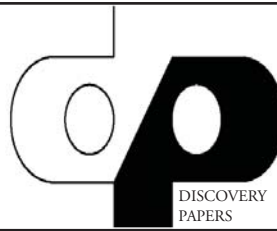


BRINGING CHRIST HOME

SERIES: WALKING IN THE MYSTERY



Catalog No. 110605

Colossians 3:18-4:1

6th Message

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Today we're continuing on in our series on Colossians, looking at what it means to walk in the mystery of Christ. For the last two weeks we saw how Paul's instructions followed the model of a TV show: *Extreme Home Makeover*. First, Paul showed the Colossians what they needed to tear down and then he showed them what they needed to build up in its place. For the most part, we've been talking about what walking in Christ looks like within the community of faith. In our passage for this morning, Paul moves on to the household. Now he tells us how to bring Christ home. This morning we'll be talking about bringing Christ home.

It can be really tricky to figure out what it looks like to be a Christian in your home—where you are known better than you'd like to be. There are a lot of bad attempts to walk in Christ in the midst of family life. A good example of this is in a movie called *21 Grams*. It follows the intersection of three different characters whose lives collide in an interesting way. One of those characters, Jack Jordan, is a new Christian. In a scene from the movie we get to see his attempt at bringing his new faith in Christ home.

The scene begins with Jack, his wife, and his two small children eating dinner. As Jack tells his wife that he was fired from his job, which makes her angry and disgusted, his children begin fighting over a dinner roll. During the fighting, the little boy hits his sister and when she complains of being hit, Jack has her put out her other arm to be hit again by her brother. The mother is yelling "No Jack, no!" Jack then tells his daughter a passage from Scripture; Matthew 5:39, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." His son hits her again and then the mother whisks her off to safety as she tells Jack sarcastically, "Great parenting Jack." After they've left, his son keeps looking at his father expecting some kind of punishment and sure enough Jack hits his son over the head and says "There's no hitting in this house. Go stand in the corner." The scene ends with Jack all alone at the table, eating dinner by himself.

There are so many things wrong with this picture that it's hard to know where to begin. Quoting Scripture in a bizarre way, acting in a way completely opposite to how you tell others to act, misguided parenting. The list goes on. This is an extreme example of what home life looks

like. But I don't think it is all that far off from what a lot of our experiences are. Many of us would like to bring Christ into our homes, but we are inconsistent and bumbling with how we do it. I'd like to think I'm more stable than Jack Jordan, but if you took several of my recent low points at home and put them together, it wouldn't be all that different from this scene.

The truth is that our regular everyday relationships are some of the hardest ones to follow Christ in. In this clip, we see a marriage, we hear Jack talking about losing his job, and we see parenting. Marriage, family, and work. These relationships are what make up a lot of our lives. How do we walk in Christ in them?

That's what our passage this morning addresses. We're looking at Colossians 3:18-4:1. Paul talks about three different sets of relationships. First he addresses husbands and wives. Then he talks to children and parents. Finally he gives instructions for masters and servants—what we can apply as bosses and employees. These instructions are very practical on what it looks like to live the life of Christ in the midst of these relationships. But there are a few background things we need to understand before diving into this passage

First, the passage that we are looking at is one of several passages that are very similar in the New Testament. There's one in Ephesians, one in Titus, and one in 1 Peter. Scholars have grouped all of these passages together and called them "house-tables" or "household codes." That refers to a set of very specific instructions for the Christian household.

The typical Roman household was the center of domestic life. We live after the Industrial Revolution, where people started leaving their homes to "go to work." But in Roman culture at this time, your home was where you worked. A typical Roman home consisted of the father, his wife, their children, and often servants who worked for them either at home or in their trade. The home was the workplace. Life was all centered around the home.

So this passage is really about everything outside these church walls. Your "non-church" life. It's about bringing Christ from "in here" to "out there."

Second, remember that this is a letter written to a church to explain to them how to function at home. This isn't an effort to reform society. These aren't general ethical instructions. These are for those who seek to follow Christ in their home.

