

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Beware of 'Wrongly Dividing' "

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/21/2010

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Introduction

In our last message, we began a careful look at Colossians chapter one, verses twenty-four through twenty-seven. I told you last time that I wanted to be especially careful as we consider this section, because in our time there is some wrong teaching about the matters that Paul discusses here. We need to address that, and we need to understand what the Word of God actually says in these verses. We need to make sure that we are not looking at these verses through the lens of a system of thinking that is imposed upon the Bible, instead of letting what the Bible actually says control and direct our thinking. And so last time we began to address those issues, and we're going to continue today.

Let me read these verses again for you, as we begin today. Colossians chapter one, beginning at verse twenty-four:

Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church: Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

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Review: Paul as Minister of a Dispensation

Let me begin by reviewing the points we noted in these verses last time. First of all, we saw that Paul says that as an apostle of Christ, he has become a servant or minister of the church. The Greek word that is translated “minister” in verse twenty-five is a word that speaks of someone who executes the commands of another person who is in authority over him. And as we tie this back to verse eighteen, we see that Paul is saying specifically that he has become a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, because Christ is the Head of the Church, and in all things Christ must have the preeminence. My ministry is genuine Gospel ministry, Paul is saying, because I am functioning as a minister or servant of the Head of the Church. Jesus Christ is in charge. Christ and his Word are the sole authority.

Review: What is a Dispensation?

And then we came to a second key word in verse twenty-five, and that is the word “dispensation.” Paul says, verse 25, I became or was made a minister of the church “according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you” – or as the New King James Bible translates it, “according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you.”

Now, we saw last time that the word translated “dispensation” in the Old King James and “stewardship” in the New King James is the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is the word from which we get our English word “economy.” I mentioned last time that

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this word translated “dispensation” has been the source of great confusion in the church over the past several generations.

We saw that this word *oikonomia*, or dispensation or stewardship, can have two different meanings, depending on the point of view that the text has in mind. When the Bible is speaking from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, *oikonomia* or dispensation is properly translated as “a plan” or “a plan of management.” But when the word is used from the viewpoint of the one under authority, the one who is given responsibility for carrying out the plan, the word is properly translated “task” or “responsibility” – or, as we have it here in Colossians 1:25 in the New King James, “stewardship.”

In Colossians 1:25, the Apostle Paul is not using the word *oikonomia* or dispensation from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, but from the viewpoint of the one who is under authority. And in this case, that person is the Apostle Paul himself. He says that God made him a minister of the church “according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you.” In other words, Paul has been given responsibility for the carrying out of a part of God’s plan.

And what is that plan? Paul tells us what it is, in the next phrase of verse 25. He says it is “to fulfill the Word of God.” We saw last time that in the original language, the word that is translated “fulfill” here means, “to carry into effect the Word of God” – “to carry the Word of God through to accomplishment” – or “to execute my duty as it pertains to the Word of God.”

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And what is Paul's duty as it pertains to the Word of God? He tells us in the next verses, beginning at verse 26. Paul says, "I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Review: What is the Mystery?

Now in our last message, that brought us to a third key word in this passage, and that is the word "mystery." Paul speaks of "the *mystery* that was hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints."

We saw that a mystery, according to the Word of God, is some aspect of God's plan that was hidden at one point in time, but is later revealed. We saw that some commentators try to say that the mystery spoken of in this passage is the fact that the Gentiles would partake of salvation along with Israel. But as we saw, that was no mystery. That was never anything hidden. We looked at a number of passages in the Old Testament that proved this, beginning with God's promise to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 that in the Messiah who would come through Abraham's descendants, "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" – not just Israel. We also saw that in the Old Testament record we find many occasions of individual Gentiles, and even whole Gentile cities, like Nineveh, repenting and turning to the Redeemer.

