

# In Praise of the Church

## Colossians 1:1-8

*Russ Kennedy*

When you admire a church, what do you appreciate about it?

The centrality of Christ is seen in the graces that are praised in the church at Colossae. There is a proper and Biblically authentic way to honor people that also honors Christ.

One writer sets the stage for this book like this: (Lucas, p. 26-27)

<It appears that high among Paul's aims in writing this letter was that of reassuring the loyal believers at Colossae as to their proper standing as Christians, and to confirm the accuracy of the message brought to them by Epaphras.

Evidently the influence of the new teaching was unsettling on both counts. Its effect had been to raise painful doubts among the young Christians as to whether or not Epaphras had given them the whole truth, that is, a full and complete gospel. Should it turn out that he had failed them in this, the question must inevitably arise as to whether they were equipped with a full and proper experience of the new life in the Spirit.>

Paul's praise of the church, which is centered on Christ and gospel, is meant to assure them of the reality of their experience with Christ.

### **In Shaping his Salutation (v.1-2)**

Christ centered praise of the church shapes how Paul opens his letter. This is how the gospel connected them.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup>To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

#### **From Paul's Position (v.1)**

Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus. This is both an office and description. He is one of the apostles of the Lord. He was called and commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's ministry and office were bound up in Christ Jesus.

He did not assume this office on his own initiative. He was an apostle because of God's will, God's initiative. In Galatians 1, Paul expands on what he is thinking when he uses this short form here and in other letters. To be an apostle by God's will means that he has been called and placed into that office by God. He was taught directly by the Lord, probably in the Arabian desert. He did not get his office or his theology from consultation with other men, even other apostles. He received both, by God's will, directly from Jesus Christ.

#### **With Their Relationship (v.2a)**

The letter is written to the saints, to the sanctified or holy ones. This is always how the New Testament thinks of Christians. With one possible exception, the New Testament never addresses believers as "sinners". We are always called "saints". That is not to say that we do not sin. But it is to say that being a sinner is to be *outside of Christ*. To be a saint is to be *in Christ*. These words are used to describe our character and our condition. Even a sinner's good deeds are unacceptable before God. This is the great problem for an unbeliever. There is nothing you can do to be accepted in Christ. What you are required to do is to believe and bow to Jesus because of His redeeming work on the cross. Then, the gospel tells you and promises you that you are now a saint. Will you sin? Sure. But now you have been

made holy by God's saving work. You have access to the forgiveness for sinning through confession of sin (1 John 1:9).

They are brothers. Paul wants to assure them of their standing in Christ. The Apostle is calling them saints and he is calling them brothers. This is the second important self-view for Christians. We are part of a family, the family of God. We are all brothers and sisters because we are all saints. The letter is being addressed to everyone (saints) but also to a group of saints who are called, *faithful brothers*. Among the saints in the church are those who are marked as being faithful. They are those who are growing in their walk with Christ and with the church. Paul does not use this term lightly or casually. Not all saints are faithful. We know what this means even if we don't want to acknowledge it. Some of you are followers of a sports team. Some of you are fans. Some of you are faithful followers and fans. You will support your team regardless. Manchester United has had rough season in the Premier League in England. But I still support them. I will still hang my Man U Christmas stocking this year. I consider myself to be a faithful fan even when they have a bad coach who can't manage what should be a really good team. Faithful... are you?

### **By God's Provision (v.2b)**

This is both a greeting and a prayer wish. It is like our, "How are you?" But it is filled with ever so much more thought and depth.

One of my mentors, Kent Hughes helps us appreciate this simple prayer wish, this greeting, to the church. [Adapted from Hughes, PTW, Logos]

<We must note that by sealing the above with "Grace and peace to you from God our Father," Paul created a Christian blend of Hebrew and Greek greetings. The customary greeting in the ancient Greek world was *chairen*, which was a form of "grace" and meant "greetings" (see James 1:1; Acts 15:23; 23:26). But in Paul's hands, it became the freshly minted Christian salutation *charis*, "grace." Greeting fellow-believers with this word celebrated the work of grace in their lives. "You are a recipient of God's unmerited favor. Praise God for his grace! This is indeed wonderful!" It was also a commissioning to live under grace. "May you be a great taker. May you have the disposition, the dependency, the humility which makes you a ready receptor of God's grace."

The other half of the greeting, "peace," came originally from the Hebrew *shalom*, which meant more than simply the absence of trouble, but well-being which springs from a sense of the presence of God. Paul's wish for the Colossians was that they would comprehend more fully their peace and enjoy it in all its depth.

