

We're only four weeks away from the beginning of Advent, and the countdown to Christmas, but before that begins, I want to do a short series through the book of Colossians.

Colossians is one of the letters the apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Asia Minor, now Turkey. The church in Colossae was one that Paul had never met. It had been started by a coworker of his, Epaphras, who was from Colossae. Epaphras had recently visited Paul in prison and had updated him about how well the church was going overall, but he also mentioned some of the pressures the church was facing, tempting them to turn away from Jesus.

One of the key concerns in the letter is to counter the "Colossian heresy." While scholars debate the precise details, they are agreed that at its core this heresy undermined the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The heretical teachers suggested that believers needed something more than their relationship with Jesus to live a genuinely spiritual life that was pleasing to God. This "something more" included many elements, from Jewish circumcision, Sabbath observance, the worship of angels, and an ascetic lifestyle, or extreme self-denial.¹

In response, Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Colossian church to address the issues Epaphras had raised, and to challenge them to a greater devotion to Jesus.

The letter begins, as all of Paul's do, with a greeting. Of small note, is that Timothy is the coauthor of the letter, indicating he was likely with Paul in prison in Rome at the time of its writing, which incidentally is believed to be in the early AD 60s.

Paul begins by giving thanks for the church in Colossae, for their faith in Christ Jesus, and for the love they have for all the saints. Their faith and hope are based on the gospel – the good news that God loves us, and through Jesus Christ we can know peace with God, and the forgiveness of sin. This gospel was 'bearing fruit' in the Colossian church, just as it was around the world. But the Colossians ought not to feel overly pleased with their evangelistic efforts, for this is the nature of the gospel: where it is shared it bears fruit. Someone has said, "just as a tree without fruit and growth would no longer be a tree, so a gospel that bore no fruit would cease to be a gospel!"²

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Colossians," in CSB Study Bible: Notes, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1892

² James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 61, quoting Schweizer

In Romans Paul writes of the “power of the gospel”³, and the prophet Isaiah says of the Word of God,

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.⁴

According to Isaiah, God’s word is a powerful thing – it accomplishes – without fail – the thing for which God sends it, and its proclamation causes growth and change.

But the gospel only bears fruit where it is heard and ‘truly comprehended’,⁵ or understood. Jesus once told a parable of someone who scattered seed: some seeds fell on the path, some fell on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Jesus then explained the parable saying, “the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a harvest.”⁶

The Colossians had heard the gospel, and they understood the grace of God, and therefore the gospel bore fruit among them. This of course, begs a challenge for us. Do we understand the gospel? Do we understand our human plight, and our need for a Saviour? And do we understand the good news, that God has provided a Saviour for us in Christ? For the gospel to “bear fruit” among us, it needs to be understood.

Paul then says that it is “for this reason” that he ceaselessly prays for the Colossian church. But they’ve heard the Gospel, they’ve understood it, they have faith in Christ Jesus, they have love for one another: the gospel is bearing fruit. You might think that would be enough. But no.

They’re only at the beginning of a lifelong journey of discipleship, a journey that will take many turns, will raise many questions, and will suffer many challenges. So, Paul prays four things for them, that they may...

³ Romans 1:16

⁴ Isaiah 55:10–11

⁵ Colossians 1:6

⁶ Matthew 13

1. be filled with knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (9)
2. lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as they bear fruit in every good work and as they grow in the knowledge of God (10)
3. be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power (11)
4. be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father (11-12)

Paul's first prayer would surely be (ought to be?), the prayer of every Christian, indeed of anyone who believes in God – to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. The word "be filled" in grammar is a passive verb, and it indicates that it is God who does the filling. For the Colossians, knowing God's will is not a matter of strange spiritual practices (which we'll come to later); knowing God's will is a matter of God's grace. And Paul prays that God would fill them to the full with His will 'in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.'

While it is true that the Colossians had the Holy Scriptures (for them, the Old Testament), which contained God's Word, and revealed God's will, we know that the Scriptures can be twisted and taught incorrectly. Paul prayed that the Holy Spirit would guide them into the full and true knowledge of God's Word and will.

