern Orthodoxy claims that we are not part of the true Christian church because we do not participate in their system of bishops and we do not practice their so-called "Divine Liturgy".

As we saw last week, it is clear from history that the separation of overseers and elders, or to use the more common terms, the elevation of bishops over priests was a development in church history. It began in the second century, long after the apostles. Scripture and early church history use the terms interchangeably. To say that we are not part of the true church because we use the terms the way Scripture does and therefore not the way Eastern Orthodoxy does is to alter the gospel. What makes us a true church is faith in the Lord Jesus, not the way we govern ourselves. We are not justified by ecclesiological structure.

Second, the “Divine Liturgy” was formed in the fourth century. The primary liturgy used by capital o Orthodox churches is called “the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom”. John Chrysostom was an elder in the fourth century. The idea that a church cannot worship God without using a fourth-century liturgy befuddles the mind, since Scripture tells us repeatedly to worship God in truth. Were Christians unable to do this until John Chrysostom came along? We are not justified by liturgical practice.

To be truly orthodox is to hold the faith once delivered. It is to embrace God’s self identity as three divine Persons in one God, who reveals himself fully through God the Son, who became one of us, lived, died, and rose again in victory. It is to trust in the Lord Jesus. This is why both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed are structured in a Trinitarian way. It is why they focus so much on who the Son is.

To be orthodox is to have right doctrine, but right doctrine that is centered on God and his gospel, not right doctrine about church governance or worship practices. To be truly orthodox is to be gospel-centered.

## Application

Years ago during our first year or two when we met at Palmer School for worship, we had a dear lady named Jessie. I will never forget the day Jessie asked a simple question, somewhat wistfully yet with a hint of joy: “Have you ever noticed all our songs are about Jesus?”

Have you ever noticed all our songs are about Jesus? Several sarcastic and snarky thoughts immediately entered my mind, but then I was struck by this observation. The Holy Spirit paused my tongue and I just stood there. I am reminded of the disciples’ response in John 6 when after feeding the 5,000 men plus women and children, these well-fed folk began leaving Jesus because his teaching got a little harder to embrace. He asked his disciples if they were going to leave as well. Peter spoke for all of them:

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Jn 6:67 So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,<sup>69</sup> and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

John 6:67–69

Have you ever noticed all our songs are about Jesus? While twelve years ago the snarky response, “Who else *would* we sing about” was on the tip of my tongue, I now understand more clearly that the right response really is, “Who else *would* we sing about? Who else has the words of eternal life? Who else offers us hope?”

This is why I am so flummoxed over those who turn to other things for hope and comfort. Jesus and Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. Listen, I will stop saying this when it stops being a problem: politics cannot save you. When you are facing hardship and pain, congressional candidates won't rescue you. When you see the world and it seems to be falling apart, presidential candidates won't save you. When you're struggling with sin and you're feeling overwhelmed by it, preachers who tell you God wants you to be rich and prosperous will not help you overcome.

When you're feeling lonely or anxious or depression is crushing you, ensuring every T is crossed properly and every I is dotted correctly on your carefully crafted statement of faith will not give you the relief you so desperately desire. When the doctor has bad news or the phone call from a family member leaves you shattered and in tears, you're not going to be lifted up by how great the band was on that one song last week.

Only one thing will bear fruit in your life and do so in ever-increasing measure: the word of the truth, the gospel of Jesus. The gospel is not a magic pill. We should never simply say to someone hurting, "Just believe the gospel". The gospel is good news but the good news isn't that your life will suddenly be pain free. The good news is that even in the midst of pain and sorrow the Lord Jesus is still working. In fact, he's working for our good *in the midst of the pain*, even if we cannot yet see how. The good news is that your pain and suffering has an expiration date, for your faith and love rest on the hope that is laid up for you in heaven.

The gospel of Jesus doesn't make the pain go away; it makes the pain bearable. The gospel is the promise that one day God will wipe away every tear from every eye, and it is the promise that until he does, he will get you through.

When the church becomes focused on anything other than Jesus it leaves orthodoxy, whether it pursues politics or "right doctrine" or right worship practices. When a church pursues prosperity as the most important issue, it necessarily leaves behind the orthodox faith it has received.

We should be involved in our local and state and national government. As followers of Jesus we should seek to be good citizens. We should strive to love our neighbors and to care for the poor and the hurting. We should stand with the oppressed against the oppressor. The orthodox faith will lead to those things, but those things aren't orthodoxy. The orthodox faith in Jesus will cause you to love all the saints and to love your neighbor as yourself, but being a loving person isn't the orthodox faith. The orthodox faith is centered on God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who is at work making all things new.

My job is to tell you the same thing over and over and over again. I'm not trying to be clever. There may be times your spirit is stirred up and there may be times I simply remind you of all you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel. I will continue to say it until each one of us believes it, fully and completely: God in Christ through his Spirit is saving his people and one day will save all of creation.

When the mustard seed of the kingdom of our Lord has fully grown and has pushed out all other plants from our garden, then I will...no. Even then I will continue to point you to Jesus. Have you ever noticed all our songs are about Jesus? For now and through all eternity, all our songs will be about Jesus.