

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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MAKE THE GOSPEL “AT HOME”

Colossians 3:15-17

You may have noticed that many of our college students are on spring break. Some, like our daughter Krista, are going back to school today. I think Fairfax County scheduled school vacation for early April. For many of us, spring is a time to take trips or visit relatives and friends. Perhaps many of you have already done this – or you plan to when your vacation comes. You pack up the suitcases, get on an airplane or load up the minivan and get out of town. You stay in a hotel or in the home of a friend or relative. Maybe that someone is kind and gracious, doing everything they can to make you feel “at home.” But do you feel at home?

We usually don't. We often live out of our suitcases because there is no closet or drawer space. We probably don't know where everything is or how everything works – from the laundry, to the bathroom, to the kind of cereal in the pantry. We take extra care to be sure that the kids are not too loud or rambunctious or that they are careful not to break Grandma's china. We're less inclined to leave a glass on the end table without a coaster or put our feet on the coffee table. Things are different when we're away from home.

Things are back to normal when we return home. We put our stuff away in our own drawers and closets. We know where everything is. We know how everything works. We make the rules – it's our house and we can be comfortable in it. We feel like we belong.

Have you wondered how the gospel of Jesus Christ can be “at home” in our worship here at Faith Church? During this Lenten season, as we prepare for the celebration of Easter in a few weeks, I think that question takes on a special importance.

We need to understand better what it means to make the gospel really belong in our church life and worship. Today we'll concentrate on one verse in our passage – Colossian 3:16.

FAILING TO MAKE THE GOSPEL AT HOME

Paul tells his readers to let the word of Christ dwell richly in them. Let's try to understand what that means.

The phrase “word of Christ” specifically refers to the words that Jesus spoke, the teaching He gave to His disciples and to many others over the three years of His ministry. Many of these words are now recorded in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. At its core, that teaching is the gospel, the message of salvation through His death and resurrection.

But even more broadly, the phrase includes the entire Bible, which from cover to cover is about salvation in Jesus Christ. The “word of Christ” then, means the gospel. The good news of Easter, that in Jesus Christ, we have a Savior from our sins.

The word “dwell” means to keep house, to inhabit a home or a dwelling. We should live in the gospel just as we live in our homes. Just like we’re familiar with our home where all the closets are, where we have items stored, what food is in the pantry, we must thoroughly acquaint ourselves with the Word of God. We need to be comfortable with the Bible – know the great sweep of redemptive history, know what God has given us in its pages for life and godliness.

But it is more than knowing the stories of the Bible. We need to let the word of Christ dwell inside and live at home in our lives and in our church. The gospel is to penetrate deeply our minds and hearts. It should tell us how to live day-to-day, how to relate to God and to one another, how to minister and serve in the church, and how to worship. The problem is that a lot of times, the gospel is not what penetrates our hearts and minds, the Bible is not what defines what we do.

The Colossians struggled with that, too. The gospel was not at home with them. Paul’s words were written to a small band of Christians in a little town called Colosse in what is now central Turkey. He wanted to correct a problem of the worship. They had “traded-down” the gospel by substituting the pre-eminence and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ with something else. Their worship was not focused on Christ. A couple of passages will show you the problem.

In 2:8, Paul writes: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Then down in 2:16, he continues:

Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:16-23 NIV).

In effect, the Colossians practiced a “do-it-yourself religion,” one that was influenced by the people around them rather than shaped by the Word of God. They listened to the competing

voices of their culture and mixed Jewish and pagan practices with Christianity. The result was a church lifestyle and worship that Paul called “hollow and deceptive philosophy.”

For one thing, they set up religious traditions they thought would please God. These festivals and New Moon celebrations were somehow related to the sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, but mixed in the local religion. That strange phrase “worship of angels” meant “to worship in the same way that the angels worshipped. The Colossians adopted a religious lifestyle that they claimed to be like the angels. By following these rules, they would know God in a special way.

From time to time, we evangelicals slip into this error without realizing it. We may have insisted on certain behaviors and feelings as marks of true faith. We think that simply observing religious practices or having certain special experiences is how we get close to God.

