

**“Disappearing Church”**  
**Colossians 1:1-8**  
**September 4, 2016**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We begin today a series of sermons on Paul’s letter to the Colossians. I’ve chosen this letter because I think it speaks clearly to a situation the church faces today. That situation is the temptation to lose our center in Jesus in the face of the onslaught of today’s focus on the self. If we lose our center in Jesus, the church will disappear in our culture.

Several years ago, I remember reading about a Hindu family who began visiting a church in America in order to investigate the life of Jesus. After several months, they asked the pastor, “When are we going to be able to start hearing about Jesus? We’ve heard excellent sermons about marriage, child-rearing, money management and other practical topics, but not yet about Jesus. Is there some special class we need to sign up for in order to hear about Jesus?” It is often the case that the church, in its desire to be relevant, takes its focus off of Jesus and tries to appeal to the felt needs of people. The problem with such an approach is that the felt needs of unbelievers are all wrapped up with self-fulfillment. Their felt needs are different from their true needs.

The result of moving our focus from Jesus to felt needs is that the church will disappear. When Wendy and I were in Spain earlier this year, we were in a town north of Barcelona that featured a large and beautiful cathedral in the heart of the old town. We were walking around the area on a Sunday morning and noticed several thousand tourists milling about around the outside of the cathedral. Many also, like us, walked into the cathedral to see it from the inside. I noticed that the nave was partitioned off to divide the area where tourists like us were permitted access, and another area restricted for those wishing to attend the worship service. There was such a service taking place at the time we walked into the building, and I peeked around the partition to observe about 7 or 8 worshipers scattered throughout the room as the priest celebrated the mass. That’s a disappearing church, kept alive in Spain only by the fact that these cathedrals are supported with tax money from the state.

The situation Paul addresses in Colossians is not unlike our contemporary situation of seeking relevance at a cost of losing our focus on Jesus. Though scholars have been unable to define precisely the error Paul is addressing in this book, it is clear that the error involved removing Jesus from the center. Paul tips his hand about his purpose in the letter from the very beginning, using the traditional thanks section of letters of his day to emphasize the

centrality and potency of the gospel. The church will not disappear if it holds to the genuine version of Christianity.

## **I. The Marks of Genuine Christianity**

Paul begins by giving thanks for these three qualities that mark a genuine walk with God throughout Paul's epistles: faith, hope and love. I think he begins with these marks because the Colossians had been unsettled by this new teaching Paul seeks to counter. One feature of that new teaching was a type of spiritual elitism available to those who were initiated into a special knowledge of God. So Paul takes them back to the basics and reminds them that genuine Christianity is marked by these three God-given qualities of faith, hope and love. Let's consider them in the order in which Paul mentions them.

He begins with faith, which is the only response we can have to the fact that Christianity is all about God's gift. Notice how Paul refers to the Colossians salvation as understanding **"the grace of God in truth"** (v. 6). To be a Christian is to understand that all we have is not only a gift, but an undeserved gift. When someone offers you a gift, if you were to reach into your wallet to offer them payment, you would insult them greatly. The only proper response to a gift is to receive it with thanksgiving.

When Paul mentions faith, he includes the object of our faith when he says **"faith in Christ Jesus"** (v. 4). This is the distinguishing feature of Christian faith. Everybody has faith; it's only a matter of where you place your faith. The opposite of biblical faith isn't no faith, but misplaced faith. Years ago, Wendy and I had a neighbor with whom we would often discuss spiritual things. She once said to us, "I wish I could have faith, but I just don't." Actually, she did have faith, and it was a faith in herself. At the end of the day, she believed that she could run her life better than God. That is the most common competitor to Christian faith. Faith in self says, "If I perform well, then God will like me and do good things for me." Christian faith says, "Since Jesus has performed well, God likes me and will always do good to me." When God is at work in our lives, we begin to see that Jesus is God's provision for us to deliver us from the mess we have made of our own lives. As a result of that, we give up self-deliverance. This takes nothing less than a miracle from God, because we all instinctively trust ourselves instead of Jesus.

As faith delivers us from self-dependence, love begins to deliver us from self-centeredness. This kind of love flows out of faith. It's a package deal. By faith we come to understand that Jesus has taken care of everything we will ever need. That frees us from having to try to figure out how to manipulate others into taking care of our needs, so that we are free to focus on loving others. Jesus has focused on loving us, and now he tells us to follow him by loving others. What does this say about the person who has all the orthodox

beliefs but who is mean and unloving? Maybe Mark Twain had this kind of person in mind when he said, “He is a good man—in the worst sort of way.” Though we can’t see anyone’s heart, we can say on the authority of God’s word that where there is no love there is no faith.

Let me say one more thing about this love before moving to hope. Christian love is more than sentiment. It is more than feelings of well-wishing for others, but moves to intentional acts of sacrificial love. To love is not just to wait around for good and kind feelings for others, but to put yourself out and actually plan how you will bring good to others and then carry through on those plans. Kent Hughes tells the story of this kind of love shown to Chuck Colson when he was serving a term in prison for his role in the Watergate scandal during the Nixon presidency. Colson was a new Christian at the time, and several U.S. congressmen were meeting to pray for him. One of them, Rep. Al Quie of Minnesota discovered an old law that allowed an innocent man to serve a prison term for another, and Quie volunteered to serve the remainder of Colson’s term. The offer was not accepted, but it was still a demonstration of biblical love. That’s the kind of love Jesus has for us, taking our place that we might go free.

