

Proclaiming Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening and thank you for your welcome. My name is Graeme Chiswell, as Paul said, and I work at Monash University with the APS group. Tonight we're going to have a look at one verse from that passage that was just read. Well, as you see, we'll need to draw on all the bits around it to actually get to the heart of it. So Colossians 1.28 is the verse. It's also the theme passage for, or the theme verse really, for our work at Monash University. It's something we've talked about often as a verse, that's a theme. And so as we go through, you'll see some slides. It's kind of an illustrated talk using our work at Monash University so that you get to know us a bit. There'll be 10 of us coming in a couple of weeks and this will give you some background as to where we're coming from and who we are. Even if you won't know the personalities after this, you'll have an idea of what the group is about. But first let me give you a text of ministry at university in 2005. And I want you to use your imagination for a minute. Imagine this. Imagine one of those community markets. I don't know what they have up here at Doncaster. There's one down our way at Dingley. There's tables and tents. There are vendors at the tents. You know the sort of market I'm talking about. Now I want you to imagine that it's a market not for peddling pre-loved goods or cheap jewellery. It's a market for purveying causes, values, spiritualities, activities. Imagine you're walking around just browsing. Occasionally you stop and chat to somebody at one of the stalls. The shyer ones politely answer your questions and they might give you a bit of paper with some info on it. Grab your attention. They have cool music and colourful costumes and usually free food and drink of some sort. And they might try and persuade you to try out their wares. Can you imagine such a market? Well in the last week of February every year, which is what these slides are from, there is just such a market at Monash University at Clayton. It's called the Orientation Carnival. And it's where all the student clubs and societies and various corporations as well, all vie for the attention of the new students arriving on campus. It's colourful, it's fascinating, it's enjoyable, it's loud. I thoroughly enjoy it.

I've been going to these things for about 20 years now. Not at Monash but other places as well. It's great fun. But the range of choice, that's mind-blowing. There are ways to get healthy.

There are games to play from chess to taekwondo. There's cars to build and race. There's medieval dances. In the middle of January they're in the full garb in medieval costume, dancing around.

Battles to re-enact, sword fights with shields. There are causes, causes to champion. Situations of social injustice and oppression to set right. There's a major religions are all on offer there.

Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity as well as various alternative new age spiritualities, including the occult. They're all there. It's an extravagant smorgasbord of lifestyle options.

[3 : 43] And the key value is choice. The message is you can choose what you want to do and who you want to be in this place. You can choose it. It's all about choice. And as I said, I've been going to these things for about 18 years now. And one of the things they bring home for me nearly every year is from the general public's point of view, Christianity is just one of many lifestyle options, lifestyle choices available. And that makes me feel uncomfortable every year. Because the problem is, you see, Jesus Christ cannot and will not be just reduced to a lifestyle option, a lifestyle choice.

And I guess my job as a missionary at Monash University is, in partnership with many others, help people to come to know Jesus and grow in him in that kind of smorgasbord of ideas and possibilities in that kind of environment. Now, the Apostle Paul's letter to Colossians is addressed to a context in many ways that's similar to Monash University. Monash Uni, and for that matter, I guess Melbourne in general, they're not unique in their diversity of lifestyle options and beliefs on offer. And the ancient world in which the New Testament was written was actually a fascinating mishmash of religious religions and gods and ideas. And the Colossian Christians seem to be toying with some alternatives to the Christian faith, alternatives to the things that Christ and his apostles had been teaching them. They were tasting some of the smorgasbord, just trying out the choices on offer.

And Paul summarises the alternatives that they were looking at, they were having a go at, in Colossians 2, verse 8. If you've got your Bibles open there, that'd be handy. There are verses on the screen, but they're in the wrong version, I've realised. So it'd be handy to have your Bibles open.

2, verse 8. These are some of the alternatives. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

See that stuff? Empty human traditions, he calls them. Empty philosophies. There's all those sorts of ideas, human ideas out there, traditions.

[6 : 28] Colossians. And there's Christ. And there are alternatives. The Colossians are just having a taste. This smorgasbord on offer. And as you read through the letter, you get an idea of what's involved in those empty philosophies for the Colossians. Just as a sample, look at 2, verse 16 and 17.

It wasn't read for us. It's a bit further on. Chapter 2, verses 16 and 17. Here's what's involved. Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths.

These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Religious rituals. Looks really religious. Eating special foods.

Observing particular religious days. I guess I'm not sure what's so attractive about it. But they're dabbling in it.