If we set our goals as self-discipline, self-fulfillment, self-esteem, we usually end up with worship of ourselves. Do-it-yourself religion puts “self” at the center and is doomed to failure. For those of you who are giving up something during Lent, I encourage you to take care lest you fool yourself that your discipline is what connects you to God.

The Colossian church let something other than the gospel influence their worship. But that’s our problem, too! In the American church – perhaps in the church in any age – the surrounding culture profoundly shapes worship. In an age of self-love and moral relativism, when everybody seems allergic to absolute truth, the gospel has become increasingly irrelevant. The Word of God is ignored or downplayed – even in Christian worship. People who demand the right to find truth their own way, through their own wisdom and experience, make little use of the Bible.

And in our media-soaked culture, worship has become entertainment. We’ve become consumers of worship and describe our church experience by what we get out of it, rather than what we give back to God.

Church so often is more about ourselves and how we feel, than about exalting and serving God. American Christians – you and I included – often look for a “worship experience” that makes us feel good about ourselves. We shy away from those times where the worship exposes our sin for God and calls us to repentance, service, and self-denial. Dr. Philip Ryken, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia made this observation:

There is an exaltation of the experiential in worship. In this self-centered age, worship is no longer about glorifying God; it is about satisfying myself, even feeling good about myself. It is all about me – what I need, what I like, what I’m getting out of it. Worshippers go to church saying, “Here we are, entertain us!” By that standard, things like expository preaching and pastoral prayers seem far too boring and difficult to appeal to the masses (P. Ryken, *City on A Hill*).

Experience in worship should be about being in the presence of a holy God and how we respond to Him in obedient faith. In our 21st-century self-centered culture, the church may be the only place where our attention is turned away from ourselves and toward our God. We need a biblical theology of worship that tells us how to make the gospel at home. That's what we have in Colossians 3:16.

WORSHIP INVOLVES INSTRUCTION AND APPLICATION

We make the gospel at home through worship that involves faithful instruction to the human heart. Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom." We should live in the Word of God as we live in our homes. We are to hear what God says to us so that we might respond in obedience to Him. We are to saturate our minds with the gospel so that we can become more and more like Christ.

Folks joining me in our Sunday school class, [How People Change](#), have heard me talk about the "gospel gap." That's the missing dimension in our walks with Christ. We understand the past – because we trust in the work of Christ, because of His death, we are washed clean and our sins are forgiven. We look forward to the future. When we became Christians, by faith we were made part of God's family and will spend eternity in glory with Him. But we fail to see what the gospel has to do with the present, how it affects our lives in the here and now. That's the gospel gap.

You see, growth in the Christian life requires our knowledge and application of God's truth. We don't come to worship to be spectators, to be entertained or simply to consume what is put before us. We need His Word and we need others to help us apply His Word to our daily experience.

When we come to Christ, we are not asked to check our brains at the door. Biblical Christianity is not a mindless groping for experience in worship, not just an emotional and spontaneous reaction – though worship certainly does involve our emotions. But true worship must have an intellectual and volitional response to the truth of God. We engage God's truths with our minds and respond with our wills. All real worship brings us to a God who challenges us to think and understand and obey Him.

That's why Paul puts together these two elements of teaching and admonition. They go together. When we teach, we build each other up in the faith, we teach the great truths of Scripture so that we know what the Bible says. When we admonish one another, we relate the Scripture to the real stuff in our lives.

We seek real and lasting change in our lives. That's what the Bible is for, to change us. Timothy 3:16-17 reminds us: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Warning without instruction from the Scripture is shallow moralizing. If what I give from the pulpit or in the classroom is simply encouragement, rebuke, or warning, without unpacking the grand truths and great stories of the Bible, it's not enough.

But teaching without application and a call to obedience simply degenerates into an intellectual exercise. If I haven't helped you apply the death and resurrection of Christ to your daily life, I haven't helped you. It's of no use to you. We must have both teaching and admonition!