It is the same for all people: there must be grace before we experience the *shalom* of God. Grace (God's work) comes before peace (our new relationship). Among the tragedies of our time is humanity's pursuit of personal peace apart from God's enabling grace. That pursuit takes many forms: material, intellectual, social, even religious; but they all end in futility. When sinners find peace through God's grace, that is beautiful, that is cause for rejoicing! "Grace and peace" is the proper Christian greeting and celebration.>

So, grace and peace to you, my dear fellow saints and faithful brothers and sisters.

### **In Fueling his Thankfulness (v.3-5a)**

It is easy sometimes to pass over the openings of the Pauline letters. They often sound alike. We know they are a part of the letter writing of the age, so we don't linger over them much. That is almost always a mistake.

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Thankfulness arises because of how they had received the gospel...

### **Its Expression in Prayer (v.3)**

Paul expresses his thanksgiving for the people of the church there. Just to remind you that Paul is almost always thinking of people, not an institution when he writes or speaks in this way. The church in New Testament are a people in a place gathered, growing, and going.

He addresses his thanksgiving to God, the Father. This is the pattern of the New Testament. When we pray, we are praying to the Father. I would commend to you, that when you open your prayers and acknowledge who you are praying to, that it is not just God, but God, the Father.

The reason this is important is that we are addressing the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who is also our Father. This is normal for Paul. These are not just religious formalities or formulas. They are expressing a reality that we believe. By expressing it, we are both affirming it and pointing our souls to our heavenly Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In prayer, when people come to mind, Paul gives thanks for them. This is a poise of his heart. I wonder if it is the poise of our hearts? Do you, when God brings someone to mind, default to giving thanks for them? If not, then what do you do instead? When you think of your elder, your ministry leader, your ministry partner or team mate, someone in the worship band, a greeter, the person who sat in your seat and took your row this week... if your heart is like mine, then we tend to think and reflect on the things we don't like, that bothers us about them. Brothers and sisters, this is the wrong poise of our hearts. Retrain your mind towards gratitude for people, not grumbling about people. This will allow you to grow in being blessed by them and keep you from bitterness against them.

### **Its Motivation by a Report (v.4)**

Paul is moved to gratitude by what he hears about them. The report he has received is of two key, fundamental marks of a believer: faith and love. Regardless of the strengths or weaknesses, the struggles or victories, the spiritual or practical abilities (or not), if the person is a Christian, you can always thank God for faith and love.

Believers are people who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul seems to note that they had a gratitude inducing quality to their faith. Or, it is simply that Paul was glad because these people, whom he had never seen, had come to know the Lord.

Believers are people who love one another. Now that love may be small or great, shallow or deep, but love is to mark us as Christians. I note one important phrase here: for all the saints. Given what often happened in the early church and happens in churches today this is something to think about. Do you love *all the saints*? We tend to love those we have affinity with, we sit near, who agree with us, who like what we like, and who appreciate us. In other words, we love the people who are easy to love. But even the pagans do that. Christians love all the saints. That love ought to show itself in a kind of getting outside of yourself, outside your group, outside of your friends and seeking, pursuing friendship with others. Do we really love, all the saints?

### **Its Foundation in Hope (v.5a)**

Do you see it? "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven..." Paul's prayer of gratitude for these people is because there is something stored up, set aside, in heaven. This is called,

the hope. Faith in Jesus and love for Jesus' people *is not primarily based on anything in time, but everything in heaven*. Again, this is challenging because it is foreign to the way we think. We are thankful for what people are here and or even more so, what people do for us here. That is right and proper. But our prayers, our thankfulness for people, is because of that which they are and which they are becoming. This is an assurance, a confidence. All of us are in process. We are changing and growing. There is a lot to be concerned about with people. But I am absolutely certain that every one of you who have faith in Jesus and love one another will receive, will become, what God has promised will be ours in heaven.

Faith, love, and hope are often repeated together in Paul's writings. They form a triangle of ideas that are uniquely Christian. But they do not stand as some sort of quasi-religious ideas. They are solid, real, living realities that are all centered on Jesus Christ.

Every aspect of this greeting in some way is connected the Lord Jesus Christ. In a few short verses, Paul's heartbeat can be heard. Even an opening paragraph, following a standard letter format, sent to a distant church of people he has never met is filled with references to Christ. This is not just "god-talk". This is not just Paul's religious narrative. This is not his self-expression in some way centered on himself. This is what it means to be a people of faith, love, and hope. Ultimately, the hope that is laid up for us in heaven is all that God has purposed, planned, and promised to be ours in the life to come.

### **In Focusing on the Gospel (v.5b-6)**

At the heart of the gospel is hope, an assurance of what is reserved in heaven for the saints.

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

#### **How did they come to the gospel?**

These people in Colossae had heard it. It had come to them. They had the true gospel. No matter what those bringing the error of the higher spiritual life or the deeper spiritual life said, the saints at Colossae had the true gospel. What they had believed was what had been preached to them. Paul is confident then that they have and having believed it, they are true believers.

