Hearts United in Love

Summer Quarter: Living in Covenant
Unit 1: A Fulfilled Covenant

Sunday school lesson for the week of June 23, 2019
By Ashley Randall

Lesson Scripture: Colossians 2:1-15
Key Verse: Colossians 2:6-7

Purpose: To deepen commitment to faith that is rooted and built on Christ.

Agriculture and Architecture

Agriculture has to do with cultivating the land, raising crops, and getting those crops to market so they can feed people. People who are engaged in this enduring practice are concerned with ways to prepare the soil for planting that protect and preserve. They struggle to overcome pests like weeds, insects, and the diseases they carry. They work to ensure that the crops they grow have the water and nutrients they need to flourish.

The Bible is replete with agricultural metaphors. In the story of creation, God plants a garden. The faithful are “like a tree replanted by streams of water” (Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:8). “They will bear fruit even when old and gray; they will remain lush and fresh” (Psalm 92:14). “The vineyard of the Lord of heavenly forces is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted” (Isaiah 5:7a). God declares to Israel, “It was I who planted you, a precious vine of fine quality” (Jeremiah 2:21a). When Israel is restored, “Jacob will take root; Israel will blossom and sprout and fill the whole world with produce” (Isaiah 27:6). Hosea expresses his hope in the Lord with these words: “The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be gathered together, and they will choose one head. They will become fruitful in the land” (Hosea 1:11). Many of the parables of Jesus speak of seeds and soil, wheat and weeds, planting and harvest. Jesus asks his followers to “produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives” (Matthew 3:8).

Architecture has to do with the design and construction of buildings. Around the world there are varied expressions of the art of design. In many places the materials that are readily available for building influence the different types of construction. While there are some variations in the kinds of proportions that are used in building design, there is much evidence that these proportions contribute to the strength and beauty of the resulting buildings. Careful builders from every culture value firm foundations and careful joinery.

Much of the Hebrew scripture contains detailed instructions about the way things are built. From the construction of the tabernacle, to the building of the Temple, to the rebuilding of the wall around the city of Jerusalem, God shows attention to materials, proportion, and design. The
psalmist confirms the importance of attending to God’s principles: “Unless it is the Lord who builds the house, the builders’ work is pointless” (Psalm 127:1).

It is worth noting that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report Jesus quoting Psalm 118:22: “The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone!” Indeed, it becomes a central tenet of Peter’s testimony when he appears before Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest’s family following his arrest in the Temple (Acts 4:5-12).

Jesus was clear that people should build their lives on a solid foundation. “Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock” (Matthew 7:24, Luke 6:48). Paul extended the metaphor: “As God’s household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:20-22). Paul is emphatic: “No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

So which metaphor is the right one; agriculture or architecture? Does the covenant community of God grow? Does it follow the principles of good agriculture? Or is the covenant community built? Do those who wish to build an enduring structure need to attend to proper materials, complementary proportions, and elegant design?

**Convincing Arguments and Clever Deception**

Paul had never visited the city of Colossae or the community of faith that worshipped there before he wrote this letter to them. He had heard reports that there were some among them who were stirring up controversy and spreading dangerous distortions concerning the nature and work of Jesus.

A number of philosophies developed in the first few decades after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension that tried to compromise on the claim that “All the fullness of deity lives in Christ’s body” (Colossians 2:9). Some claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human. They claimed that his body was only an illusion; which meant that since he had not really been alive, he didn’t really die on the cross.

Others claimed that Jesus was born, the same as any other person, but because of his exemplary virtue, God “adopted” him as the “Son of God” by sending the Holy Spirit to dwell in him. Still others claimed that Jesus had been created by God at some point in time, but only recently sent to deliver God’s message and to offer himself as a sacrifice to satisfy the debt of sin. In addition, there were those who claimed that Jesus was in no way divine – a good man, but nothing more.
All of these philosophies carried with them the claim that Christ alone was not enough to insure our salvation. Something more was necessary – circumcision, keeping kosher, learning some “special” knowledge, avoiding certain behaviors, practicing intense personal disciplines.

Paul wanted the covenant community in Colossae to understand that any “secret plan” was revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. “All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him” (Colossians 2:3). Their faith in Jesus Christ was sufficient to assure their salvation.

**Rooted and Built Up in Christ**

There is a temptation to see most issues as “either/or” propositions. We do face a lot of choices that present themselves that way: paper or plastic, eat in or take out, sweet or unsweet. That doesn’t mean that this kind of forced choice should be the defining principle of our lives – especially when it leads us into controversy, division, and animosity.

Even though agriculture and architecture are very different disciplines, throughout the scripture that are used in tandem to describe the work God is doing in the midst of the covenant community. A recurring theme throughout the message of the prophet Jeremiah is the assurance that when God restores the people of Israel, God will build and plant (Jeremiah 1:10, 18:9, 24:6, 31:28, 42:10).

When he is addressing the divisions that have been created by the controversies in Corinth, Paul moves rather abruptly from using agricultural images to describe the work the has been done to form this congregation to architectural ones. “We are God’s coworkers, and you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:9).

In Colossae, as in Corinth, Paul reminded the covenant community that what sustains our shared life together is the reality of life in Christ. Christ is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. Christ supersedes every ruler and authority – on earth and in heaven. Through baptism we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection, which has cancelled the debt we owe and reconciled us to God and to one another.

Controversy continues to create divisions in the covenant community. Diversity itself is often identified as a problem rather than being celebrated as a gift. In her book “Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart” (InterVarsity Press: 2013), Christena Cleveland asks, “How much are the people for whom Christ died suffering because we remain paralyzed and divided by our differences when we should be working together as the hands and feet of Jesus in the world? There must be a better and more efficient way to carry out our roles within the mission of God. Surely, we can do better” (20).

Paul certainly believed that those who remained rooted and built up in the love of Christ could do better. With roots firmly planted in the rich soil of God’s love, they could bear fruit that
would sustain those in the covenant community as well as be a source of physical and spiritual nourishment for the hungry around them. Built on the foundation of Christ, they could withstand the storms of life; the assault of the enemies of God; and the clever arguments of those who would attempt to distract, confuse, and discourage them.

Paul was confident that faith in Jesus Christ would carry the diverse community in Colossae through the controversies that were swirling around them. Faith in Christ would provide the stability and discipline that would carry them through these turbulent times. May your faith in Christ fill you with joy and thanksgiving as you march with the rest of the covenant community in Christ’s triumphal parade.

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