

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Confronting False Teachers" (Colossians 1:28)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 4/25/2010

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Introduction

Today I want to call your attention once again to a passage that we've been examining closely in our last several messages. It's found in the book of Colossians, chapter one, verse twenty-eight. The Apostle Paul says this: "Him we preach" – that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, in all His facets, and in all His preeminence – "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect [or complete] in Christ Jesus."

This verse is the culmination, or the climax, of the entire first chapter of the book of Colossians. The Apostle Paul has been proclaiming the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ in all of its great aspects – past, present, and future.

And he's been setting forth the preeminence of Christ in a way that relates it directly to the Colossian believers. He's been telling the Colossians that the past they have been delivered from, they have been delivered from it because of Christ. He's been telling them that what they have become as Christians – the deliverance from darkness, and all the benefits of wisdom and knowledge that are now open and available to them – they have all of these things because of Christ.

He's been telling them that what they are going to become, when all things are consummated, and they are at last delivered from this present evil world and presented perfect and faultless before the very throne of God – they are going to have all of that, because of Christ. Christ is preeminent in everything. He has, He demands, He deserves, first place in every realm.

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And Paul says that it is this Christ that we preach – “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect [or complete] in Christ Jesus.”

We are focusing right now in particular on this phrase, “warning every man.” Paul is saying is that every Christian needs to be warned. Christ must be preached, in all the aspects of His preeminence, because every Christian needs to be warned. Well, this of course immediately raises some questions. Why do we need to be warned? What is it that we need to be warned about?

Well, we began answering those questions by looking at the meaning of word “warning” in this verse. We saw that the word that Paul uses here means to impart understanding, to instill a way of thinking, and to do that in such a way that this new understanding, this new way of thinking, will have a corrective influence on a person. The idea is to warn someone with the objective, the goal, of bringing about a change – setting a person right in his thinking, in areas where his thinking has been wrong.

Biblical Warnings: The Word, the Preacher, the People

We noted last time that this tone of solemn warning is an essential component of genuine Biblical preaching. And we saw that the Scriptures tell us five things about the nature of this note of warning that is to be an indispensable element in Biblical preaching.

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First, we noted that God has given His Word as the source of warnings. His Word, not man's word, is the authority by which the preacher delivers God's warnings to His people.

Second, God ordained prophets and preachers to be the messengers of warning. We saw that this is a solemn responsibility. It is a responsibility for the souls of men.

Third, believers are to have a proper attitude toward God's messengers of warning. We saw this in First Thessalonians chapter five, beginning at verse twelve. Paul says this: "We urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you," – that is, those who deliver Biblical warnings to you – "and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

And we saw that this implies a great responsibility for the preacher to deliver God's warnings in just the same way that the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles did it. And in that regard, in our last message I said a word to preachers. If you are a preacher listening to this message, you need to ask yourself, "Does my preaching have this true, Biblical keynote of a solemn warning from the Word of God within it?" Do you understand that this is your calling, this is your commission, to deliver a warning from God? Are you true to that calling? Can you honestly say with the Apostle Paul, as he said to the elders of Ephesus in Acts chapter twenty, "I testify to you his day that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God"?

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Or are you backing away from that? Are you afraid you'll offend people? Are you afraid people will leave your congregation? Are you afraid your church will be unpopular? That was not Paul's attitude. That was not the attitude of the Old Testament prophets. They proclaimed the message, and they recognized that the responsibility for the results – for the application of that message to their hearers – that responsibility is the responsibility of God the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the message fell on deaf ears. The people didn't receive it. They didn't act upon it. And they failed to receive it, they failed to act upon it, to their shame, and often to their condemnation. But on many other occasions, the Spirit of God did a mighty work. Men were cut to the heart as they were on the Day of Pentecost, and they said, "What must we do? What needs to change?" And many heeded the warnings and repented.

Not Only a Leadership Responsibility

Well, this brings us now to our fourth and fifth points about the nature of this matter of warnings that we find in Colossians 1:28.

