

December 28, 2014
Rick Myatt

THE BEST RESTORATION PROJECT EVER
Colossians 1:18-19

Humorist Rob Suggs wrote a column titled “I Yam What I Yam” years ago in which he expressed the plight of a child who is a finicky eater. He said this of himself as a kid: “with the world of vegetables I had no quarrel; I’d examined them closely and concluded they were not for me. If the rest of the family wanted to gorge themselves on stewed carrots and asparagus, they had my blessing. I’d made my lifestyle choice and wished people to respect it.” At one point his mother trotted out the tried and true bromide, “millions of starving children across the world would love to have your dinner.” He answered, “I realize that, and it fills me with sadness. I can’t eat for thinking about it.”

Then came the day the parents tried the “you’ll sit at the table until you eat it” strategy. He wrote, “The vegetable in dispute was yams, the most aesthetically troubling dish I’d laid my eyes on in all my 5 years. No way that brown lump of vegetation was passing my lips.” His parents condemned him to stay in the kitchen all alone until he ate it. They didn’t know the key secret: kids embrace martyrdom. He was in it for the long haul. He wrote, “It was Mom and Dad’s own personal Vietnam: an unwinnable conflict that could take years.” He said eventually his mom’s lip began to quiver, whispers began in the next room, the coalition was falling apart. In the end he was sent to his room where he could gloat.

Every parent knows the frustration of wanting what is best for your child only to have them resist you at every turn. Today we are going to look at what is best for us, and I dearly hope you do not resist it like Rob Suggs did. There likely will be times in your life when this thing might appear as unappetizing as Rob’s yams. But you will find it sweet and good if you will just try. You’ve heard people talk about “looking out for number one.” I am going to surprise you by telling you that I am a big fan of looking out for number one. It is, in fact, the only way to really get the most out of life. However, I should clarify that I am talking about the real Number One. Let me show you what I mean in Colossians 1:18-19.

JESUS IS IN CHARGE

In verses 15-17 we saw that Jesus was the Lord of creation. In verse 18 Paul says Jesus is the head of the church. Big deal. Who cares about the church? Hopefully we all do. All humans should because in this verse Paul turned from creation to the new creation, meaning the church.

God's plan is to restore the human race to what it originally was intended to be. He intended us to not be distorted by evil, to live in constant connection to him and to experience a life of love, joy, peace, meaning and fulfillment. All of that was blown apart by Adam's and Eve's rebellion in Eden and its aftermath. But through the work of Jesus God's plan is to restore it. He has made it possible for us to reconnect with him. He is working to restore both the healthy and holy aspect of our lives. That is an on going project as we live, one that will only be complete when Jesus comes back.

The church is where this project is currently underway. In his commentary on Colossians Robert Wall wrote, "the new creation has erupted in the midst of a fallen creation, and the promised blessings of the new age are now being realized within the history of the church." This is why Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:10, "His (God's) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." The late Ray Stedman said the church is something "the world has never seen before. It is quite different from any other organization or organism among men."

This sounds wonderful. If that's true who wouldn't get excited about the church? It is the place where God is fixing everything that is wrong in the world. That's not true of the government, of ours or any other nation, of any school or club. The church is unique. Here God is displaying his divine wisdom. I find it exciting to be a part of this divine endeavor. Everyone knows there is something wrong in the world and something wrong in humans. Wouldn't you want to be in on God's plan to fix everything and to be a part of something totally unique in this world?

This all sounds good but I do have a problem. The church doesn't look like what I just described. It sure doesn't appear to me to be the place where all that is wrong in this world is in the process of being fixed. I have found myself trying to mediate between brothers in Christ who were at war over business dealings. Though I told them it was absolutely against God's revealed will to sue each other in court and read them the Bible verses that proved it, they always went right ahead with suits and countersuits. They utterly destroyed their relationships and in the process beat me to a pulp. Somehow by trying to help, at their request by the way, I became the enemy to both sides.

One time Laurie and I were on vacation far from here. Our vacation overlapped a couple of days with a fellow staff member from the church we were in at the time and we arranged to have dinner together. In the course of the conversation my colleague told me I was going to have something I would have to deal with when I

got home. He proceeded to describe how an elder meeting at the church while I was gone had devolved into an ugly argument between an elder and a staff member. The argument became increasingly heated until the two were yelling at each other. He said he thought for sure they were about to trade blows. Fortunately it didn't go that far. But the only thing that kept it from getting there was that one of them angrily stomped out of the meeting and slammed the door as he left. That happened more than once.