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So the salvation of the Gentiles itself is not the mystery spoken of here. And so we asked the question: What, then, is the mystery? And we saw that we have the answer right here in Colossians chapter one, at the end of verse twenty-seven: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The mystery of God's plan that has now been revealed is that the Messiah would actually live in each member of His redeemed people during this age. "Christ in you, the hope of glory." And we found that confirmed in other passages, such as Galatians 2:20, where Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

"Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is the mystery that is now revealed.

"Rightly Dividing" Doesn't Mean "Cutting Up"

Now, we also saw last time that there is one particular reason why many commentators in the past several generations have gotten the interpretation of this passage in Colossians wrong. We saw that how you interpret this passage depends on how you view another key passage in the Bible, and that is 2nd Timothy 2:15. That verse says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth."

The problem is that over the past several generations, a wrong interpretation of the phrase, "rightly dividing the Word of truth," has come into the church, and it has come to dominate much of what has been taught in Evangelical churches. That wrong view says that the phrase "rightly dividing" means "rightly cutting up." And on that basis, many teachers try to divide up the Word of God into Jewish portions

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and Gentile or “church” portions. But last time we saw that this view is absolutely wrong, and we saw why.

We saw that the Greek word that is translated “rightly dividing” is *orthotomeo*. We saw that this word was primarily a civil engineering term. It was used as a road building term. The idea was to cut a road straight so that people who will travel over that road would arrive at their destination directly, without deviation.

We also saw that there is another word in Greek, *katatomeo*, which means “to cut into sections.” But that is not the word that the Apostle Paul under inspiration uses here in 2nd Timothy 2:15. Paul is not talking about “rightly dividing” in terms of dissecting the Word of God, or cutting it into sections based on Jew and Gentile or any other criterion. We also noted that the Apostle Paul does use that other word – *katatomeo*, cutting up – in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 2, where he says, literally, “Beware of those who would divide you up” – in other words, beware of those who would try to make a difference among believers between Jews and Gentiles.

So the actual meaning of *orthotomeo* – “rightly dividing” the Word of truth – is not dividing Scripture, not cutting it up, but teaching Scripture accurately, as a single, unified whole, without being turned aside by false teaching.

The Results of “Wrongly Dividing”

One of the major results of the wrong interpretation of “rightly dividing the Word of truth” as “rightly cutting up the Word of truth” has been the rise of a system of

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doctrine called Dispensationalism. This system cuts up the Bible into various periods of time which the advocates of this system call "dispensations."

These teachers define a dispensation as follows: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." The problem with that definition comes when Dispensationalist teachers try to apply it. I have in my library a number of study Bibles, commentaries, and other books by Dispensationalist teachers. Among those teachers, there are men who define as few as three dispensations, some have four, some have six, some have seven, some have eight, some have nine. Their definitions of dispensations don't agree with one another. And even several of the men who define the same number of dispensations, don't agree on what those dispensations are, and what time periods they cover. I'm looking right now at two commentators who both define seven dispensations, but their two lists of the seven are very different. I have before me another pair of commentators who both define eight dispensations, but they disagree on what those eight dispensations are, and when they begin and end.

In one man's system, the dispensation of the church age – the dispensation they say we are now living in – is the third dispensation. In another commentator's system, it's the fourth dispensation. In yet another commentator's system it's the fifth dispensation. In another man's dispensational system, the church age is the sixth dispensation. And in yet another dispensationalist commentator's system, the church age is the ninth dispensation.

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The Scofield Reference Bible has by far done the most to spread the use of the Dispensationalist approach. The original Scofield Bible was published in 1909, and there have been three major revisions by different groups of editors – in 1917, in 1967, and in 1984. And each of the four editions of the Scofield Bible has significant differences in the set of dispensations that it defines as a way of dividing up the Bible.

Now, I've given you all of that information to make a point. And the point is this: Dispensationalism is a system of human thinking imposed upon the Bible. And that, dear friends, is a serious problem. It is a fatal flaw. At its core, at its essence, any system that imposes human thinking upon the Bible puts human thinking in authority over the Bible.