It looks very religious. And what's more, there's some really great spiritual experiences thrown in, just for good measure. Have a look there in verses 18 and 19. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

[7 : 55] Again, there's alternatives. There's visions. Encounters with angels, no less. Can you imagine that? That's what's on offer. You can have an experience of angels, these great visions and dreams.

Come, try this out. And there's Christ who is the head. There are alternatives. I guess the Colossians were being told, you could put it this way, and say, this Jesus stuff is okay as far as it goes.

But there is, oh, so much more to being spiritually fulfilled than him. You haven't got the full deal yet. You've got Jesus. That's great.

I don't think they were saying don't be Christian in that sense. But there's, oh, so much more out there. You could be really religious. You'd have these great spiritual experiences.

Monash Uni has its fair share of deceitful human traditions and empty philosophies.

[9 : 02] Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that everything on offer is evil and not for Christians. In fact, a lot of those activities on offer at Orientation Week and places like that, they actually represent good gifts from God, which are to be enjoyed and received with thanks.

But there are certainly false religions, empty spiritualities on offer. And there are values pushed that are firmly based on worldly principles.

Take a few of them. Here's a few values. These are sort of top of the list. Pleasure is the ultimate good. Sound familiar? Pleasure is the ultimate good.

That's a credo at university campus. Here's another one. Wealth and career is the way to fulfilment. The people at university campuses, they're on a track.

They've been talked to about it since year eight or year nine at school. What are you going to do with your life? Uni is the way to that life. Career and wealth. That's the way to fulfilment.

[10 : 07] You want to make something of your life? Go for it. You need to be at uni. That's what they're being told. They're on a track. And the big one. Here's the biggie. God is a matter of opinion.

God is a matter of opinion. That's a really biggie. That's a really big one. When it comes to matters of religion and of God, it's all a matter of opinion. It's in the opinion box, not in the truth box.

That's a strong value. I guess the Monash Uni version of what the Colossians were coming up against is, this Jesus stuff is okay, but there's also much more to being human than being just in Jesus.

Don't be so narrow. Live a little, guys. Try some stuff out. Well, in Colossae, the alternative to Christ looked very religious and spiritual.

It was actually quite attractive for Christians or religious people. It looked very spiritual. But Paul sees it as a deadly threat to their faith. In a way, that's why he's writing Colossians.

[11 : 23] He's addressing that problem. And in his letter, he uses a strategy which he uses throughout his ministry. It's not rocket science.

It's pretty straightforward. You probably know about it. And it's found there in verse 28 of chapter 1. And we're going to unpack it. What's he say?

What's he do in response to this context, this smorgasbord of philosophies, human traditions, religion? 1.28. It is he, that is Christ, whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

He's outlining his ministry in that section. He's talking about his establishing his credentials. And this is how he sums up his ministry. Verse 28. There's two elements to it.

There's a key activity that he's engaged in with a clear purpose. A key activity and a clear purpose. What does Paul and his mission co-workers do in a context of faith-threatening alternatives?

[12 : 38] They proclaim Jesus Christ. Paul makes an announcement about Jesus. He declares Christ.

It doesn't mean he just mentions the name of Jesus Christ over and over again. Proclaiming is associated with declaring who Jesus is, what he's done, what the appropriate response is.

It's a declaration of the Christian gospel. And the way that message is summed up is simply Christ.

We proclaim Christ. Jesus is the central figure of that announcement. Paul actually proclaims Christ in this letter. The way he addresses it is actually proclaiming Christ.

He has great statements about Jesus that pepper this letter. Have a look at chapter 2, verses 9 and 10, for example. Again, talking about Christ.

[13 : 39] For in him... How about this for a big statement? In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. And you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Doesn't get much bigger than that, does it? Fullness of deity. He has authority over every power and authority you can think of.

Jesus is Lord. Christ is fully God, and he's Lord of every power and authority. Proclaiming Christ. This is who he is. And again, throughout the letter, Paul draws the Colossians back from the alternatives by declaring the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It's interesting to know what he doesn't do, to notice what he doesn't do. He does not merely commend a view of the world or a collection of ideas.

He doesn't just commend a view or ideas as being better or more beneficial to others on offer. He announces truths about a person.

[14 : 54] It's an announcement of news, not just a discussion of views. An announcement of news, not just a discussion of views. I think one of the temptations we face is to buy into the commonly held belief that Christianity is just one of the many philosophies which can be presented, just another range of ideas to think about the world.

The reality is that in Jesus, God has achieved something in human history. He's achieved something to set a warped world right, to bring forgiveness and hope.

What God has done in Jesus is to be announced, declared, proclaimed, it's something that demands a response. Don't get me wrong, it's not that dialogue or discussion of other faiths and philosophies is a bad activity.