I've got more stories, but I'm sure you get the picture. And that's just in my experience. When you look at the church worldwide I have to say that it presents a far from encouraging picture, one that is far different from that unique project to fix what is wrong in the world that I talked about. So how are we to explain this?

First remember that none of this is new. The first century Corinthian church was torn apart by dissension on several fronts. The Philippians were divided because of two women in their church who were at odds. When Paul was in prison people were trying to compete with his leadership in the church. In some cases Jewish and Gentile Christians were divided. The apostle John had to deal with a man who wanted to be in charge and was causing lots of problems in the church.

Despite all those problems God revealed that even then, even with those ugly things happening, God was in the process of restoring the human race in the church. The key word there is process. We get a feel for what this means by moving from the corporate level to the individual level. This process involves restoring individual humans to the original just out of the box condition of the first humans. How is the project going in you? I'm going to answer that question for myself by simply saying the project is not yet complete. In fact I'd have to say in my case the project appears to be experiencing Department of Defense sized cost overruns and delays.

This is a process. We have had several church events at the home of the Stroms. I noticed their garage contained an old car. It was a classic Mustang. That's a 50 year old car. They were in the process of restoring it. It was a lot of work. In fact they put a whole new engine in it. In the middle of that project you could look at that car and say, "Wow, they've got a long way to go." It would have made no sense to say at that point, "You're not restoring this thing. Look at it. It can't even run. It looks like what it is, an old car that isn't even in running condition. I don't know what you think you're doing here but you're clearly not restoring this thing to any kind of desirable condition." You should see it now. The thing is beautiful. I'm envious.

God's restoration project is in process, both in our individual persons and in the church. When that Mustang was in process I could see what it was, and I could see the potential for what it would turn out to be even though it was not impressive at the time. So it is with the church and with us individually. It isn't always impressive, but it is in process and you can see in it the potential for what it is going to be.

In verse 18 you see the key element of that restoration project. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He is the one in charge. This is one of the key ways the church is unlike any other human organization. Jesus Christ is the one in charge. The biggest obstacle to the restoration project is people forgetting this. That's true for us as individuals and it is true for the corporate body of the church.

Have you ever been in a situation where your body doesn't obey your head? It's miserable. It happened to me once when I sustained a severe concussion and damage to my ear from a blow to the side of my head. The inner ear was damaged with the result that my equilibrium was totally fouled up. My brain told my body to stand up, only when I tried it went kind of sideways and fell over. I couldn't find the vertical no matter how much my brain consciously ordered my body to do so. I found out it is absolutely essential for the body to obey the head in order for it to function properly. Ultimately it is essential for life. At a small level we've all experienced this physically. Have you ever had a muscle spasm? How irritating is it when a muscle starts firing when your brain has not instructed it to do so? It's very frustrating. I hate it when that happens.

Every moment when we do not follow the direction of the head, whether individually or corporately, we are a problem. When the body doesn't let Jesus be the head, the restoration project not only gets stopped, it gets set back seriously.

Here's another important truth about the head. Nothing and no one can substitute for it. No one can take over the role your head plays, even when you are asleep it is running your body, making sure you keep breathing and your systems keep operating properly. This is where Ray Stedman's comment about the uniqueness of the church is important. No other organization is like the church because no other organization has Jesus as its head.

I will probably have some people disagree with me here, but I get frustrated by what I hear often from so many church leaders. I have encountered many who believe fervently that we must glean from the world its best philosophies and

practices of organization. We must put them to work, I am told, in the church so we can be more efficient and more effective.

Doesn't that bother anybody besides me? Does Jesus really need us to go to the world to learn how to run his body? Doesn't there seem to be something wrong with that to you? There is no doubt that we can make more impressive human organizations by following the advice of smart people. They accomplish impressive things. I look around this world and am astounded at what some human organizations can do. I even see churches that put great organizational principles to work and do things that blow me away. They're way more impressive than anything any ministry I've ever been in has done.

But here's the problem: they're substituting something for the head. They can accomplish impressive things that way. But what they can't manufacture that way is what the head of the church wants to do because it is fundamentally different than what human organizations always try to do. The true head, our Lord Jesus, consistently operates in ways that confound humans, that often are the opposite of what humans think should be done and will always emphasize things different than humans will emphasize.