Now, Dispensationalism is not the only system that does this. There are forms of what is called Covenant Theology that also do this – especially forms of Covenant Theology that say that God is finished with Israel. And the problem isn't limited to Protestants. Roman Catholicism does the same thing with its traditions. All of these systems, to a greater or lesser degree, put an interpretive lens or a filter between people and the Bible, and they require you to interpret the Bible through that man-made lens or filter.

Now in the case of Dispensationalism, this can lead to some very serious problems. There are some Dispensationalists who do, in fact, have the "gospel" wrong, and that is because they teach two different ways of salvation, one for Jews

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and another one for what they refer to as the Gentile church. One of the men who teaches this is very well known Dispensationalist preacher who is based in San Antonio, Texas. He says this, and I'm quoting him now: "I believe that every Jewish person who lives in the light of the Torah [that is, the Jewish law], which is the word of God, has a relationship with God and will come to redemption." He also says, "I'm not trying to convert the Jewish people to the Christian faith." He says that trying to convert Jews to Christianity is a "waste of time." He says that [and I quote] "Jews already have a covenant with God that has never been replaced by Christianity."

Now dear friends, that is just plain wrong. That is another gospel. That is the very thing that the Apostle Paul condemns in Galatians chapter one. The Galatian church was abandoning Christianity and going back into the legalism of Judaism. And Paul said to them, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:6-8). That is the kind of thing that extreme forms of Dispensationalism can lead to – the preaching of another gospel, the perversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Not a Blanket Condemnation

Now let me say this as well: I am not by any stretch condemning all Dispensationalists as unbelievers. I have many dear friends who hold some form of

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the Dispensationalist view. I owe a lot of my own love for the Word of God to teachers and preachers who would identify themselves as Dispensationalists. But these are men who have the Gospel right. They haven't gone into any of the extreme forms of Dispensationalism that deny the one true Gospel. They believe and preach the one true Gospel. They believe and preach that salvation is now, always has been, and always will be, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, totally apart from works of any kind. But at the same time I believe that my Dispensationalist friends are looking at Scripture through a dangerous lens. They're looking at the Bible through a filter that has the effect of undermining the very teaching about the Gospel to which they express such loyalty. And I believe that looking at Scripture through that man-made lens or filter does spiritual harm in lots of other ways that we don't have time to get into in this message. And so I am saying what I am saying today not in condemnation, but out of sincere love for my brethren who hold to that system.

I also want to be clear about something else. You don't have to be a Dispensationalist to believe that God is not finished with Israel, and that He will keep His promises to Israel as a nation. You cannot take an impartial look at Romans chapters nine through eleven, and compare those chapters with the rest of Scripture, and come to the conclusion that God is finished with Israel.

There is one, single, unified and glorious plan of redemption – not two separate plans for Israel and the Church. And there is going to be a future glorious mass conversion of the nation of Israel to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. God's future plan

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for Israel is part of His unified plan to call out and redeem a people for Himself from among every tribe and nation and tongue on earth.

How Do You Handle God's Word?

Let me close today by making this personal. Dear friend, how do *you* handle the Word of God? Are you looking at the Word of God through a man-made lens or filter? I don't care what name you give to it – Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, Lutheranism, Methodism, Romanism, or any other "ology" or "ism." Do you impose, or do you allow someone to impose for you, a man-made lens or filter over the Word of God? Or do you endeavor to find out exactly what the Word of God actually says, and take the Word of God for what it says?

That is the vital question. Now this is not to say that you don't need to be taught or instructed. We're going to get to that in our next message. Paul says in the very next verse we're going to look at, Colossians 1:28, that every Christian needs to be warned, every Christian needs to be taught, and every Christian needs to be brought to maturity in Christ. But you need to be a Berean, and that means that you prayerfully and humbly need to test everything you hear, and everything you read, to make sure that it agrees with the infallible Word of God. You need to be a Scripture-driven Christian. And it is my prayer that that will be true of every believer who is listening to my voice today. May the Lord encourage you in faithfulness to His Word.

About the Broadcast