So let's think about what Paul is doing. He started Colossians with a description of who Christ is. Then he moved on to instructions on "walking in him." First, his instructions dealt with how the church community interacted with each other and then his instructions were directed to the family. Next week we'll see him give instructions on how to interact with outsiders. What he's doing is starting with the church and seeing the life of Christ move out from there. It all starts here and then it moves itself out into our families and eventually our communities. This is how God works. It begins in the church and radiates out to the world.

So we have a specific set of instructions, given for the Colossians to take into their homes. They are bringing Christ home and as we see next week, that's the way that Christ reaches the world.

Marriage is mutual

We'll start by looking at the first two verses, which address husbands and wives.

Colossians 3:18-19:

¹⁸Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Now, we don't have time for a comprehensive teaching on Christian marriage. A lot has been said about Christian marriage. Some of it is very helpful; some of it is very unhelpful. This is not the time to sort it all out, but we do want to make some attempt to understand what Paul is saying here.

There are two points I want to make about what Paul says here to wives and husbands. The first has to do with the contrast between what Paul says and what his culture says about marriage. In Greco-Roman culture, the husband had complete authority within the family. The husband was viewed as the *pater familias*, which is Latin for "father of the family." Only he had the legal right to own property. Only he had legal rights at all. Women were expected to obey their husbands in everything.

But Paul's instruction is different. He gives more instruction to the husband than to the wife. He wants to make sure the one who has power in that culture uses that power lovingly. This is a theme that resonates all throughout Scripture: God cares for the powerless. It is probably the case that husbands were abusing their power over their wives and parents were abusing their power over their children, so Paul has extra instructions for them.

The instruction that he does give to the wife is an interesting one. Wives are told to submit to their husbands. But submission is not usually something that is instructed. Submission is usually something that is demanded.

Think about the harsh example of slavery in the United States. Slave owners didn't instruct their slaves to submit to them. They demanded it, they forced it, and they punished them harshly if they didn't comply. You don't normally ask for someone to submit.

So the very fact that Paul gives this instruction to the wives elevates their position above that of their culture. They are seen as independent people. Their submission is something they offer to their husbands. It is a choice. It is a gift.

Here's how one commentator puts it:

The admonition is an appeal to free and responsible agents that can only be heeded voluntarily, never by the elimination or breaking of the human will, much less by means of a service submissiveness.¹

So the first thing that we want to notice about this passage is that Paul seems to have a goal of limiting the power of the husband and emphasizing the free choice of the wife. He portrays marriage as a two way interchange. Wives submitting to their husbands and husbands loving their wives. That's very different from how it was viewed in his culture. Paul's version of marriage is not a one-way hierarchical relationship. It's a relationship of mutuality. **Marriage is mutual.**

Second, let's look at the instructions that are given. A lot of Christian teaching on marriage goes way beyond what the Bible actually says about husbands and wives. It's very common for such teaching to focus on roles— what husbands and wives are supposed to do and what areas they contribute toward. But I don't find a single place in Scripture that gives instructions about roles within marriage. When you look at the passages involved, they aren't talking about roles. They are talking about attitudes. How you relate to your spouse.

Let's think first about wives. There is an image of the Christian wife that says she is always supposed to be cheerful, have dinner ready when her husband gets home, always be ready for sex whenever he is, do all the housework without complaining, keep track of everything relating to the kids, and obey everything the husband says. But most of that doesn't come from the New Testament.

Let's look at what they are instructed to do. The wives are instructed to submit to their husbands. This command is frequently repeated in the New Testament by several different authors, so we have to understand what it means. This word is different than what is used for children. Children are asked to obey, wives are asked to submit. Those are two very different things. Nowhere in the New Testament are wives asked to obey their husbands.

So what does submission look like? I suggest that for wives this describes an attitude of respect toward their husbands. That is how Paul summarizes his instruction to wives in Ephesians 5:33. Wives are to respect their husbands. Husbands are to love their wives. This is the basic attitude of a wife toward her husband: respect.

That doesn't say anything about the inherent worth of women. It doesn't say anything about who earns the money, who has more influence in major decisions or who does the laundry. Those are all roles. This is talking about a relational attitude.

