ACTIONS VALIDATE TEACHING

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A short overview of Colossians. The heart of mission is about presenting Jesus to people; telling his story and declaring his glory. However, if our actions don't match our words, then our words are meaningless.Â
Category: Observations

Over the last couple of weeks, Sue has been in Madagascar working on a translation of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Meanwhile, I've been musing on the same letter in preparation for a sermon in a few weeks time. I must admit that I'm pretty keen on Colossians, it's a book I return to time and time again. Partly, this is because of the remarkable teaching about Jesus.

> *15Â The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16Â For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17Â He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18Â And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19Â For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20Â and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15-19)*

These few verses may have originated as an early Christian hymn, but wherever they came from, they are incredibly rich.

Then in chapter 2, you have this amazing statement:

> *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10Â and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. (Col. 2:9-10a)*

You could spend ages exploring and unpacking the meaning to these twenty or so words. However, surprising as it may seem, I find the most important teaching in Colossians at the very end of the book; in the bit where Paul greets his friends - the bit that we tend to skip over.

> *7Â Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8Â I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. 9Â He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. (Col. 4:7-9)*

The significant bit here is verse 9: "He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you". We know from the letter to Philemon - and the Colossians knew because they were local - that Onesimus was a runaway slave who had deserted his Christian master in Colosse. While

fleeing he had met Paul and been converted and now Paul is sending him back to Philemon's house.Â

This may not ring any bells for us, but in Roman times slaves were the lowest of the low and runaway slaves were automatically condemned to death. Onesimus had no rights, at best he could expect a severe whipping from his former master and at worst he could be crucified. But Paul sends him back describing him as a "faithful and dear brother" and "one of you". To describe a slave as "one of you" was rather insulting to his readers - they were better than slaves! However, in these few verses (and in the accompanying letter to Philemon), Paul is giving a demonstration of how all of his high-flown rhetoric in the early part of his epistle should be worked out in practice.

> *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col.1:20)*

This isn't just a theoretical statement, an axiom of doctrine or theology to be mulled over and used in hymns and prayers. It is a statement of truth which has practical consequences in the real world. If Christ is reconciling all things; then he is certainly reconciling a believing master and his brother who happens to be a runaway slave.

In these few, apparently throwaway verses at the end of the epistle, Paul gives us a clear demonstration of the implications of his teaching. He doesn't just say amazing things about Jesus - he lives them out in reality and this is important. If Onesimus was not accepted back in Colosse, it would completely undermine all of the great things that Paul said about Jesus in the earlier chapters - and that's serious.

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