Our fourth point is this: As believers receive God's warnings from pages of Scripture and from the mouth of the faithful preacher, it equips us to warn one another. And we have a responsibility to do that. We read of this in Romans chapter fifteen, verse fourteen. Paul says, "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish

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[that is, to warn] one another." That word "admonish" is the same root word that is translated "warning" in Colossians 1:28.

Fifth, as believers receive God's warnings from pages of Scripture and from the mouth of the faithful preacher, it lays upon them the responsibility to warn one another. And we're going to see that this speaks of warning one another about blatant sin in a general sense, but it also speaks more specifically to the issue of dealing with false teaching and false teachers within the church.

Soldier, You're Out of Line

We read of this in First Thessalonians, chapter five, verse fourteen. Paul says, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all." "Warn those who are unruly" – it literally means, "warn those who are out of line." In the language of that day, this was often used as a military term. Soldier, you're out of step. You've broken ranks. And Paul applies that metaphor to the church: Warn those who have gotten out of step with the Word of God. Warn those who have broken ranks. Warn those who have deviated from God's prescribed order of things for the Christian.

That is our responsibility. But Paul also adds this: "Be patient with all." And then he continues in the next verse, "See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all." Christian, you have a responsibility to deliver a Biblical warning when you see others significantly straying from the truth – but do it in a spirit of patience, do it in a spirit that has in mind the best

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spiritual interests of both individuals and the entire body of believers. Because the time may come when you yourself need to be warned, so warn others in the same manner that you would want to be warned yourself.

This is not the legalistic, control-freak kind of warning that we find in some churches. This is not a matter of lording it over others. Scripture forbids that. I know of churches – churches that call themselves Evangelical and Bible-believing – where you have to get the permission of the elders to change jobs, or buy or sell a house, or to get married. These churches and the people in them think that they have the right to micro-manage every aspect of your life. They try to take over the rightful role of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

That is an abomination. That is not at all the kind of thing that Paul is talking about here. He is talking about warnings against spiritual danger. And he's saying that the attitude that should characterize the communication of those warnings from one believer to another is an attitude of humility and patience, and recognizing that each one of us can fall into the snare of the devil.

Confronting False Teachers: Warnings With a Purpose

And elsewhere in his epistles, Paul gives some specific instructions about the kinds of warnings that believers are to communicate to one another, and the way they are to do it. And again, this is speaking of warnings about sin in general, but especially about the issue of false teaching.

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We find the first example in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, in chapter three, beginning at verse thirteen. Paul says this: "But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him" – that is, warn him, it's the same root word as Colossians 1:28 – warn him "as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:13-15).

Christians who are willfully, deliberately, manifestly disobedient to the Word of God are to be denied fellowship, Paul says. And what is the purpose? The purpose is not punishment. The purpose is not vengeance. The purpose is to produce shame, godly shame, with the hope of repentance.

The Age of Spiritual Cowardice

How many of our churches practice this today? And if they do it, how many do it in the right way, the Biblical way? Very, very few. And I submit to you that this is one of the major problems of the church in our time. The church condones sin. The church tolerates sin. The church condones false doctrine. The church tolerates false doctrine. The church looks the other way.

The fact is, we would rather offend our holy God than risk having someone in the church take offense – someone who is sinning, someone who has brought in some wrong doctrine, someone who by his life and by his teaching is doing serious spiritual harm to himself and to others. We would rather put up with that, than face our

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responsibility to deliver a warning, and to put such a person to shame in the hope that he will repent.

Heretics Turned Inside Out

But then there is more. Paul is speaking here in Second Thessalonians of the stage at which someone's sin has become obvious, and a warning needs to be delivered, action needs to be taken. But what are we to do if that person still persists in his sin? Well, Paul gives us God's answer to that question in the book of Titus, chapter three, beginning at verse ten. He says this: "A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinning, being condemned of himself" (Titus 3:10-11).

Paul says, if someone in the fellowship is willfully, deliberately, manifestly disobedient to the Word of God – if someone in the fellowship persists in following after false teaching – and if you have done your duty and have warned that person, one time, two times – and if that person still persists in his sin, still persists in his false teaching – then reject that person. Avoid that person, First Timothy 4:7. Refuse to accept that person. Do not associate with that person, Second Timothy 2:23. Refuse to submit to that person's teaching. Refuse to associate with, and identify with, and expose yourself to, that person's sin.