The third, and often neglected, quality in this great trio is hope. In the Bible, hope is our confident expectation of a bright future with Christ. The full riches of knowing Christ are not met in this life, but await our reunion with Jesus in the next life. Notice the verb Paul uses for this hope. It is **“laid up for you in heaven”** (v. 5). This is the word used for storing up such things as grain. It refers to a savings account. Our Christian hope is the ultimate 401(k), and it is not underfunded. It is not dissimilar to a young man or woman with a trust fund they will come into upon turning twenty-five years of age. Imagine you’re a recent college graduate engaged to be married to a young man who’s also a recent graduate and who is having difficulty finding a good job. Your parents express hesitation about your marriage to him, wondering if he will be able to provide for you. But then you tell them something that changes everything. He has a trust fund valued at fifty million dollars and he will come of age for the full possession of it when he turns 25. I imagine that would change your parents’ perspective somewhat. Even if you have to eat beans and rice for the next three years until he turns 25, it won’t be that big of a deal.

That’s exactly the way it is for Christians. We all have trust funds of immense value, and they are stored for us in a place that is completely secure, in heaven itself. There are at least two results of this hope. The first one is security. There is simply no room for insecurity in our lives if we remember our bright future, one in which we will inherit everything because we are co-heirs with Christ. The second result of this hope is love, indicated by the word “because” at the beginning of this phrase. It is because of our hope that we are able to love. Knowing that we have a great inheritance, we become willing to give up all now as part of loving others.

So these are the marks of genuine Christianity. Faith, hope and love are incapable of being manufactured by us. They come from God himself, and they come, at least in seed form, to all who truly know Jesus. It is possible for a person to learn the vocabulary of Christianity, to embrace the behaviors of Christianity, and to look like a Christian in external ways. But true Christianity is known by these qualities alone. And where they are known, the church will not disappear. If we are to leave a vibrant church and a vibrant Christianity to future generations, the need is not to seek relevance but to hold faithfully to these gospel marks. How we do so is addressed next.

## II. The Path to Genuine Christianity

The gospel they believed came to them in a word that they heard from the lips of a human instrument, Epaphras. Two matters of importance are addressed in that sentence. The first is that the word of the gospel has a God-given power to bring life. Paul says that this gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world and among the Colossians. Only living things bear fruit and grow, and the gospel is such a living thing. And it is not culturally bound, but able to grow in the soil of any culture throughout the world.

Notice how this living word of the gospel takes root in the soil. Paul said that it had done so among the Colossians **“since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth”** (v. 6). The way to hear God’s word so that it bears fruit in our lives is to understand the grace of God. God comes to us with a dominant word of his grace and love. Our lives are changed not through hearing about the ways we don’t measure up to God’s standards, even though it is certainly true that we don’t measure up to God’s standards. But real change comes when we come to understand that God is for us in Christ, surprisingly and extravagantly so.

I like the way Paul reinforces this message of God’s grace by the way he approaches the Colossians. Remember that the overall context of this letter is Paul’s efforts to correct a dangerous and evil teaching that had begun to take root in this church. But notice how he goes about this job of correction. He doesn’t start by saying, “What are you thinking, you Colossians? I can’t believe what I’m hearing about this teaching and the way you are beginning to accept it.” No, he begins by thanking God for them. He affirms what he sees God doing in their lives. In doing so, he is being like the God of grace he is proclaiming. Can you hear that? When you think of God and his thoughts about you, do you think of a God with a permanent frown on his face? Is he shaking his head at all the ways you fall short? Does God see what is wrong with you? Absolutely, far more clearly than you see it yourself? Does it cause him to raise his hand to slap you in anger? Absolutely not. Instead, he rejoices over you with great joy.

He is bound to you through Jesus' life and death on your behalf. And he is thrilled with that because of his love.

The Colossians learned this grace of God through Epaphras. I am thankful for that word "learned" because it indicates that it is a process. I am still learning it, and still find myself forgetting the grace of God in my life, falling back into the mentality that thinks if I only get my performance straightened out, then God will be more favorable to me. The Colossians had learned this originally through Epaphras, the founding pastor of this church. New Testament scholars believe that he was converted during Paul's fruitful ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Colossae is less than one-hundred miles east of Ephesus in what is now Turkey. So Epaphras was converted in Ephesus and then returned to his home town, where he proclaimed the good news of the gospel, saw conversions and began pastoring the church that formed from these conversions. But now, several years later, Paul is in prison in Rome, and he hears of a false teaching had arisen in this church. One of the results of this false teaching is that the church began to look down on their pastor. We infer that from the fact that Paul goes out of his way to affirm Epaphras. You can see that in verse 7, where he calls Epaphras a faithful minister on their behalf. Then he says that Epaphras has spoken well of them to Paul. Then at the end of the letter he reports how Epaphras was faithful in praying for them and worked hard on their behalf (4:12-13). Paul wants this church to love their pastor for the simple reason that it is good for them to do so. He is the one through whom they need to hear the simple gospel truth of God's grace. As they do so, and as they resist this false teaching that is beginning to take root, much fruit will be borne in their lives.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The simple gospel, taught by God's appointed pastors, is what the Colossians needed, and it is also what you and I need. As is the case with most pastors, people come to see me from time to time about some problem in their lives that they would like me to help them with. My answer is usually a form of helping them to explore how they need to trust God's love for them through seeing and repenting of their sin and then receiving the love of God through Christ. This doesn't happen often, but occasionally someone will hear that and be disappointed. They were hoping for some action they could take themselves that would solve the problem. More often than not, the problem is another person and they would like something to do to force change in that person or they would like me to do something to change that person. What's needed, though, is to hear and believe the simple gospel. May God help you to hear it and believe it today!