

## Colossae: The Picture of a Strong Church

The Apostle Paul's *Epistle to the Colossians* is a wonderful letter for us to read and to study. It emphasizes the preeminence of Christ, placing our focus on where it belongs: Jesus Christ. Jesus is King, Lord, and Savior in the lives of His people. He is God, the Son. He is Creator and Sustainer of all things. Jesus is the source and the means of our redemption. It is through preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ that men and women can be reconciled to God.

This letter is addressed to a congregation at Colossae located in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor, east of Ephesus. At the time of writing, Paul had not yet visited there, according to what Paul tells us in Colossians 1:4 and Colossians 2:1. Epaphras, a man who lived in Colossae, apparently established the community of believers in Colossae (Colossians 1:7; Colossians 4:12; Philemon 1:23). Problems, however, had arisen, brought on by teachers who emphasized Christ's relation to the universe (cosmos). These individuals were part of the Gnostics, a group that denied Jesus came in the flesh, and their teachings stressed the worshipping of Angels (Colossians 2:18) whom Paul calls the "***principalities and powers***" in Colossians 2:15. These Gnostic teachers were connected with alleged astral powers and cultic practices that taught that the elite, select individuals can achieve personal enlightenment through observing their rules about food and drink and ascetical disciplines, which means they taught the body should be deprived to reach a higher consciousness. These Gnostic teachings of some 2000 years ago are rampant today in many denominations and New Age religious organizations. These teachings, Paul insists, detract from the person and work of Christ for our salvation as set forth magnificently in a passage that really is a hymn found in Colossians 1:15-20 and it is reiterated throughout the letter. Paul reassures us that such teachings are but "***shadows,***" as opposed to Jesus Christ, Who is the "***substance***" or reality (Colossians 2:17).

For help in dealing with these problems that these new teachers were posing at Colossae, Epaphras sought out the assistance of the Apostle Paul, who was then being held in a prison (Colossians 4:10; Colossians 4:18) at a location that the letter does not mention or designate. Paul, without entering into debate over the existence of Angelic spirits or their function, simply affirms that Christ possesses the sum total of redemptive power. He writes in Colossians 1:19 [RSV], "***For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell....***"

Paul also affirms that the spiritual renewal of the human person occurs through contact in baptism with the saving blood and person of Christ, Who died and rose again from the grave victorious over death. Listen to what he tells the Colossians and us vicariously in Colossians 2:13-19 [RSV]: ***13. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14. having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in Him. 16. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in***

**questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. 18. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of Angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19. and not holding fast to the Head, from Whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.**

It is unnecessary for the Christian to be concerned about placating spirits (Colossians 2:15) or avoiding imagined defilement through ascetical practices of depriving the body in regard to food and drink. Paul writes, **20. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21. "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" 22. (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? 23. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh** (Colossians 2:20-23 [RSV]). Just as he does with everything, Satan twists something that is good to make it something evil. Whereas true Christian asceticism consists in the conquering of personal sins through prayer and fasting, Gnosticism teaches that we are gods ourselves. Paul tells us in Colossians 3:5-10 [RSV], **5. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. 8. But now put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. 9. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices 10. and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator.** The practice of loving one's neighbor is in accordance with the standard set by Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-16 [RSV], **12. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, 13. forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**

There is a very simple idea that we will encounter over and over again as you study through Colossians. Jesus is all we need! When we have Him in our lives, we do not need anything else. The Colossian church is a good strong church that was coming under attack. We will find that Paul had some positive things to say about the people in this church. The church in the city of Colossae had some problems as all churches do. As you read through Colossians, you understand that these people had some struggles, but Paul began by emphasizing the positive aspects of their congregation.

In the first eight verses of this letter, you see seven characteristics that picture a strong church. As we study, it is our challenge to think about how we can reproduce this image in the church here at Lake Land Church of Christ. If the Lord were sending an epistle to us, would He have such positive things to say about the way we are living our lives and working for Him today? Let us take a few moments now to read Colossians 1:1-8 [RSV].

**1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2. to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4. because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, 5. because of the hope laid up for you in Heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6. which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing – so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, 7. as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf 8. and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.**

Colossians was a strong congregation because it was made up of saints (verse 2). There is a widespread misconception about what a saint is. People speak of Saint Paul, Saint Matthew, Saint Peter, etc. The Catholic Church canonizes people as saints long after they are dead. However, in the Bible saints were living people.

The word “**saint**” is connected to the word sanctify, meaning “to set apart” or “to make holy.” So a saint is a set-apart-from sin, set-apart-unto-God holy person because Christ is holy.

Christians are people who have been sanctified. After enumerating a laundry list of sins in which the people at Corinth used to participate, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:11 [RSV], “**And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.**” The Corinthians certainly were not super-holy people. They still struggled with the problems of sin, but with the blood of Jesus continually washing and cleansing us of our sins we remain sanctified. As the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 John 1:6-7 [RSV], **6. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; 7. but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.**

Yet in spite of the problems facing the Corinthians church, they were part of the blood-bought church of our Lord (Acts 20:28). They had been cleansed by the washing of water with the word (Ephesians 5:26), just as is everyone who comes to the Lord in obedient, saving faith.

So saints are simply people who have been cleansed of their sins by baptism into Christ and are now living lives of holiness. As the Apostle Peter states it in 1 Peter 1:15-16 [RSV], **16. since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” 17. And if you invoke as Father Him Who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.**

This church here at Lake Land is also made up of saints – people who are living holy lives in Christ. That does not mean that all of us have overcome all struggles with the devil. We still have to fight that spiritual war with him. It is still possible that we could lose that struggle and lose our souls in sin. But as long as we are in the light in Christ (1 John 1:7), we are saints!