Much of what I've said so far involves what Pastor Neil and I do from the pulpit. It explains why we have preaching of God's Word as the centerpiece of our worship service. The preaching of Scripture is an essential part of worship. But how can you make the instruction and application a part of your church life? Let me briefly suggest a couple of ways:

- Get involved in the other ways the Bible is taught in our church. We have an excellent Christian education program, with great teachers instructing everyone from toddler age to the oldest adult. Every Sunday, our Sunday school teachers carefully open and explain the Bible to their students..
- Join a small group Bible study – they meet throughout the week, in homes and in the church. In a small group, you will have help from one another to look into the mirror of God's word and bring your thoughts and behavior into obedience to Scripture. None of us do this well on our own – we need loving encouragement and accountability from other believers. Our small groups provide this kind of intimate and face-to-face community to look deeply at Scripture and ourselves and apply God's word honestly and faithfully. That's how we become more like Christ.

When our worship and church life is full of faithful instruction and application, centered on the work of the cross, there is no gospel gap. As we make the message of the Bible real in our church – here in the sanctuary or in the classroom or in our groups – we are obeying Him. The gospel is at home in our church when worship points to Jesus.

WORSHIP INVOLVES THE OUTPOURING OF THANKFUL PRAISE

The other way Paul tells us to make the gospel at home is through worship that involves an outpouring of thankful praise. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

That involves music, doesn't it? That's one thing Faith Church is known for in worship – our music! We enjoy what our choir and praise teams and accomplished musicians bring to worship.

So, what kind of music does God like? Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. I think you can take that literally. The whole range of church music is included – there's room for traditional and for contemporary music. Paul's not talking about musical style.

The kind of music that pleases God and makes up true worship is the kind that involves the heart! When the Bible tells us to worship with our heart, what it really means is to worship God with all we are and to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Worshipful singing means the whole person.

Hebrews 13:15 encourages us: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess His name. A sacrifice involves the whole being, all of you. Music in worship, just like preaching, demands a deliberate, obedient response to God by the whole person – your mind, emotions, and will. Marva Dawn wrote:

The biblical heart signifies the holistic will, not merely the emotions and emphasizes that we worship God intentionally, deliberately, mindfully – even when we don’t feel like it – since God is worthy of our adoration (M. Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time*).

That’s why worship music is rooted in the Word of God. Our hymns and songs should teach and exhort, not entertain. In fact, a hymn or praise chorus is not worth singing if there is no biblical truth about God and how I respond to Him. If all we get from a song is an emotional release or a pleasant experience, we really haven’t worshipped.

That is to say, worship is not man-ward, but God-ward, it’s a response to Christ and what He has done. Whether we speak of the musicians and choir up front, the preacher in the pulpit, or all of you in the pews, worship is not a performance we give to each other. We are not the audience – God is.

The purpose of worship is to give glory to God. Twice Paul reminds us to thank God, once in verse 16 and again in verse 17: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

The word “worship” comes from the Anglo-Saxon term “worth-ship.” When we worship, we give honor to God.

Only God is all merciful and all loving,

Only He is completely wise and powerful and majestic.

Only He is righteous and holy, perfect in all His ways and in all He does.

Only God is the Creator, you and I are created beings and belong to Him

Our salvation comes only through Him, He bought our lives with His own blood

Our hope – in this life and the next – is from our Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Remember what He has done. He is our Savior.

He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords

At the name of Jesus every tongue will confess and every knee will bow.

Jesus Christ is worthy! That’s the gospel. That’s why we worship

In lives and in our church, the gospel is at home only when worship points to Jesus.

Early in his career, Matt Redman, the popular Christian musician in Britain was singing with his praise band when their pastor confronted them. They had become quite proud of their musical ability and the way they performed. But the pastor felt that they were neglecting true worship. Insulted by the charge, the members of the band left the church. That is, everyone in the band except Redman. Shortly after, he wrote *Heart of Worship*. Listen to these words.

When the music fades
 And all is slipped away
 And I simply come
 Longing just to bring something that's of worth
 That will bless Your heart

Chorus:

I'll bring You more than a song
 For a song in itself is not what You have required
 You search much deeper within through the way things appear
 You're looking into my heart
 I'm coming back to the heart of worship
 When it's all about You
 It's all about You, Jesus
 I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it
 When it's all about You
 It's all about you, Jesus

As we prepare for Easter Sunday, remember that true worship is the kind that instructs us of our need for Christ. True worship is an outpouring of grateful praise to our Savior.

How do we make the gospel "at home"? How do we let the word of Christ dwell in us? The gospel is at home only when worship points to Jesus.