

“A Good Church”
Colossians 1:3-8

January 12, 2014

SI: We’re studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians this winter.

Many commentaries point out that the church in Colossae was the least important church to which Paul ever wrote a letter. The city of Colossae was a backwater. It didn’t hold a candle to Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi—and certainly not to Rome. Those were all major cities.

And it’s also been pointed out that Paul’s strategy was to plant flagship churches in major cities that would multiply and plant churches in lesser cities and towns. For that reason, he had not personally visited Colossae.

It was too small a city for his strategy.

The Colossian church was apparently started through the influence of the church in Ephesus about 100 miles away.

The Colossian church as a small church in a small town.

So it was probably easy for them to get the idea they didn’t have much going on.

They weren’t like the big churches in the big cities.

That sense of being small and unimportant might have been one of the reasons they were susceptible to this teaching, the Colossian heresy, we talked about last week.

People who were saying: If you really want to be a church that gets it, a church where things are happening—then this is what you need.

Paul is going to get to that teaching later on in his letter and demolish it.

But here, in these opening words he’s reassuring them. He’s building them up. So let’s look at Paul’s compliments to this little church in these verses, and let’s use them to evaluate ourselves.

And to think about what God is doing in our church.

INTRO: The funeral director in my home town of Tusculum was a funny man. When he was with a grieving family he was appropriately solemn.

But whenever you ran into him in other settings, he was one of those men who had a litany of standard jokes. And one of his standard jokes was whenever anyone would ask him how his work was going, he would shake his head and say: Business is just dead.

I think if you had asked the Colossians how things were going in their church, they wouldn't have said dead, but you would have heard a general sense of dissatisfaction. They would have shaken their heads and said: We're just missing something. We're not the dynamic church we should be. We're not the passionate church we should be.

Dynamic and passionate weren't the popular buzz words in Christian circles back then, like they are now. The popular buzz word was full, fullness.

How's your church going? How are things in Colossae?

I don't know. It just seems like we just don't have the fullness.

We're not the full church that we should be.

That seems to have been what the teachers of the Colossian heresy were saying.

Our little church is ok, but we don't want to be just ok. We want to be full.

We have a new teaching and a new emphasis that will give us the fullness.

Well here comes a letter from the great Apostle Paul in the great city of Rome.

And right off the bat, you know what he says to these Christians in their little church in this backwater town? He says: I think you've got a great church.

I like your church. Your church makes me happy.

Whenever I hear about you and think about you, it makes me thank God and thank Jesus.

He goes on later to say: You don't need the fullness these people are saying you need in order to be a good church, you've already got the fullness you need.

You just need to see it and enjoy it and build upon it.

Of course there were problems in the Colossian church.

He gets to them later on in the letter.

But Paul's first, gut level response is that this is a good church.

And he tells them it's good for three reasons.

Let's look at those three reasons, and as I've already said, let's see how Christ Covenant stacks up.

But before I say any more, I want to give credit where credit is due. I listened to a sermon on this passage by my old seminary friend Charles Garland. Charles is the pastor of Ivy Creek Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. And his insights were very helpful to me.

MP#1 A good church has good news.

It's in verse 5. After telling them how thankful and happy they make him, Paul says, "you have heard the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world, this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." The gospel is one of those words that we use a lot but don't define enough. The word gospel itself means good news. Paul calls it here the word of truth, and he refers to it as God's grace in all its truth.

The gospel is a message. It's news. I love the way Paul Miller put it. The bad news is I'm more wicked and sinful than I ever dared to admit. The good news is I'm more loved and accepted in Christ than I ever dared hope. When you believe that, when it sinks in deep, the simultaneous truth of your great sin and God's greater grace, it makes you humble and confident at same times. It fills you with hope and joy in Christ.

The gospel's not just the beginning of the Christian life, it's whole Christian life. You're never done with the Gospel. You believe it, claim it, and apply it in those all the days of your life. Later on in this letter, chapter 2:6 we finally come to Paul's theme verse. "So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him." See, it's not something new or different. The way you become a Christian is the way you live as a Christian. Or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: "This is of first importance, Christ died for our sins." For the Apostle, the Gospel was always to be of first importance.

The problem in the Colossian church was that there were sophisticated people saying—the gospel is Kindergarten. We're ready to move on to the deep stuff. If you want fullness, there is something more. Deeper, more spiritual teachings. But Paul says in these opening words: What's great about your church is that the gospel is at the heart of what you believe and preach and talk about. Keep it that way.

Now, there are lots of things that Christians disagree about—big things.

There are several churches on St. Joseph—why isn't there just one church?

Why isn't it just our church?

Well, let's take the church just up the road: Spirit Life Church of God.

I was friends with the former pastor, Andrew Ball.

We had big differences over the Holy Spirit and gifts of the spirit.

Those differences big enough that we have to have two churches.

I won't get into whether that is good or bad—that's the way it is.

The important thing is that if you asked Pastor Ball: What's the main thing?