As evidence of that consider the meaning of this season. Would a human ruler of all of creation have come up with the idea of entering human history as a baby? Would we devise a plan to die by one of the most awful tortures ever dreamed up as a way of saving people? None of that seems very efficient or smart to humans. Yet that is exactly what Jesus did. Have you ever read the Old Testament? Read the story of Jacob some time. He was God's choice to be the son of promise. He was a schemer and a con man, always looking for how he could get an edge. Does that seem like the kind of person you would choose to play a key role in your movement to rescue the human race? If you were trying to start a movement that would sweep across the globe and change the world, who would you choose as leaders? I suggest very few organizational gurus would have come up with the twelve guys Jesus hand picked. They certainly wouldn't have chosen a guy they knew for sure would betray the cause. I doubt they would have chosen as the key guy a brash fisherman with a serious case of foot in mouth disease. But Jesus did.

God's way of doing things involves the first being last, leaders being servants, humbling ourselves to be exalted, becoming weak so God's power can be work completely, suffering loss as a way to win. God's plan involved grace at its heart, a concept that is utterly foreign to humans and frankly no human organization can efficiently run by.

I hope is you come away with a breathtaking vision of what God wants his church to be. I want you to be filled with passion for the possibility of the church. And I want you to be fervent in your desire to have Jesus be the head of not just the church worldwide, but of *this* church, our church.

JESUS IS THE FIRSTBORN

Paul goes on to say that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Remember from the previous verses that the term “firstborn” can have two different nuances of meaning. We saw in verse 15 that one meaning had to do with superiority or leadership. Jesus was the firstborn over creation. He made all of it, he holds it all together, and he rules over it.

Paul used “firstborn” in the sense of “ruler” in verse 15, but here he uses the literal sense of one born first. You can see this from the prepositions used with it. He was the firstborn *over* creation, but he is the firstborn *from out of* the dead. In other words, he was the first of all those who will rise from the dead. All who will rise from the dead will do so as he did.

When the Navy builds new ships they never make just one of a kind. They build a new ship and that ship becomes the model for the group of ships that will follow after it. In 1972 the Navy launched a new nuclear powered attack sub and named it the USS Los Angeles. There have been 62 more subs like it all in the Los Angeles class. We have Nimitz class aircraft carriers and Arleigh Burke class destroyers. Currently a new carrier is being built, one that has an electromagnetic catapult system instead of the steam catapult we’re used to. It’s called the Gerald Ford. It will be the first of the Ford class carriers. Each ship in a class will have a few idiosyncrasies unique to it, but they will all look much alike. There is to be a whole group of people who are “Jesus class people.” They have their idiosyncrasies and unique characteristics, but they will all look much like the first one in the class, the firstborn.

It is also important to note that Jesus rose to a different kind of life. His resurrection life was not exactly the same as his life prior to his resurrection. It had much in common with it. He had a physical body that was recognizable, but it also had properties ours do not have. There is a lesson for us in this. Romans 6:3-4 says, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” The point is that in Jesus not only is there eternal life,

but we should begin experiencing aspects of that life even now. We have the opportunity to be raised to a new kind of life.

At some point in the future we will have the advanced human capabilities that Jesus has, such as immortality, victory over death, victory over sin itself, ability to actually appear in closed rooms and others. We don't have that right now, but what we do have is to depict for others that something has changed. An old life has died and something new and different has replaced it.

Consider Chris Simpson. In July of 2012 *The Washington Post* carried an article about him. As late as 2010 he was leading white supremacist marches. He had "Pure Hate" tattooed on his knuckles. He was consumed with hate and anger. But after seeing his effect on his own children he watched the movie *Courageous* and began attending a church. Not long after that he was baptized, proclaiming he was now a follower of Jesus. He said he has let go of the hatred he had, has forgiven all those who had wronged him and had asked forgiveness from all those he had wronged. He is now having his tattoos removed, beginning with the word "hate." He has a new life because he is connected to Jesus, the firstborn from the dead.

JESUS IS SUPREME

Verse 18 sums up the core of Paul's message in this passage by saying that God's plan is that Jesus might have the first place in everything. In other words, that he might be the Lord of all. You see the same message in Ephesians 1:23, which says, "and God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church."

Why is it important that Jesus be first in everything? We've thought about this question recently, but it is hard for us to remember. It seems odd if we follow the logic of verses 15-19. Jesus created everything. He created for himself. He created it for himself so that he might have first place in everything. So he made everything so he could have everybody make him supreme. Doesn't that seem strange?

Here's why it is not just important, but crucial. If you don't make Jesus supreme you will make something else supreme. In the end what you will make supreme is you, and from that come all the horrors of all of history. From that comes all the conflict, all the broken hearts, all the violence and brutality, all the pain of damaged or destroyed relationships in the entire human race.