Paul is engaged in persuading and debating quite often. It's just that it doesn't take the place of proclaiming Christ, declaring what God has done in Christ in human history.

News, not just views. And in our present environment, it's all too easy to be ashamed of a message about a crucified saviour, someone who is raised bodily from the dead, raised bodily from the dead to be Lord and saviour of all.

[16 : 21] You really believe that? You really believe in a resurrection? You think somebody dying on a cross 2,000 years ago deals with sin?

It's very easy to take a step away from that news, that declaration of what God has done in history. But that's what Paul announces.

That's what he proclaims. Whatever the reception it might receive. That's his task. That's his strategy. And he goes on to develop that idea of proclaiming Christ, doesn't he?

He doesn't just say the magic words, Jesus is Lord, over and over again. He actually applies that truth to real situations. As he proclaims, he's proclaiming Christ, as he does that, he sees himself doing two things.

On the one hand, he warns or corrects wrong thinking and practice. He admonishes. Since Jesus is Lord, he says, don't do that.

[17 : 27] Reject that wrong idea. On the other hand, he teaches and instructs in right thinking and practice. More positive, he teaches. Do this instead.

Think this way. And again, this letter is a model of doing that. Proclaiming Christ, admonishing and teaching. Have a look there in 2.8.

We saw it. 2.8. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit. Stay away there. Jesus is Lord.

That's not the way to go. Look at chapter 2, verses 6 and 7. As you therefore have received Christ, Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Live this way, because Jesus is Lord. Teaching them. So his key activity there is proclaiming Christ, admonishing and teaching as he does so.

[18 : 29] And his goal, he has a clear goal in doing that. Where is he heading for? Why is he doing that? He proclaims Christ in order to present people mature in Christ, or as other translations have, perfect in Christ.

That's what he's doing, to present people to Jesus. Not about gathering followers for himself. That's not what Paul's about. He's on about presenting people to another.

Have you been to a family wedding in recent years, maybe months? Just to know what goes into getting a bride ready for wedding day.

Sometimes grooms as well, but particularly the bride. A bride and her family work so hard, there's huge expense to present that woman impeccably and beautifully dressed on her wedding day.

And that's the kind of image that Paul's drawing on. And what he wants to do, he wants to present people ready to be with Jesus. Mature in him. He wants people to be fulfilled in their purpose.

[19 : 41] Complete. See, the alternative spiritualities, we're offering fullness. Okay? You could look really good doing this. And Paul says, no, that fullness is only found in Christ.

We want to present people in him by proclaiming him, admonishing and teaching people. That's where fullness is. What does that maturity look like?

Well, it looks like a stability of belief that's not easily swayed by the latest fad. All these traditions and philosophies going around.

It involves a deep trust in Jesus and his death and resurrection for forgiveness of sin. It involves a consistency of character and behaviour in line with following Jesus. They're the kinds of things that Paul's shooting for.

That's why he keeps proclaiming Christ, admonishing and teaching people. What's really crucial is, and you notice this from what Paul says, in the Christian faith, you never move on from Christ, do you?

[20 : 51] It's not like you start with the simple stuff of his death so you can get your sin forgiven, and then you move on to the deeper, more spiritual stuff.

Sure, you grow in understanding and in trust and love and obedience of Jesus, but you never move on from him. You never move on from him.

Being found in Christ, trusting him, following him, is our ultimate goal. Being presented, complete, fulfilled in Christ.

That's where true fullness lies. That's where you're at your most human, in Christ.

And the pathway is hearing and responding properly to a clear, steady, teaching and warning type proclamation of Christ. That's how you get there.

[21 : 49] So there's Paul's strategy. Colossians 1.28, there's this strategy to be adopted, whatever situation of spiritual diversity we find ourselves here in.

And I have no doubt here in suburban Doncaster, it's a spiritual smorgasbord out there. It's no different to Monash Uni in that sense. Might be some different things around, but it's a smorgasbord.

Religion is a matter of opinion. It's all about choice. Choose your lifestyle option. And this is the strategy. This is the key strategy we're to adopt. The shape, it might take all sorts of forms.

It might be lots of different shapes of proclaiming Christ. But at the centre will always be proclaiming Jesus, admonishing and teaching people as we do.

The shape will vary, but that mission strategy never does. That's what we'll be doing together in a couple of weeks' time. That's the central thing, proclaiming Christ.

[22 : 56] For us at Monash University, it takes a particular shape, just so you get to know a bit about how we go about in our neck of the woods, proclaiming Christ.

