

Karl Valentin was born in Munich, Germany, in 1882 and starred in many silent films in the 1920’s. He was also a performing artist who was part of that rare group we call clowns. The scene for which he is best remembered took place on a darkened stage illumined only by a solitary circle of light emanating from a streetlight. Valentin, with long-drawn face and deeply worried expression, walks around and around this circle of light, desperately looking for something. A policeman enters the scene and asks, “What have you lost?” “The key to my house,” replies the clown. The policeman then joins the search, but they find nothing. After a while, the policeman inquires, “Are you sure that you lost it here?” “No,” says the clown, pointing to a dark corner of the stage, “over there.” “Then why on earth are you looking for it here?” asks the policeman. He replies, “There is no light over there.”

Clowns are not only performers, but they are also instructors who teach us by their ridiculous parables and by enacting absurd expressions of our human frailty in their performances. Valentin’s parable is a picture of the snare in which we could easily become entangled. We are drawn to whatever promise of light is available. Not unlike the Colossians, we respond to explanations that appeal to a scientific approach or offers of salvation that make us and our interests the priority, to any philosophy that defines the unknown and closes all the gaps of mystery. So, Paul offers a warning: “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ*” (v. 8).

In this section Paul is contending that the Treasure is a person, not a philosophy. His argument goes against all those who would potentially “*take you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy*” (v. 4). The Treasure in Paul’s view is the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the fullness to fill our emptiness. Paul is not anti-intellectual, nor is he an enemy of philosophy. He is one of the great minds of the ages. He simply knew that as important as they are, information and knowledge are not the answer to meaning in life. We do not philosophize our way to reality. A living relationship with Jesus Christ, not mental assent to dogma or doctrinal propositions, is the foundation for the Christian life. This does not mean we can be sloppy in our thinking; the world demands and deserves the best thinking of which we are capable. But right thinking does not make us righteous. Only the cross can do that. Right thinking that is right in the sense of being hard, honest, clear, and disciplined, is essential if we are going to communicate the Gospel effectively to a huge segment of the world.

The Confession of 1967 states: “Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (9.03). Though we American Christians make much of our personal Christian experience, we also must join Scripture and reason to our personal experience when we approach theology. Paul is not demeaning philosophy, great learning, or intellectual growth; he was warning against the subtle mixing of Christian thought with false philosophy, and the effort to syncretize the Christian message with the vogue philosophy of the day. He was also warning the Colossians against succumbing to the false thinking that regulations and practices of religion are what provide meaning.

Jean Morrison, a mainstay at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Riverton, NJ, was hosting Jayne and me for lunch soon after I had begun my field education at the church. As soon as we sat down for lunch, we heard the doorbell ring. Jean could see a young couple standing at the door. She recognized them as Jehovah’s Witnesses, so she immediately said, “Karl, the doorbell is for you.” After exchanging a few pleasantries with the young man, he asked, “How could Jesus be the Son of God when in John 17 he prayed to the Father?” I responded with something like, “How can he not be the Son of God, when he said in John’s Gospel, “I and the Father are one?” We would have debated longer had I not explained I was not the resident of the house but a guest, and our lunch was waiting. Before leaving they handed me literature that I put in the circular file.

I don’t think we have ever had Jehovah Witnesses knock on the door of our home, but today all of us are inundated with all kinds of media and with myriad offers to fill our emptiness. This flood of media propaganda is comprised of philosophies of life that usually glamorize self-indulgence; self-realization; or materialism that reduces us to what we consume. Yet we are complete in Christ, says Paul. Having Christ, we have all we need. The complete being of God is revealed in Jesus Christ; in him we appropriate his fullness for ourselves when we yield ourselves to the indwelling Christ. There is another great truth in chapter two: We Christians are the channel through which the presence and power of the indwelling Christ flows to others and to the world. How does this happen? It happens in two ways:

Prayer. Imagine how the Colossians must have felt receiving this letter from the Apostle. Their hearts must have beat faster, a surge of power must have flooded their lives, light began to illumine their minds, formerly darkened by the confusion of conflicting teachings and deceitful words. The quality of Paul’s concern and prayers for them had become a channel of grace.