Recently you may have read about what has happened at Mars Hill Church in Seattle. I have referred to this before, but it provides us with a sad but graphic illustration of the problem. Mark Driscoll was the pastor of that church. He is a brash, sometimes abrasive man, but he loves Jesus and is a dynamic and charismatic leader. His church experienced explosive growth and was winning tons of people to faith in Jesus. He became a best selling author and started a new organization dedicated to planting new churches. But this year the whole thing blew up. There were some shady decisions made, but the worst part was that it became clear that the church had a culture of domineering, insensitive leadership that caused no end of damage to people. It was so bad that Driscoll resigned and the church has essentially disbanded. Several insiders, men who were in Driscoll's corner have come out and honestly admitted what has gone on there. The curious thing is it really involved some subtle things. The emphasis was on making the church grow, expanding the ministry. This became the focal point. It became supreme. They wanted to win people to Christ, and to do that they had to grow to reach more people. Winning people to Christ is a good and godly thing. But it is different than having the focus on Christ himself. Shifting the focus just slightly off of having Jesus be supreme onto growing the church led to a lot of ugliness, a lot of people getting hurt, and in the end a black eye for the kingdom of God.

It is so terribly easy for us to forget that the whole point of this whole thing, of everything in our lives is that Jesus would be supreme. This has been a big Christmas for Laurie and me. We now have to share our children with other families because they are married, so we have two sets of in-laws who love the kids as much as we do. That means we don't get to be with our kids every holiday. This Christmas Michael and Carissa came here to spend the holiday with us and we also got to have Toby and Anna with us. Next year if the schedule holds true, we get no one. And we are quite aware that in the future we don't know what we can count on because life is changing pretty dramatically in our family. So this is a big deal to us, and we've both wanted to make the most of it. We wanted to have the house decorated with lights to make the Christmas special, better lights than we normally can manage to get up. I wanted to put lights up on the top of our house, but that would require a 20 foot ladder, which I don't have. I was mentioning this to a neighbor and she said, "you shouldn't be going up that high on a ladder anyway." In other words, you're too old and you might kill yourself. Anyway, we went so far as to hire some guys to put up some lights for us. We wanted to get presents that the kids would really enjoy. We wanted to have a great Christmas dinner with a time of rejoicing and laughing together. We wanted it to be *special*. But here's the thing, what needed to be the focus of our Christmas celebration? It needed to be that Jesus be supreme. I needed to make sure that our visit with all 4

of our kids was about Jesus being supreme. Our giving of presents, our opening presents together needed to be about Jesus being supreme. Our fellowship around the table at Christmas dinner needed to be about Jesus being supreme. If I made it about anything else, inevitably I would create tension, conflict, bad feelings and disappointment. I would be frustrated because someone didn't do what I thought they should or weren't as joyful as I wanted them to be. Or I would be disappointed because they didn't appreciate the present we got for them or because the meal wasn't what I wanted or the fellowship at the table didn't come out the way I wanted. I would put pressure on people and at some level they would resent it. But if Jesus being supreme was the focal point it would change everything. I would realize I can't make other people have Jesus be supreme. I can't force Jesus to sign up for my plan to have our Christmas celebration go a certain way. All I can do is make sure in my thoughts, in my heart, in my actions and my words the point of all that I am and do is that Jesus be supreme. When I do that I can let people be who they are, I can let Jesus have events go the way he wants them to go, I can be at peace and I can give grace, love and peace to people around me. It's pretty simple. I can let Jesus be supreme, or I can cause trouble for myself and everyone else.

Which of those did I do? Maybe not as well as I'd like. Toby and Anna told us they watched the comedy movie *Christmas Vacation* in which Chevy Chase played the bumbling dad Clark Griswold. Anna said his character reminded her of me because he wanted everything to go just right at Christmas. Uh oh. Well, I tried. You'll have to ask some of the family to see if I did all right or not.

CONCLUSION

How should we respond to these truths?

First be excited and optimistic about the church. It is deeply flawed, to be sure. It is disappointing and frustrating at times. But it is God's project, and it is magnificent even as it is in process. I am always dismayed and concerned about people who claim to love Jesus yet have no vision or passion for his church. This is his pet project. It is what he is doing in this world.

Second we as a church need to make sure that we make Jesus the head of this church. We need to believe and act on the premise that Jesus is active among us and should be in charge at all times of this church.

Third we need to stay continually in close connection to Jesus, to trust him and let his resurrection life, his new life, transform us and flow through us.

And finally we need to make sure that Jesus has first place in everything in our lives. Our goal in everything we say and everything we do must be to have Jesus be supreme.