#### **Is the gospel truth?**

It is the Word of Truth. In the way this is written it is reflexive. The gospel is the true word. The true word has the gospel. What they had heard was truth. It was the truth spoken, declared, preached.

The hope laid up for them in heaven *is part of the gospel*. I have come to believe that we have too narrow a definition of the gospel. We tend to use the word to refer solely to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. This is the heart of the gospel, the part of the gospel that makes all the other parts possible, but it is not the totality of the gospel. The good news is all the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ centered on Him as Redeemer and Ruler.

#### **Where has the gospel gone?**

In all the world... think about that for a moment. In Paul's day, the gospel had reached all the world as he understood it. It is not so much the worldwide spread of the gospel that Paul is celebrating as what the gospel has produced wherever it has gone. Why is this important? They, like you, have been taught and thus believed and learned the truth of the gospel that has gone into the world.

## **What is the gospel producing?**

It is producing fruit. The seed of the gospel lands in human hearts of all kinds of people in all kinds of places. It germinates and then produces fruit. It is how the Spirit brings life to the dead sinner. It produces faith and love in people. It causes them to believe the truth and to see the hope of God's promises. It is the gospel that is doing this work. While it requires some means for people to hear it, it is not the messenger who is producing the fruit. It is the gospel, the word of truth.

## **What must the gospel bring us to?**

Grace. If the gospel is preached right and heard well, the effect is we will understand the grace of God. Once again, believing goes before understanding. The word of truth, the gospel, is preached. It is heard and believed. Then grace is understood.

Therefore, the gospel is not only necessary for saving grace, but also for transforming grace. The gospel is producing the fruit of love towards God and towards others. In other words, it is also how God transforms us. The truths of the gospel are to be believed so that we are changed into the people God is making us to be. I am aware that people want something more, something else. They want change that is often steps of action in areas of wisdom. This is not how the Bible works. That is the old way, the way of the world. It is moralism. And yes, you can go to most churches, and they will give all this practical application that a Hindu, or a Muslim or a Mormon could simply put into practice.

Yes, those may be helpful. But never as a substitute for the wide-ranging truths under the umbrella of the gospel. This may not be satisfying to our law oriented, steps-of-action craving hearts. But it is the way transformation works. Without the gospel, without grace, without the Spirit's empowering, you will not be pleasing to the Lord. Why? Because you will be functioning just like the world. Face it, most unbelievers can implement all the stuff in Christian books about how to \_\_\_\_\_ and live a better, easier life. But they are not being godly in doing so.

So, will you believe the gospel, the word of truth so that you will understand the grace of God in truth?

## **In Recognizing his Ministry Partner (v.7-8)**

The gospel almost always comes to us through people. Epaphras was the messenger to them.

<sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

### **With a Commendation (v.7)**

Epaphras is connected to the church in Ephesus. He is likely the one who went out from the church there to preach the gospel in the cities around them. It was through his preaching that the people in Colossae heard the gospel and learned about grace.

What wonderful, personal, spiritual terms of endearment. Does it ever strike you as odd that the Bible talks like this all the time about people and yet we don't? "Beloved fellow servant..." "Faithful servant of Christ..." When you hear how much Paul valued his relationship with his partners in ministry, you can see why defections from ministry and from the faith were so painful.

### **Because of a Communication (v.8)**

Epaphras has visited Paul in prison at Rome. He has brought much news of the churches. Some of what he has told Paul has been the reason for this letter. This church was marked by its love. It is a love in the realm of the Spirit. This is a very good thing. But they are also in danger of error. So, people can have a commended faith and a love in the Spirit and still

be vulnerable to error. This is why the ministry of the Word is so important. This is why we must constantly come back to the gospel and to grace.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

The opening of Paul's letters always challenges us to think about our relationships. How wide, deep, and valuable are your Christian relationships?

What is our poise toward other Christians? Even when they are wrong about something, what is your inner response when you think about them?

Do you pray for each other? No, don't give me the "correct" answer... Give me the honest answer.

Are you a true believer? Do you have an assurance, a Biblical hope because of the gospel?

Have you received the gospel? Have you heard, believed it, trusted it? At the core the gospel about the death and resurrection of Jesus. But there are many truths and themes that intersect and expand the gospel. Coming to know Jesus brings you into these kind of relationships. Frankly, they are not all they are supposed to be. But it is nevertheless what we strive and aim for.

Do you need the gospel? The answer to that is, "Yes". But what do you think you need?

Do you need grace? The answer to that is, "Yes". But what are you wanting instead?

May you grow in your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God's people. May you really have a confident hope for what God has reserved for you in heaven. You have had this expectation ever since you first heard the truth of the gospel. This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace. May it continue to change your lives... (Adapted from the New Living Translation)