Get the picture? Epaphras had sent word to Paul in prison about the crisis of faith and practice with which the Colossians were wrestling. This started Paul's mind wondering and his heart aching for them, most of whom he had never met before. Different translations capture the degree of his concern. "*For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you*" in the RSV; "*For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you*" in the NRSV; "*I want you to know how much I have agonized for you*" in the NLT. The Greek word used is *agōn*, meaning to have a struggle, and from it we derive our word "agony." Paul agonized in prayer. It is the image of 1:29, strenuously striving (*agōnizomai*), which means to "contend" or "fight." He's not making small talk, not sending a shallow "I'm thinking of you" message which is as deep as many of us are willing to go in our concern even for family and friends. This is deep intercession, prolonged, penetrating, time and energy-consuming, emotion-draining, prayer that is a channel for the mystery of the fullness of God in Christ to fill the needs of other believers.

Prayer is the vital vocation of all Christian people. God has given us the privilege of sharing in his work in the world in this way. Scripture testifies and history confirms that the Lord has arranged his Kingdom so that blessings and power for us are to a great degree dependent upon the prayers of others. What does that tell us about our praying? I wonder. If the blessings and power of God for others are dependent upon us, who is it that may be getting cheated?

In verse 2 Paul prays that the Colossians will be "*encouraged*," that they will be "*united in love*," so that they may have the "*full riches of complete understanding*." Who needs our intercessions to this end? There is an awesome challenge in the fact that Paul agonized in prayer "*for all who have not met me personally*" (2:1). To pray for our loved ones and friends when they are in desperate need of our prayers is one thing; but to pray for those we do not even know, that is something requiring a much deeper commitment than most of us can muster. Just imagine the residual source of power from people and churches around the world praying for each other, *agonizing* for the cause of Christ as Paul contended for the Colossians. The second way we convey Christ is...

Presence. Not only are our prayers the channel through which the presence and power of Jesus flows into the life of others and the world, our personal presence is likewise a channel. Paul urges the Colossians, "*Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him*" (v. 6). Through our prayers and in *our presence* the mystery of the indwelling Christ is communicated.

Way back in 1954, Mike Dowe wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* about Chaplain Emil Kapaun, a prisoner of war, whose life conveyed the mystery of the indwelling Christ simply through his *presence*. Dowe wrote: “In his soiled and ragged fatigues, with his scraggly beard and woolen cap made of the sleeve of an old GI sweater pushed down over his ears, he looked like any other half-starved prisoner. But there was something in his voice that was different. A dignity, a composure, a serenity that radiated from him like a light. Wherever he stood was holy ground and his spirit within him—a spirit of reverence and abiding faith—went out to the silent, listening men and gave them hope and courage and a sense of peace by his very presence. Somehow, he could turn a stinking louse-ridden mud hut into a cathedral for a little while.

On the day they took him away to his death the chaplain made no protest. He looked around the room at all of us standing there and smiled. “Tell them back home that I died a happy death,” he said, and he smiled again. As they loaded him on the litter, he turned to Lieutenant Nardella from whose missal he had read the services. He put the little book in Nardella’s hand. “You know the prayers, Ralph” he said. “Keep holding the services and don’t let them make you stop.” Then he turned to all of us and said I’m going where I’ve always wanted to go and when I get there, I’ll say a prayer for all of you.”

The Treasure that is the person of Jesus Christ is conveyed through our personal presence with others. Like a map locked in a dusty cupboard for ages, God’s mysterious plan was once hidden. But now it has come to light through Jesus the Messiah. Paul is in possession of a treasure map, so to speak, and he is inviting as many people as possible to come with him to find the Treasure.

If we are drawn to whatever light is easily available, not unlike the Colossians, we will probably lose our way. We will respond to philosophies that appeal to a type of salvation that makes us and our interests the priority. Even though the world’s libraries and the Internet contain mountains of data and information, Paul says in Colossians 2 that we will never find the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in any other place except in Christ the Lord. Here’s the reality: Jesus is the Treasure we are all searching for. “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness*” Paul says in vv. 9-10.

Let us then strive for the faith Paul longed to see in the Colossians through our prayers and our presence. Glory to God! Amen.