And why does Paul say we are to do that? Because, he says, you now know that this person "is subverted, and sinning, being condemned of himself." And we need to note something about this word "subverted." In the original language, what it actually

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means, literally, is this: *that person has been turned inside out*. By persisting in his false teaching, he has demonstrated that he is not on the inside what he appeared to be on the outside. But now this person has been turned inside out. You now know what he really is. By his own behavior he has now condemned himself.

The Imperative of Decisive Action

You've done your duty in warning him, and he has not repented. So put him out of the church – or if necessary, leave the church that tolerates him. And do so, Paul says, not after the ninth or the tenth warning, not after the ninety-ninth or one-hundredth warning – but after the first and second warning. This is no situation in which to be indecisive. This calls for action.

The problem is that so many churches today, so many Christians today, are failing to do this.

Some people say, "Oh, we can't confront Doctor so-and-so about his false teaching, he's such a nice man." Dear friends, there are many, many "nice men" who are leading souls down the pathway to Hell.

Some people say, "Oh, we can't deliver a warning to Pastor so-and-so about his doctrinal deviancy. He's been here for so long. He's built up the numbers in the church. He's such a dynamic speaker. We're growing and prospering under his leadership." Dear friends, all the more reason to confront him. All the more reason to

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reject him and put him out of the pulpit if necessary. The larger the church grows, the wider the influence of his false teaching. The more the spiritual damage that is done.

Some people say, "Oh, Doctor so-and-so must know what he's talking about on these matters. He has all these degrees from these well-respected universities and seminaries. He's written all these books. He's trained all these men for the ministry." Once again, dear friend, all the more reason to deal with such a man and his false teachings. All the more reason to deliver God's warnings to him.

People need to understand that a man can be an undiscovered heretic for many, many years. What does Jude say? "Certain men have crept in unnoticed," who pervert the grace of God. What does Paul say? Second Corinthians eleven: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers" – Satan's ministers – "also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness" – pose as ministers of righteousness – "whose end will be according to their works" (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Some people say, "Oh, we can't confront this elder or this Sunday school teacher. He's been teaching this class for fifteen years. The people love him." Dear friend, if you really love the man, if you really care about the people, then you will warn him of his heresy. You will warn the people about his false teaching. And if he refuses to repent, you will protect those people who love him so much, by removing the influence of this false teacher, and his teaching, from their lives and their thinking.

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And some people say, "Oh, it's not really my job to do this. I'm just a layman. Pastor so-and-so has all these years of training that I don't have." Dear friend, we read in the book of Acts, chapter seventeen, that the people of Berea did not take that kind of an attitude. Paul and Silas came and preached to them. And Luke, the writer of Acts who was an eyewitness to these events, writes this, verse eleven: These people, the people of Berea, he says, "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

The clear implication is that these people – the regular rank-and-file people, the laymen, if you will – these regular people did not even take the word of the learned Paul, Doctor Paul, the trained and commissioned apostle of Jesus Christ, they didn't even take his preaching and teaching at face value. Their standard was the Scriptures. They searched the Scriptures daily, to make sure that the things the Apostle Paul was preaching and teaching agreed with the Word of God. And the clear implication is that they were ready to call him to account, they were ready to reject what he had to say, if it did not agree with Scripture. They didn't say, "Oh, it's somebody else's job." They said, "Before God, it is my job."

Dear friend, is that your attitude today? Are you willing, first of all, to be warned yourself? Are you willing to heed God's warnings as they apply to your own life and doctrine? Are you willing to deliver a Biblical warning, in the spirit of patience and humility, to someone else when it is needed?

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And if those Biblical warnings are not heeded, especially in the case of a false teacher, are you willing to take the necessary step of rejecting such a person – even if it means putting that person out of the church, even out of the pulpit? Even if it means leaving that church or denomination, if the leadership of the church or denomination refuses to act?

The church of Jesus Christ desperately needs that kind of attitude and resolve today. It is time to stop fooling around. It is time to stop being spiritual cowards. For the sake of the preeminent Head of the Church, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we need to do what He calls upon us to do.

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