It might be helpful to recognize trends we're seeing in our culture. A generation ago, the picture of masculinity was a dominant, aggressive, and over-bearing leadership. A generation ago, we probably had more of a problem with husbands who dominated their wives, but things have changed. The picture of manhood in our culture is a weak one. Men are often viewed as simple, unsophisticated, and incompetent. In short, men have lost a lot of respect in our culture. Think about the movie scene from *21 Grams*. In a few short words, Jack's wife completely cut him down. Not a hint of respect.

We've seen the same thing in some of our marriages. Women who don't respect their husbands, but dominate or manipulate them. It's a helpful reminder in our culture for wives to respect their husbands. So wives are not instructed to obey, they are instructed to have an attitude of respect.

What about the husband? A lot of Christian teaching on marriage correctly focuses on the metaphor of biblical metaphor of headship that Paul uses in Ephesians 5, referring to the husband as the head of the wife. Headship within marriage is a beautiful and powerful picture of

the relationship of marriage. The image combines many facets and ideas while maintaining a sense of the mystery that is the human body. Authority is one of the aspects contained within the metaphor, but not the only one. It is unfortunate that headship has lost its meaning for many Christian couples because they have only heard headship as referring to authority or leadership.

The other references to headship in the New Testament speak of the organic connectedness of the head and the body as well as the collaborative working together of a head and body toward the goal of accomplishing God's purposes (Col 2:19, Eph 4:15-16). Within the instructions to husbands in Ephesians 5, the metaphor of headship emphasizes not the authority of the husband, but the oneness of the husband and wife.

It's helpful to look at the specific instructions that are given to husbands, here in Colossians, as well as in the New Testament as a whole. Many people assume that the New Testament instructs men to lead their families. It may come as a surprise that of the six instructions or exhortations to husbands in the New Testament (Eph 5:25, Eph 5:28, Col 3:19, 1 Pet 3:7, 1 Cor 7:3, 1 Cor 7:11), none have to do with leadership. There is an aspect of leadership implied within many of the discussions of marriage as well as within some of the commands, but the instructions focus on different areas.

The most common instruction is what we have in Colossians 3: love your wives. This is a powerful and challenging instruction to husbands. Loving your wife is an active, sensitive, and engaging process. Paul's expansion of this command in Ephesians 5 demonstrates just how much is meant by love: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Two words that are helpful in understanding what it means to love your wife are initiative and sacrifice. This is how Christ loved the church. This is how husbands are instructed to love their wives.

Loving your wife means taking the initiative to find out what her needs are so you can meet them. Loving your wife means being the first to work toward resolution of a conflict. Loving your wife means taking an active role in family life as a husband and father. There is no room for passivity in love. Loving your wife means sacrificing your preferences for the sake of hers. Loving your wife means that things will not always go the way you want them to. Loving your wife means dying to yourself, as Christ died on the cross, so that you can offer the experience of life to your spouse.

We live in an age where men are tempted to be either passive consumers of family life or controlling dictators of everyone in the house. The instruction in Colossians corrects both extremes. The emphasis of the New Testament for husbands to love their wives offers Christ as the model. Once again, the discussion of a particular issue like marriage comes back to Christ. There is a high standard for men to step up with initiative and sacrifice.

But remember: the husband also has a negative instruction. The husbands are instructed not to be harsh with their wives. The literal word used here is the word for bitterness. Husbands are instructed not to be bitter toward their wives. So we have to assume that husbands in the first century were bitter towards their wives and Paul was trying to correct something. Paul is not defining a role that husbands are supposed to play. It is an attitude they are to have as they relate to their wives. They are told not to be embittered.

If you were to look at our culture it's easy to find examples of husbands being embittered toward their wives. Men often view their wives as a limitation. They use terms like "ball and chain" to refer to a marriage that holds them back from what they really want to do. Loving another means losing out on some personal preferences. It means engaging in a relationship that is often complicated and hard to figure out. Most men prefer to spend their energies on projects that are easier to manage than marriage. Men can be bitter that they are constantly asked to engage in an area where they don't always feel competent: loving their wife.