He wouldn't say speaking in tongues. He would say the Gospel.

Let's go down St. Joseph to next church: Free Will Baptist Church.

Don't know the minister there—parents sent to Free Will Baptist School 5 years.

Thing I remember as a little Presbyterian boy was not the free will part as much as

but their specific beliefs about modesty and sobriety.

None of those specific things were emphasized in my church—

even though we also believed in modesty and sobriety.

And those different opinions about Christian behavior so strong, different churches.

But if you asked the pastor there, Brother Tom Malone, What's the main thing?

He wouldn't have said: Main thing is Christians shouldn't drink wine.

He would have said, the main thing is the Gospel.

Here's the point. The loudest voice with which we speak must be the things

the church has most widely and historically believed. Gospel spread over world.

And we must speak about our distinctives with a softer voice.

Yes, we believe in Presbyterian church government, infant baptism,

doctrine of election—believe Bible teaches, that important. Ask me, I'll tell you.

But we want the Gospel to be the main thing.

That encourages me when I look at our church.

If you go to our children's Sunday school or to Covenant Kids,

you don't hear our children being taught that the most important thing is keeping

our particular list of rules. Be a good boy or girl and you get a star.

From their earliest years, our kids are taught that they are sinners who need Jesus.

And in our youth group, the ministry is not about distracting teenagers away from

drugs by hoopla and shaving cream fights. (Nothing wrong with that!)

Our youth have fun, but most important, Jonathan teaches them Bible and doctrine.

Some people might say that kind of serious approach runs kids off,

but what they are getting is the Gospel.

In our Adult Bible classes and in many of the Covenant Groups I've been in and in conversations, the approach is not a behavioral checklist.

Here's what you do to have a successful life, to have perfect marriage children.

I hear over and over the members of this congregation talking about themselves as messed up, deeply flawed people, and that it takes an invasion by Jesus and his Holy Spirit to change us.

That's a good church, a church that focus on the gospel—

I am more wicked and sinful than I ever dared to admit, and at the same time,

I am more loved and accepted in Christ than I ever dared to hope.

Let's keep it that way.

MP#2 A good church has good members.

It's full of people who have the gospel at work in their lives.

The way Paul summarizes this is with that famous triad—faith, hope and love. Paul doesn't say that when he hears about their church, the thing that makes him give thanks to God is that they have tons of programs and ministries. He doesn't say that he give thanks to God because they are a very busy congregation with lots of gifted and talented people.

He says that he gives thanks to God the Father of our Lord Christ because, vs. 4
“we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ.”

That's what made Paul happy.

A church full of members who have faith in Jesus Christ.

That seems so ordinary, doesn't it?

If someone said, tell me what you like about Christ Covenant.

Would you say? The first thing is that the members of our church have faith in Jesus Christ. What's so special about that?

But Paul thinks it is extraordinary. He thinks it's supernatural.

He says that he thanks God for their faith.

Faith in Christ is a miracle of God's grace.

It's a result of being regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Paul knew that whenever there is faith in Jesus Christ it is a miracle, so thanks God.

We don't have it in us to believe. We are dead to God. Incapable of faith.

So when you have a group of people who were spiritually dead, who have now been drawn together by faith in Christ, that's something to celebrate.

Then Paul says he's thankful for their love, vs. 4, “the love you have for all the saints.”

And that may be a bigger miracle, that you love the members of your church. I recently read the last volume of William Manchester's biography of Churchill, it covers Churchill's leadership during WWII.

As this biography traces all the politics in Great Britain during the war, I was struck by the enmity, resentment, competition of many in leadership. They were fellow Englishmen, they were serving in the same government, they were fighting the same enemy, fighting Nazis, yet in many cases they despised each other.

They maneuvered politically to harm each other, they gossiped, they snubbed—and Churchill himself was not above it. Even people who were loyal to him, he would cast them aside for trivial reasons and their careers would be ruined.

A church full of people who love each other and look after each other is amazing.

It's supernatural. Only happens when the gospel comes in and changes people. You don't have to look at our church too closely to see that under normal circumstances, this particular group of people wouldn't be together.

There are too many differences, socio-economic, personality, age differences.

It's amazing when you have a church full of people who love each other,, who try to care for each other as a family.

Then Paul says he's thankful for their hope. Verse 5. Their faith and love "springs from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven."

That means the things that really matter to you have changed because of Gospel.

It means you have a future orientation.

You know trials are temporary and what really matters is the future.

So as church members, you muddle through trials together.

We're living together in a fallen world with lots of sadness and disappointments.

But we go through it together in hope, looking forward to our inheritance.

Reminding each other all things work together for good for those who love God.

Is that hope just an ordinary thing? No, Paul says—it's amazing. Supernatural.

When you have a bunch of church members with that hope, have a good church.

Now don't think the Colossians had it all together.

They didn't. They had problems in their church. Paul gets to those problems.

There were fathers who were harsh and children who were rebelling.

