Conflict as Opportunity
Blueprint for a Spiritual Practice
Table of Contents

SECTION I
The Colossian Forum Mission in Action ....................... 1

SECTION II
The Essence of The Colossian Way ............................ 7

SECTION III
The Colossian Way Curriculum Overview .................... 13

SECTION IV
The Colossian Way Curriculum Sample
of the Origins Participant Guide .............................. 17

SECTION V
The Colossian Way Curriculum Sample
of the Sexuality Participant Guide ............................ 49
SECTION I

The Colossian Forum
Mission in Action
Why The Colossian Forum?
The church is shrinking in the west, its positive contribution to the wider culture is in decline, and young people are leaving in droves. Why? It is, at least in part, because in the face of today’s messiest cultural conflicts the church just doesn’t “smell like Jesus.”

Our Mission
To equip leaders to transform cultural conflicts into opportunities for spiritual growth and witness.

Our Vision
A Christian community that acts Christian, especially in the face of conflict.

Our Commitments

- **Jesus**: Since Jesus is Lord, we can be a people of sacrificial love and faith, not fear.
- **Church**: The Body of Christ belongs together as a people of worship and hope.
- **Generations**: Old and young build each other up by walking and talking together in faith.
- **Conflict**: We accept divisive cultural issues as catalysts for faithfulness.
- **Obedience**: Love of God and neighbor, especially when things get hard.
- **Formation**: Christ is making us into the people he longs for us to be.
- **Evangelism**: Share the good news of the gospel’s power today, especially in the midst of conflict.
The Colossian Forum’s mission is expressed through the following programs and resources developed to ignite a culture change within the church and its related communities.

**Forums, Events, and Workshops**

We provide guided opportunities for worship-filled spaces of Christ-honoring conversations around culturally divisive “hot button” issues. Instead of explosive polarization, participants can glimpse a deeper vision for our unity in Christ as they observe how relationships are deepened in the midst of conflict. These events embody the truth and promise of Colossians 1:17, that “all things hold together in Christ”—including the church.

**Books and Resources**

[colossianforum.org/books](http://colossianforum.org/books)

We create and use resources that model Christ-honoring engagement across difference. Books like *The Fool and the Heretic* (Zondervan, 2019), *All Things Hold Together in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2018), and *Evolution and the Fall* (Eerdmans, 2017) beautifully demonstrate this intentionality to topics of significance in faith, theology, and the study of science.

The Colossian Way

colossianforum.org/tcw

The Colossian Way is a small group experience designed to help Christians of all ages engage difficult questions in ways that build up love of God and neighbor. Churches or Christian schools engage in a ten-session experience where cross-generational, diverse, and often deeply divided participants engage conflict within a thoughtful and richly theological process that includes prayer, worship, and lament. Our vision is that of a growing “community of practice”—people who together embody both truth and love in ways that reflect Christ in a polarized world.

TeachFASTly
teachFASTly.com

TeachFASTly is a rich teaching resource developed in response to the questions: Could there be a way of exploring the intersection of faith and science that is hopeful rather than fearful? What does it look like to teach science well in this context? The result is a robust compendium of teaching activities, essays, and book reviews that encourage the best teaching practices within the context of Christian faithfulness.
The Essence of The Colossian Way
The Colossian Way is a discipleship practice in which a small group of people meet over ten sessions to engage a difficult issue. The small group engagement within The Colossian Way works to deepen the group’s understanding of differences while growing love for God and neighbor while also making progress on the difficult issue at hand. The experience rests on the conviction that Christ holds all things together (Colossians 1:17).

People’s default approach to complex problems is typically to choose sides and go to battle, or stay at a distance from one another. The Colossian Way experience is designed to help Christians across generations to engage difficult questions through a prayerful series of encounters in which people work to listen more deeply to God and each other.

How The Colossian Way Works

- We gather Christians who disagree and confess that all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17)
- We lean into the reality of Christian unity
- We humble ourselves before God, asking for help as we engage the issue
- We listen to varied experts on the issue
- We attend to Scripture and the resources of the faith
- We learn to listen and talk across difference
- We offer to God our praise, lament, and hope

The Result: witnessing the Body of Christ coming to life, offering a new way of being for the world

Materials and Resources

Since the design of The Colossian Way is unique, we paid particular attention to both the group materials we offer and the training and support we provide for leaders. Through several pilot groups we developed a theologically rooted, practical curriculum as well as a robust training and coaching experience to support each Colossian Way small group.