So the instruction not to be embittered is an important one. This means remembering that God often uses wives to call their husbands forward into real significance. Our wives help us when they don't let us get away with things and hold us to a higher standard. Instead of responding in bitterness, we can respond in grateful love. God uses marriage to teach men to love. Learning to love your wife helps you to love God and others in richer and more significant ways.

We've made two observations about what Paul says toward marriage. First, he is speaking in sharp contrast to the culture that he is addressing. He sees women as having autonomy and choice and asks them to make the choice to submit. And he holds men to a much higher accountability than existed in the culture. He emphasizes mutuality between husband and wife.

Second, he does give some interesting instruction. In the midst of a culture where women disrespect men and

men use women, we are told that our marriages should look different. Women should submit to their husbands. Husbands should love their wives.

Now we need to move on to the other two sets of relationships that Paul addresses in this passage: parents and children; and masters and slaves.

Family is respecting

Let's start by reading Paul's instructions to parents and children.

Colossians 3:20-21:

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Paul tells the children to obey their parents and he tells fathers to avoid being extra harsh on their kids.

In our culture, obedience to parents is not an emphasis for children. In this culture, the expectation on children is to prepare and achieve. Prepare for the next grade level. Study hard. Excel in sports. Win the awards. Get good grades so you can go to a good school and get a good job. Our culture tells children that life is about achievement and this is their goal: to set themselves up for big achievements in life.

But Paul's instruction has nothing to do with achievements. It's all about relationships. The entire focus for children is to learn to relate well. Their primary, defining relationship is with their parents, so that's where it starts. And the proper attitude to have toward their parents is one of obedience. We live in a culture that tells kids to focus on achievement. But the Bible tells them to focus on relationship.

What are kids preparing for? What do they really need to be well adjusted, fulfilled people in the world? What is most important? Is it grades? Or sports? Or music? Or is it how they relate to people? Our culture lies to us when it tells us that our kids will only be happy with certain jobs making certain amounts of money. You can be happy and fulfilled as a computer programmer, as a bus driver, as a doctor, as a stay-at-home mother, or as a day-laborer.

God's revelation is clear. We are primarily relational creatures. Our primary calling is to relate to each other: our

family, our friends, our co-workers, and our neighbors. So what is the primary focus for kids? It is for them to learn to relate to their parents. That brings us to the instruction to the parents.

If the children are supposed to relate to their parents in obedience, the parents are essentially instructed to help them by not making it too difficult. The NIV uses the phrase “do not embitter them.” Other translations use words like “provoke” or “exasperate.” The parents’ goal is basically to help their children learn to obey them. And by extension, to help their children in all their relationships. What characterizes these relationships in the family is respect. Children respect their parents by obeying them. Parents respect their children by working together with them on family life. **Family is respecting.**

Again, think back to our movie scene. It’s a great example of lack of respect in parenting. This was definitely a case where the father could have applied “do not embitter your children.”

I find this to be one of the most practical verses and I keep it in mind almost daily as a parent. My responsibility is to establish boundaries, structures, rules, and expectations for my children. When they disobey, my responsibility is to discipline them. The purpose of discipline is to help my children understand that actions have real consequences. Discipline is how I as a parent, train my children to handle life.

But in the midst of that I need to remember the ultimate goal. Discipline can easily become a vengeful response for making my life more difficult. It can also be easy to establish rules that are incredibly difficult for children to maintain or have expectations of them that are far greater than their capability. My responsibility as a parent is to train them and to help them learn to obey me without exasperating them, without piling on such high demands and expectations that they give up and think they can never succeed. It’s a fine line and it involves constantly listening to your children, trying to figure out where they are, trying to understand why they might have trouble in certain areas, and working with them to establish clear but attainable goals.

I know that this is far easier said than done. It’s not that hard to preach about disciplining children without exasperating them, but it’s an incredibly complicated line to find in real life. I’m not claiming to be all that good at it, but this is the goal that I think God sets for us as parents.

OK, so that’s our second set of relational instructions.

Children are instructed to obey; parents are instructed to avoid exasperating them. The understanding is that they are disciplining their children. The instruction is to do so in a way that doesn’t discourage them.