There was marital discord. Greed, lust rearing ugly head. Bosses oppressive.

There was this theological problem of the Colossian heresy.

But Paul said: That's a good church because it has good members.

They know they're broken. They know they're not perfect.

But the Gospel is at work among them.

So that means when we evaluate our church, we need to use this criteria.

Paul doesn't evaluate with numbers, no reference to numbers at all.

He rejoices in the way the gospel is having its effect, changing them.

That's sometimes hard to measure. It's subtle. Changes in character over time.

It means that the secret to a good church is not something novel or exciting—
some new teaching or second blessing that is going to stir things up.

It's the grace of God, changing members so that trust Jesus more,

love each other more, and look ahead to heaven with a stronger hope.

I see that in Christ Covenant all the time.

MP#3 A good church has a good minister.

They had a good minister, Epaphras. But you can tell weren't too sure about that.

Paul calls him "our dear fellow servant who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf."

Epaphras had a few things going against him.

He was from there, he was a local boy from this backwater town of Colossae.

So he didn't have the star power of the ministers from the big city churches.

They knew him. He couldn't put on a show because they knew his weaknesses.

You know that verse that says a prophet is without honor in his hometown.

If you had asked about him they would have probably said:

Yes, he's our pastor. He's ok—I guess.

We've been listening to him preach since he was green behind the ears.

He's solid but he's no Apostle. He's certainly not like Apollos.

Have you heard that man preach?!

Look again at what Paul says about him. He's a faithful minister.

You know the phrase, Damning with faint praise.

Paul doesn't say: He's a brilliant communicator, he's a visionary leader.

He just says: He's faithful. But in Paul's mind, that's good.

That's what he's supposed to do.

Paul doesn't care if he's a brilliant communicator or a visionary leader.

He's faithfully preaching the gospel.

Years ago I was in a cabin on Lake Martin with some other young ministers and an older minister, Alan Carter. Alan said, preaching is like cooking. You don't remember many meals in your life— you remember a few really great meals and a few really bad ones. But most meals you don't remember at all. You might enjoy them at the time and then you forget about them. But the important thing is they fed you. Brothers, most of the time you're just cooking to feed people. Sermons are not memorable shows. They are just serving up the food.

But the problem in Colossae was that they had been watching the cooking channel. They had been hearing that there needed to be something more, something new, something exciting and stimulating. And they thought they must be missing out just getting Epaphras' faithful preaching week after week.

Paul says: Maybe he's not a brilliant communicator and visionary leader, but it doesn't matter. You're getting fed. God is using that faithful feeding to grow you. But if you are hearing and understanding the Gospel, and if you are growing in faith, hope, and love through his teaching—success.

How do you think about church?

I'm afraid that many evangelical Christians in America take the Gospel for granted when it comes to thinking about what makes a good church.

Yes, of course we believe the Gospel in our church.

Of course we know it's important to grow in faith, hope and love

And yes, we know faithful preaching is important.

But all that stuff is just basic, that's just assumed.

There are other things we need to have a really dynamic, passionate, full church.

We need the right worship style. We need exciting, relevant programs.

Paul is telling us that it's harder to keep the Gospel central than we think it is.

Because when the Gospel is central, we think about church differently.

Instead of asking: What's our church's worship style?

We ask: How much does worship style matter to our church?

Style is just style. If it mattered that much to God, he would tell us exactly what style to follow. Is the gospel more important to us than style?

Instead of asking: What's the church's children's program, or youth program?

How does the Gospel shape the way we raise our children?

How does the Gospel shape the expectations we place on our young people?

Instead of asking: What's the church's evangelistic method?

Is the good news of Jesus Christ warming our hearts toward our neighbors,
so that we want to know them and befriend them and hope to lead them to Jesus?

Do you see how profound this is?

When we work to make the Gospel central it completely changes the things
that we think are important in church and the way we judge whether or not
our church is a good church.

Once a year, I go to the General Assembly of our denomination, the PCA.

When I am there, I run into ministerial colleagues, old seminary friends,
other people I know. I haven't seen them in a year or more.

And they often ask me the same question.

How's it going at Christ Covenant? How are things going in Cullman?

How does a pastor answer that question?

On the one hand, I could make a pretty good case that things are horrible.

I could focus on problems, sins, wandering and wayward sheep—
the things and people that make me awake at night.

I could tell about my own weakness as a pastor and my bad decisions.

But on the other hand, I could make the case that things are very good.

I see people growing in grace. I see evidence the Holy Spirit is at work.

I see expressions of love and generosity in this body over and over.

I hear you all talking about the things that matter,
how God's grace and the Gospel applies to all of life.

And that's the way Paul teaches us to see things.

If we are going to model ourselves on Paul's inspired, apostolic teaching
then we need to see things his way when we look at our church.

We need to focus on the Gospel, it's supernatural effect in our lives,
and the power of the word to feed us.

That means we should be quick to say:

How are things going at Christ Covenant?

They're going well. I thank God for my good church.