Small groups typically consist of 12-14 participants who represent a microcosm of the local church in all of its diversity concerning a specific topic. Each of the ten sessions over the course of The Colossian Way experience takes approximately 90 minutes and follows this pattern:

Start 15 MIN.
Introduce the topic, remember the goals, acknowledge God’s presence, listen to a participant share some of their story

Unity 20 MIN.
Learn and practice one truth that supports the work

Prayer 10 MIN.
Seek God’s help for the work

Engage 40 MIN.
Enter the messy conflict around the topic

Godward 5 MIN.
Bring what has happened back to God in praise, lament, and hope
Materials and Resources (continued)
Currently, we offer small group curricula on origins, political talk, and sexuality. As seen on the previous page, only about half of each session’s time is spent on the particular topic at hand. This is intentional because we are working not only on questions concerning that topic, but also on becoming the kind of people who can work on these questions well. Thus, this pattern (over time) builds a larger Christian practice of engaging conflict while growing spiritually.

Training and Support
Training is central to implementing a Colossian Way group. We set aside two days for leader training, and ask that two leaders from each small group attend. Trained leaders also become part of a community of leaders who are given the opportunity to gather at key points during The Colossian Way journey to support one another through sharing their experiences, relying on each other for help, and celebrating what God is doing in their groups. Individualized coaching is also available upon request for leaders who would like extra support as they lead their group through The Colossian Way.

Leader Training Fee
We have invested a great deal in developing The Colossian Way for impact and effectiveness. We ask that faith communities pay a fee to share a portion of the cost to train two leaders from their community in The Colossian Way. Please visit colossianforum.org/tcw for more information.

Ready to Practice?
Those practicing The Colossian Way testify to meaningful transformation in how they engage divisive issues and, more importantly, people with whom they disagree. Through time and continued investment in the rich practices of the faith, people are experiencing spiritual growth in small, but significant ways. It takes patience, humility, joy, and the other fruit of the Spirit to faithfully remain in conflictual spaces. We invite you into our community of those practicing and being formed by The Colossian Way of engaging conflict. Are you ready to join us?

Getting Started
If you would like to learn more about The Colossian Way including finding out about upcoming leader training opportunities, we invite you to contact us or visit our website.

Phone: 616-328-6016 ext. 7
Email: tcw@colossianforum.org
URL: www.colossianforum.org/tcw
SECTION III

The Colossian Way
Curriculum Overview
Curriculum Overview and Sample

On the next page, find an overview of The Colossian Way curriculum for the origins and sexuality topics. In sections IV and V that follow, find samples from the first three sessions of the Participant Guides on the origins and sexuality topics.

The Colossian Way small group curriculum consists of ten 90-minute sessions. Each session includes two phases for engagement. After beginning with an awareness of God’s presence and taking time to get to know one another, the Unity phase facilitates a space in which Christians can truthfully and lovingly work together on a matter concerning our Christian unity. The Engage phase addresses a particular aspect of the complex range of origins or sexuality questions. A consistent prayer forms bridges between these phases and makes explicit our dependence upon God to work on these questions well. Each session closes with prayerful reflection on how we’ve done in living out our faithfulness to Christ during our time together.

The goal of The Colossian Way curriculum is less to solve a specific issue once and for all, and more an opportunity to build a capacity for working on important questions in a way that reflects faithful obedience to Christ. The Colossian Way is intended to be a spiritual discipline that enables Christians to engage conflict and difference as a catalyst for growth in faith and witness.
What difference does it make how human beings came to be?

Read the first few chapters of Genesis and picture “the way things began” in your mind. Then listen to a mainstream scientific description of “the way things began.” The two pictures are jarringly different. Can both be true? As we bring these depictions together, there are implications for our understanding of science and the Christian faith.

In this session, we’ll start naming the current issues around creation and evolution, as well as our concerns.
Why We’re Here
We will disagree about origins questions here, but we hope to do something refreshingly different from copying the culture wars we see all around us. That doesn’t mean ignoring our differences or all coming to agreement as traditionalists or progressives. But by God’s grace it will be something that displays the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Goals of The Colossian Way
- Gather Christians together
- Practice loving God and neighbor while engaging difficult problems
- Witness the body of Christ built up

Invocation and Confession
Leader: God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

All: May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God. Amen.
(Psalms 19:14)

Leader: In Christ all things hold together.
(Colossians 1:17)

All: When we speak the truth in love, we grow as Christ’s body.
(Ephesians 4:15)
Fear
When difficult questions confront us, our fear drives us as we get angry, anxious, and withdrawn.

When we affirm Colossians 1:17, “In Christ all things hold together,” we no longer need to be afraid and defensive. We get to join Jesus as he holds things together.