Work is worship

Now let’s move on to our final pair of relational instructions. Paul addresses this to masters and slaves. This was one of the primary workplace relationships in the first century. It isn’t the primary workplace relationship in our culture, though some of you may feel like you work for a slave master at times. So we can apply the general principles that Paul instructs for masters and slaves to our workplace environment: to bosses and employees.

Colossians 3:22-4:1.

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.

^{4:1}Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

This instruction for slaves exactly mirrors the instruction given to children. They are to obey their earthly masters in everything. Paul is careful to specify that he’s talking about earthly masters, because he wants to change the focus. He wants workers to be less aware of their earthly masters and more aware of Christ. He says that when you work for your boss, you’re actually working for Christ. That means that your work is a kind of worship. Whether it’s cleaning floors, writing code, taking care of kids or anything else, your work is a sort of worship. **Work is worship.**

One of the things Paul does in this passage is address the issue of compensation. Slaves in New Testament times often received some amount of compensation. Roman citizens often freed their slaves after they reached the age of 30 and those individuals usually became Roman citizens as well as freemen. Many slaves worked hard with this goal in mind.

Most people in our culture work hard with the goal of compensation in mind as well. Every now and then you might think about the question, “If you won the lottery today, would you go into work tomorrow?” Depending on what your job is and how honest you are at answering silly questions like this, you may answer in a lot of different ways. But the truth is that for most people, they work in order to receive their compensation. You might do some kind of work if money was no object, but it probably wouldn’t be exactly what you’re spending your time on now. Most of us work to make money.

So what Paul does is to refocus their expectation of compensation. He says that your focus in work should be Christ as your master rather than your earthly authority as your master because that’s ultimately where your compensation will come from. Not that how hard you work here will determine how big a house you’ll have in heaven or anything like that, but what he is saying is that for the Christian, the long-term focus of the future is completely different than for anyone else.

This is something that permeates the New Testament in so many places. We talked about it in December when we looked at the Advent theme of hope. Life as a Christian is lived toward the age to come. That’s always in our minds. That’s the inheritance we will receive. That’s ultimately our compensation.

This is what Paul has been trying to do all throughout Colossians: getting us to connect the big themes of who Christ is and what he’s doing in the world with the everyday themes of how we live our lives—walk around and interact with people. Up there and down here. These are the connections that Paul is trying to make and here he’s doing it with our professional lives. Our everyday work that we contribute, wherever we do contribute—whether it’s as a student, a professional, a stay-at-home parent, or a volunteer—that work is done looking toward our inheritance in Christ as compensation. That’s the goal.

That’s how Paul wants to refocus the efforts of those who work, and he does something similar to refocus the energies of masters. In case, this refers to managers—people who are responsible for the work of others. He tells them to treat their employees, those who work under them, with justice. This is one of the primary attributes that God claims for himself. He is a God of justice and righteousness. So masters are instructed to treat their people with these qualities because they are aware that ultimately they are not in charge.

So employees are to remember that their ultimate

manager is Christ and managers are to remember the same thing. They don’t have ultimate authority. They themselves are under the authority of another and whatever they do should be done with that in mind.

Christ is central

This brings us to one final observation. I’ve made reference to this several times throughout the various instructions. Each of these instructions has made a reference to Christ in the midst of them. Wives are instructed to do what is “proper in the Lord.” Children are instructed to do what is “pleasing to the Lord.” Slaves and masters are both instructed to refocus their understanding of their situation according to who Christ is. Each of these instructions regarding very earthly relationships is given with a reference to who Christ is. We need to ask the question, “Why?”

The answer to this question lies at the heart of the book of Colossians. It lies at the heart of the New Testament. It is the message of the gospel. It’s something that you can hear over and over again, but still find it hard to live out in practice and you can still be surprised as you see it applied in new ways.

A phrase from our passage a few weeks ago summarizes it best. Colossians 3:11 says “Christ is all.” It’s another way of saying the overarching phrase that we found in Colossians 2:6, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” It’s the big idea that we’ve been trying to understand all throughout this book.