Colossians 128, as I've said, profoundly shapes what we do. And on the screen you'll see a mission statement for AFES. It's best summarised, I think, by the verbs.

Proclaim. Grow. Train. Send. See the progression to it? And usually people start at different stages in that, but you can see how it echoes Colossians 128.

Training and sending are really outworkings of growing. Because as people do become more mature, there comes a love for others, a heart for those who do not know Christ.

In university work, that training and sending of Christians, that's maturing them in service and sending them out to serve Christ and God's world as they graduate. It's a focus of work because of that context.

[24 : 02] Graduates often become leaders in their workplaces and churches. Many will be suitable for full-time ministry here in Australia or overseas. And that sending role is a crucial aspect of university ministry.

It's interesting in the history of missionary movements, many have come out of student work, the great missionary movements. There's a good reason for that.

We have a job of sending people out, having proclaimed Christ to them, having led them to faith and grown them in him, trained them to serve others. We send them out.

At Monash University, we have a particular mission field that has a particular shape to it. There are three main spheres of ministry at the moment. There's international students. I believe here you have a congregation for internationals in the area, so you understand where this is coming from.

One in four students at Monash University are international students. That is, they're here from six months to five years to study, and then will go back to their home country.

[25 : 05] They're cut off from all things that are familiar to them. Food, family, friends, geography, accommodation, language, customs. That's all cut off for them.

They arrive in Australia to study. Many are from countries such as China, where they may have never heard Christ proclaimed in any clear way.

That's an opportunity to be grabbed with both hands, gently and patiently and respectfully. The international students on our campus proclaiming Christ, growing, training, sending them back.

This year there's been, in the work with CU, four overseas students who have become Christians, come to Christ. And it works really well on the relationship networks.

Amy became a Christian early in the year. She was invited along to a Friday friendship thing that we run by somebody. She became a Christian.

[26 : 05] Then she met, she knew Lucy, also from mainland China. She invited Lucy along to the same thing. Lucy started to do Bible studies with somebody. Lucy is now a Christian.

They, they'd never known of Christ before. They're now his children. The second major area of ministry is the halls of residence.

There are about 1,500 people who live around our campus. It's kind of its own subculture, desperately needing Christ. Christians need all the support they can get in the residential colleges, residential halls of residence.

And they also have a unique opportunity to live among their friends, commending Christ in their words and behaviour. There's a great mission opportunity there.

Commuters, five days per week, over 20,000 people come to Clayton campus every day. 20,000. Bigger than most of the towns in Australia other than the major cities.

[27 : 10] They're there. It's a community there for five days each week. Many of those students are at a critical stage in their development, making decisions about identity and values. And, like I said, there are no, no shortage of alternatives on offer to the Christian faith.

In many ways, it's corrosive to Christian faith at university. But that's why we're there, proclaiming Christ, admonishing and teaching him. The things we do, well, again, it's not particularly flashy.

We proclaim Christ. There's a weekly Bible teaching meeting that everybody on the campus is invited to. There's a small group, Bible studies.

There's one-to-one Bible reading. You're getting the theme. It's known on campus as a Bible kind of group. And you can see that from the activities up there.

We teach the Bible and train people to teach it at every opportunity. But the Bible is not the Bible for its own sake. The Bible is actually a menu, not the meal.

[28 : 19] We teach the scriptures because they point to Christ. They make us wise to salvation in Christ. They teach and correct us so we can walk in Christ.

That's why the Bible is central to what we do. I guess every gathering, and I guess for here at Doncaster, you will need to work out your own shape, and I'm sure you have talked about that often.

How are you going to proclaim Christ and present people mature in him? We're looking forward to actually meeting with you. One of the great things about doing these missions is we get to see how other people do it.

And how it happens in normal kind of suburban churches, which is where most of the students will be for the next 50 years. It's a great opportunity for the students to learn and to work alongside others who are keen to proclaim Christ in a different context.

I hope we can be helpful. That will be a good partnership for those four days. But our mission is clear, isn't it? We're to proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone so that we may present everyone mature in him.

[29 : 35] Let's pray. Dear Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus, that you have acted in human history in him, that you have taken on flesh, that he died and rose again bodily and is now Lord of all.

We praise you for these gracious acts. And we pray now that you would give us all the energy we need to tell others this wonderful news.

We pray that you would help us in the face of many spiritual alternatives, lifestyle alternatives, different values that do not acknowledge Christ to stand firm in that great gospel, to entrust ourselves to you and to speak, proclaim him.

We pray that particularly for our time together in a couple of weeks, there will be a great time of proclaiming Christ together. For the glory of your name.

Amen.