1 John 4
A reading of selected verses from 1 John 4:

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.
The Origins Issues

Sometimes creation and evolution debates seem like a holdover from a past century. But tempers flare whenever the unsettled and difficult questions arise again. We’ll discuss a news report about a conflict over an evangelical Bible scholar’s acceptance of evolution.

Praise
Giving thanks to God

Lament
What is going wrong

Hope
Looking toward the future
SESSION 2 Meet a Young-Earth Creationist
Is it possible to be a young-earth creationist and a real scientist?

Those who accept evolution often answer “No.” Many find it difficult to imagine that someone committed to a young-earth creationist position could take science seriously. Critics of young-earth creationists often ridicule them as scientifically naïve. That might be easy to do from a distance, but spending time with one who is thoughtful and articulate reveals that there is more to the story.

In this session, we’ll meet Todd Wood, a young-earth creationist whose scientific credentials are top notch.
Why We’re Here
Last time we explored some of our fears around the origins issues. We’ve begun the work of engaging this difficult topic together as a Christian community. We’ll review The Colossian Way’s goals as we remember that this is all about pursuing faithfulness in the midst of difficulty.

Goals of The Colossian Way
- **Gather** Christians together
- **Practice** loving God and neighbor while engaging difficult problems
- **Witness** the body of Christ built up

Invocation and Confession
*Leader:* God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

*All:* May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God. Amen.
((Psalm 19:14))

*Leader:* In Christ all things hold together.
((Colossians 1:17))

*All:* When we speak the truth in love, we grow as Christ’s body.
((Ephesians 4:15))
Setting the Goals

How can Christians be one body when difficult issues separate us? Getting full agreement is a far-off goal. What can we do now? How should we live today as we seek to be faithful in the midst of these questions? We need to set the proper goals.

Revelation 21:1-5

1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” 5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”
Meet a Young-Earth Creationist

Young-Earth Creationism (YEC) emphasizes “creation”—that God has acted to make everything—and that this happened relatively recently: thousands of years ago, not millions, much less billions. Many Christians hold this belief, despite it contradicting widely-accepted scientific theories.

Praise
Giving thanks to God

Lament
What is going wrong

Hope
Looking toward the future
SESSION 3 Meet an Evolutionary Creationist
Is it possible to accept evolution and be a real Christian?

Those who reject evolution often answer “No.” They say Christians shouldn’t accept evolution because the idea of a single cell giving rise to humanity over billions of years contradicts the testimony of Genesis that God created all of life over several days. Evolution’s account is filled with suffering, struggle, and death from the very beginning of life. Can this be squared with the account in Genesis of God’s very good creation only going wrong with the Fall of Adam and Eve?

In this session, we’ll meet Darrel Falk, a Christian biologist who believes God created through an evolutionary process.
Why We’re Here
Why do we often avoid difficult questions? Maybe we’re afraid we’ll get angry at each other. In this group, we’re exercising the muscles of patience and humility as we deepen our confidence that Christ is shaping us into a body that fits him.

Goals of The Colossian Way
- **Gather** Christians together
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- **Witness** the body of Christ built up

Invocation and Confession
**Leader:** God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

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**All:** When we speak the truth in love, we grow as Christ’s body.

(Ephesians 4:15)
Christian Unity

The primary mark of Christian unity isn’t the absence of conflict. Christians have always differed over important issues. We are unified when we live with humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance toward one another, even in the midst of important disagreements. These things maintain the unity that Jesus has achieved.

John 14:1, 23-27

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled.

23 “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

25 “All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”
Meet an Evolutionary Creationist

According to Evolutionary Creationism (EC), God created life as described by mainstream scientific accounts: a single cell evolved into humans over billions of years. While the Bible does not describe things this way, evolutionary creationists do not believe the Bible is wrong or unreliable.

Praise

Giving thanks to God

Lament

What is going wrong

Hope

Looking toward the future
SECTION V
The Colossian Way
Sexuality Curriculum Sample
SESSION 1 The Sexuality Issues
LGBTQ persons are no longer distant. They are our friends, our family, and us.

American culture is rapidly swinging from rejecting to affirming non-traditional sexualities. Churches have become battlegrounds as pressure rises on Christians to reverse longstanding condemnation of homosexual behavior. Recognized experts speak powerfully on both sides of the issues and many of us are left angry, confused, or cynical. What might faithfulness to Christ look like in this time?