So we see all these earthly relationships. These are the relationships that define our lives. When I think of who I am, I think of myself as a husband to my wife, a parent to my children, a child to my parents, a pastor to my church, and a friend to my friends. These relationships are an essential part of who I am. Paul says to view each and every one of them in light of Christ; to see Christ in each of them. When we leave here and go to our homes, Christ is still at the center of everything we do. **Christ is central.**

It’s tempting to take these instructions in the wrong way. Sometimes we think that God gave us Christ in our lives so that we can grow and be better in each of these areas. I’ve heard this taught many times that our goal is to become better husbands, better fathers, and better employees. That being a Christian makes us better in all of these relationships. That is partially true, but thinking that way gets the order wrong.

The whole focus of all these relationships is Christ. God

the Father didn't give me Christ so that I could be a better husband. He gave me a wife so that I could love Christ more. God didn't send his Son so that I could be a better parent. He gave me kids so that I could know the love of a Father in a different way. He isn't Lord so that I can be a better boss. He gives me a boss, so I can understand him as Lord. The ultimate goal is Christ; knowing God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the goal. It's a spiritual, cosmic, and unearthly goal. So God has given us material, normal, and earthly relationships to help us along.

Let's face it—we're simple people. It's hard to understand the mystery of God in Christ. So God helps us by giving us things we can understand. As hard as it is to be a good parent, it's easier to understand the love of a Father when I feel that love and suffer the betrayal of disobedience. As hard as it is to love my wife as Christ loved the church, it's easier to understand the passion of love when I experience it with another person.

So what Paul is saying is that each of these relationships has something to do with our relationship with Christ. It's all connected; all woven together. Being a wife, a husband, a parent, a child, an employee, or a boss—connects you with who Christ is in a different way.

When I was in high school, I played the alto saxophone. I was fairly serious about it. I took private lessons and played in a jazz ensemble. So at one point my instructor told me to start playing clarinet as well. He said that learning a different instrument would help my ability in saxophone. So I did. I spent a year playing it in an effort to be a better saxophone player. It would have been easy to get distracted and start seeing clarinet as a goal in itself. Lots of people played clarinet to play clarinet. But not me; my goal was to be a better saxophone player.

That's what Paul is getting at here. Walking in the mystery of Christ is played out in our everyday life; defining relationships. And somehow, as we do that, we are further and deeper connected with the mystery of Christ. Everything connects in the end. It all comes together. Our job is to remember that the ultimate goal is Christ. That's where everything is centered. We can't get distracted and have grandiose plans of being a concert clarinetist. We want to be a better saxophone player. We want to know Christ.

Conclusion

We have covered a lot of ground today. We started off by looking at a movie scene that showed one way of how we might bring Christianity into our home. It was pretty easy to conclude that this wasn't what we wanted. As we've looked at these instructions, we can see that what we saw was a gross misunderstanding of what it looks like to walk in the mystery of Christ. That example didn't bring the family together nor did it highlight Christ in any way at all.

In this passage, we've seen Paul focus on three sets of defining relationships: husbands and wives; parents and children; employers and employees. We've seen his concern for those who didn't have power in their culture. We've seen him emphasize mutuality within marriage; love and submission woven together in passion and trust. We've seen the characterization of family as heavily relational: children trying to obey their parents; parents trying to help them obey and grow in their relationships. We've seen Paul redefine the structure of the workplace. He's taken the focus of both the employee and the boss off of the work itself and the compensation involved. Their eyes have been lifted to see the Lord as primary. The employee works for the inheritance of Christ. The boss manages under the ultimate authority of Christ.

In the midst of all of this, we have seen Christ at the center. What we're trying to learn about is how to walk in the mystery of Christ. Each of these relationships gives us a clue. They teach us a new aspect of what that looks like. Part of the surprise is that what sounds cosmic: the mystery of walking in Christ is played out in mundane ways. The other part of the surprise is that what sounds mundane is actually quite cosmic: it's all about learning to love Christ.

So we're left this morning with a huge, complicated, and beautiful mess. We leave from here into our families, our workplaces, and our friendships. Into those relationships, we carry the mystery of walking in Christ. Somehow the truth of God and the identity of his Son radiates out into the world. We carry that truth in our everyday lives and each of our relationships. Through those very earthly relationships, a cosmic truth is experienced and proclaimed. Christ is all. Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen and Amen.