The church in Colossae was made up of faithful brothers in Christ (verse 2). Faithful brothers (and sisters) are saints – they are not a different group from saints. “Saints” expresses our relationship with God. “Brother” and “sister” express our relationship with one another. The church is a family. We share the same Father so we are brothers and sisters in the family of God. We can join together in calling God our “**Abba, Father**” (Romans 8:14-17), a term of endearment.

Brothers and sisters in the church are to be faithful. We are dependable and trustworthy. God has trusted us with a great responsibility. We are determined to be good stewards of His trust.

We understand that there are many dependable, trustworthy people outside the church. What makes us special is that we are faithful brothers **IN CHRIST**.

In Christ is where salvation is found. Being in Christ is the only means back to the Father. Jesus said in John 14:6 [RSV], **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me.”** It is because of His holiness that we will no longer stand condemned. As Paul puts it in Romans 8:1 [RSV], **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** Because we are no longer condemned we may obtain salvation: **“Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory.”** And because we are in Christ we are able to obtain spiritual blessings, for they are found nowhere else: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the Heavenly places”** (Ephesians 1:3 [RSV]).

The church in Colossae was made up of people with a strong faith in Christ (verse 4). Christ is the sphere in which our faith operates. The fact of having faith in something is not particularly noteworthy. Everyone has some kind of faith in something. Hindus and New Age folks have faith in reincarnation. Atheists have faith in their belief that there is no God.

The faith possessed by members of the church, however, is unique because the environment where that faith exists is **IN CHRIST**. One writer tells of a Bible translator

working to make the Bible available in the language of the people of a remote island. He searched for a word that would properly describe the concept of faith to their understanding. Finally he selected a word that meant, "Lean your whole weight upon." Does that not pretty well describe what happens in a strong church? We are not doing it ourselves. We know that we succeed only when we lean our whole weight upon Christ, and put our focus where it truly belongs, which is on Him.

Christ is all we need. When we believe in and obey Christ, He is able to do for us whatever needs to be done.

We can be a strong church even if our numbers are small. It is not about our strength and us. It is about our faith in Christ and our trust in Him that God's will be done in the life of His church.

We can still expect to have troubles. The Lord does not remove adversity from our experience in the church because dealing with those trials makes us grow stronger. Our "spiritual muscles" are strengthened whenever our faith is put to the test.

The church in Colossae was made up of people who loved one another (verse 4). Faith expresses itself through love. Paul says in Galatians 5:6 [RSV], "***For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.***"

Our love for God is demonstrated in the way we love other people. This is really brought out by the Apostle John in 1 John 4:20-21 [RSV]: ***20. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God Whom he has not seen. 21. And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.***

Christian love is powerful enough to overcome even the differences of class, race, and culture that exist among humans. Paul instructs the church that no longer do these distinctions separate us. Colossians 3:11 (RSV) says, "***Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.***"

The church in Colossae was made up of people who had heard and understood the grace of God in truth (verse 6). It is an absolute, undeniable fact that not a single soul has ever been saved apart from God's grace. Grace operates through the teaching of the word of truth. Jesus said in John 8:31-32 [RSV], ***1. "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples, 32. and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*** We come to obedient, saving faith when we hear the words and gospel of Christ: "***So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ***" (Romans 10:17 [RSV]). Epaphras had preached the word of Christ in Colossae (verse 7), and his hearers had heard and understood his message. God's revelation always comes in a form that we can understand.

When that revealed truth is known and followed, hearers are made free, just as we heard Jesus say a few moments ago.

The church in Colossae was experiencing the gospel as it was bearing fruit and growing. We learn in Acts 8:4 that the early disciples went everywhere preaching the word. The gospel had been preached **"in the whole world"** (Colossians 1:6 [RSV]) by the time Colossians was written in approximately AD 62 or 63. And Colossians 1:23 [RSV] says the gospel **"has been preached to every creature under Heaven."**

The fruit is borne or carried in the lives of members of the church, meaning that the gospel does not preach itself. Faithful members of the church all over the world must teach the gospel to those around them.

Colossae was a small town, but it had souls who needed to hear the gospel. The Colossians might not be able to preach in major metropolitan centers like Ephesus or Rome, but they could bear fruit where they were. The same is true in every location where Christians are today. We can do what we can where we are. That is what the Lord expects of us, no more and no less. God's word, the word of the Lord, does not return empty (Isaiah 55:11). Different soils result in different harvests, but whenever the seed – the word of God – is sown and tended, there will be a harvest.

The church in Colossae was made up of people who had hope laid up in Heaven (verse 5). Without the gospel, the people of Colossae had been like the Gentiles described in Ephesians 2:12 (RSV), **"...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."** They were hopeless and doomed, but when they heard the gospel preached they believed in Christ as the Son of God, repented of their sins, and were buried with Christ in baptism (Colossians 2:12). They had chosen to **"...lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal"** (Matthew 6:20 [RSV]). They were a new people with new hope: **11. For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, 12. training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, 13. awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,** (Titus 2:11-13 [RSV]).

You might have noticed that in talking about a strong church in Colossae, we have been talking about the **people** of that church. No church can be any stronger or weaker than its people. God-loving, dedicated, energetic people will make up a church with the same characteristics. What the Lake Land Church of Christ will be in the future depends altogether on what kind of people we choose to become. We can use the Colossian Christians as models. They were not perfect. They had problems. But they were moving in the right direction and the work for the Lord in spreading the gospel was building up the body of Christ. Let the same be true for this collection of God's saints.