In this session, we’ll start naming the current issues around sexuality and our concerns.
Why We’re Here
We will disagree about sexuality questions here, but we hope to do something refreshingly different from copying the culture wars we see all around us. That doesn’t mean ignoring our differences or all coming to agreement as traditionalists or progressives. But by God’s grace it will be something that displays the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Invocation and Confession
Leader: God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

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All: When we speak the truth in love, we grow as Christ’s body.
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Goals of The Colossian Way
• Gather Christians together
• Practice loving God and neighbor while engaging difficult problems
• Witness the body of Christ built up
Fear
When difficult questions confront us, our fear drives us as we get angry, anxious, and withdrawn.

When we affirm Colossians 1:17, “In Christ all things hold together,” we no longer need to be afraid and defensive. We get to join Jesus as he holds things together.

1 John 4
A reading of selected verses from 1 John 4:

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.
The Sexuality Issues

From Supreme Court decisions, to LGBTQ testimonials, to controversies in churches and the public square, everyone seems to be talking about—and fighting over—sexuality questions. We’ll discuss a news report about evangelical Christians who affirm same-sex relationships.

Praise

Giving thanks to God

Lament

What is going wrong

Hope

Looking toward the future
SESSION 2 Meet a Gay Christian
Can “gay” and “Christian” go together?

Christianity demands a life of disciplined, monogamous, self-sacrificial love. For some, the word “gay” implies unrestrained, promiscuous, abusive, and unnatural sexual activity. Some think one person cannot be both “gay” and “Christian.” But things are more complex than that. There is no single pattern for the way people follow Jesus when they live with exclusive and unchanging attraction to the same sex.

*In this session, we’ll meet Tim Otto, a celibate gay Christian pastor whose story challenges many stereotypes.*
Why We’re Here

Last time we explored some of our fears around the sexuality issues. We’ve begun the work of engaging this difficult topic together as a Christian community. We’ll review The Colossian Way’s goals as we remember that this is all about pursuing faithfulness in the midst of difficulty.

Invocation and Confession

Leader: God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

All: May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

Leader: In Christ all things hold together. (Colossians 1:17)

All: When we speak the truth in love, we grow as Christ’s body. (Ephesians 4:15)

Goals of The Colossian Way

- Gather Christians together
- Practice loving God and neighbor while engaging difficult problems
- Witness the body of Christ built up

Session Planner

Start 15 MINUTES
Unity 20 MINUTES
Prayer 10 MINUTES
Engage 40 MINUTES
Godward 5 MINUTES
Setting the Goals
How can Christians be one body when difficult issues separate us? Getting full agreement is a far-off goal. What can we do now? How should we live today as we seek to be faithful in the midst of these questions? We need to set the proper goals.

Revelation 21:1-5
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Meet a Gay Christian
Those of us who are attracted to the same sex are not objects of debate. All of us are made in the image of God. All of us desire to be known. Many church-goers have never knowingly talked with a gay Christian. Today we can meet Tim Otto.

Praise
Giving thanks to God

Lament
What is going wrong

Hope
Looking toward the future
SESSION 3 Meet a Concerned Traditionalist
Is it possible to be conservative and care about LGBTQ people?

There’s a caricature of someone holding the traditional view of marriage as an old, white, straight man who has his head in the sand, completely ignorant of LGBTQ people and their realities. But conservative people and their stances don’t all fit this picture. Nor should they be quickly dismissed. There’s a lot at stake here, not just for society, but for Christian commitments to God’s authority over our sexual ethics.

In this session, we’ll meet Nate Collins, a gay Christian who holds a traditional view of marriage.
Why We’re Here

Why do we often avoid difficult questions? Maybe we’re afraid we’ll get angry at each other. In this group, we’re exercising the muscles of patience and humility as we deepen our confidence that Christ is shaping us into a body that fits him.

Invocation and Confession

Leader: God is present in our gathering. Let us testify together to our desire to be faithful in all that we do.

All: May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God. Amen.

(Psalm 19:14)

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Goals of The Colossian Way

• Gather Christians together
• Practice loving God and neighbor while engaging difficult problems
• Witness the body of Christ built up
Christian Unity

The primary mark of Christian unity isn’t the absence of conflict. Christians have always differed over important issues. We are unified when we live with humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance toward one another, even in the midst of important disagreements. These things maintain the unity that Jesus has achieved.

John 14:1, 23-27

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23 “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

25 “All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”
Meet a Concerned Traditionalist

As the culture champions LGBTQ rights, those of us who are conservative often feel our concerns aren’t being heard. Resisting or rejecting progressive victories comes off as bigoted and hateful. Conservatives have stories, too, and these views reflect important wisdom. Nate Collins wants us to care for LGBTQ people without sacrificing traditional ideas of marriage.

Praise
Giving thanks to God

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What is going wrong

Hope
Looking toward the future