But knowing God's will is never the end of the matter; knowing God's will simply leads to the responsibility of doing God's will; so Paul continues to pray, asking three things: that the Colossians might 'lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him,' that they 'might be made strong' and they might 'be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father.'

Paul then ends his introduction with a word of hope and encouragement, which also addresses part of the Colossian heresy. Many of the Colossian's feared evil spirits, so, in order to try and control them they called on angels to help protect them. Paul, however, reminds the Colossians, that God has already rescued them from the "power of darkness and transferred [them] in the kingdom of his beloved Son."⁷ Christ is supreme over all creation, and all powers in this world and the next, are subject to Him;⁸ the Colossians therefore have nothing to fear, and the only One they need worship is Christ alone.

⁷ J. I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, and Ajith Fernando, eds., *ESV Global Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 1686; Colossians 1:13

⁸ Ephesians 1:21-23

But now, I want to focus briefly on Paul's words in verse 4, where Paul is encouraged by the Colossians "love that [they had] for all the saints." It's interesting to me that the feature of the Colossian church that Paul is pleased about, is not their love for their community, but their love for the "saints" – each other.

In John 13, Jesus tells His disciples how people will know they are His disciples, and it's not because they do miracles, or even die a martyr's death. People will know we are disciples of Jesus "if you have love for one another."⁹ Notice, Jesus does not say, that people will know we are His disciples, because we love everyone else around us. This, of course, is implied as a follower of Jesus – but Jesus seems to make a big deal about how we – the church – love each other.

When people look at the church, what they supposed to be deeply impacted by, is how much the church loves itself. Tragically, today, I'm not sure this is what the church is known for; but once upon a time it was – and we get a small glimpse of this in Acts 2 where we read:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Now I don't want to focus on the selling of property, but on the fact that the church "spent much time together" and "broke bread at home." The church worked hard at genuinely loving one another, and "the Lord added to their number." I wonder if God adds numbers to loving churches. I don't want to suggest this is a church growth strategy, nor am I suggesting that church growth is simply a matter showing love – but showing genuine love toward one another ought to be a feature of being a disciple of Jesus.

At the recent General Assembly in Christchurch, a report was brought by a workgroup Te Kahui Whanaungatanga. This workgroup had been tasked with exploring what the future strategy and direction of the PCANZ ought to be. But instead of bringing another strategic document to the nation church (and in the last 15 years there have been two such documents produced, both which ended up in a drawer collecting dust), the

⁹ John 13:35

workgroup recommended that the future direction of the church will be found when we embrace *whanaungatanga*.

Whanaungatanga is a foundational concept in te ao Māori, emphasising relationships, kinship (or family), and a deep sense of collective connection.¹⁰ It is a relationship forged through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging.

Initially, because I am an openminded person, I dismissed the whole idea; but I've had time to think about it, and whanaungatanga sounds like something the church should embrace. It's made me wonder how we might develop deeper connections, how we might form a greater sense of family.

This might involve simply getting to know one another better. I'm sure you know the person next to you, and maybe even two people across. But who don't you know? Who don't you know well? Whose name do you find hard to remember? What do we truly know about each other?

Whanaungatanga requires vulnerability, which not everyone is comfortable with. But when we know each other, when we make time to better understand each other, we create deeper bonds and become more willing to trust each other. This works in all relationships, even the church.

I'm sure we all agree that we want the church to grow – I certainly do. And there are strategic things we can do that will help... but there is another phrase used at General Assembly that I've heard many times: Culture eats strategy for breakfast.

You can have the best strategies in the world, but if you have a poor culture, your strategy will fail. The culture of an organization, or of a church, is what matters most. And the culture Jesus wants to see in the church is a culture of love, of whanaungatanga.

¹⁰ <https://brainwave.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Whanaungatanga-and-identity—Strengthening-Wellbeing-for-Taiohi-Maori.pdf>