

ROMANCING THE SAINTS AT COLOSSAE

Studies in the Book of Colossians

*“If Ephesians can be labeled the epistle portraying the ‘church of Christ,’
then Colossians must surely be labeled ‘the Christ of the church’”
unknown*

Text
Colossians 4:7-18

Topic
Paul sends greetings to the churches from himself and all those who are assisting him in building the church of Jesus Christ

Title
“Let’s Build Something Together”

Introduction

The Barna Group has established new categories to describe people when it comes to their church attendance.¹ It is necessary, they say, because of the trend away from “conventional” churches and church membership. These are some of their new categories:

- There are people they call the “unattached.” As the name indicates, these are people who see no need to attach themselves to any particular church.
- There are the “intermittents.” Their attendance is on-again, off-again with no consistent commitment to any particular church.

¹ <http://barna.org/barna-update/article/18-congregations/45-new-statistics-on-church-attendance-and-avoidance>

- “Blenders” are those who maintain some contact with a local church but are exploring various alternatives, including choosing media such as the internet, as their ‘home’ church.
- Finally there are “conventionals” who participate as fully as possible in the life of a local fellowship.

A lot of Christians either don’t attend church or they don’t see the biblical mandate to attend a particular church. After all, if you are saved, aren’t you are a member of the universal body of Christ? So why commit to one particular church?

These are fair and important questions to ask and to answer.

Jesus told His disciples, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

After He ascended into Heaven the building project broke ground. We’re told that the church is built “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

The apostle Paul is arguably the greatest church-builder of the first century. Follow him through the Book of Acts and you see him not just evangelizing but establishing churches. He brought folks to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ then immediately plugged them in to a local assembly.

It would seem that membership, whether formal or informal, in a particular local church is the New Testament norm for Christians.

As we finish the letter to the church at Colossae Paul sends greetings to them from his church-building team and he offers some encouragement for those being built-up in the local churches.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Be A Builder Who Takes Humility In Your Work, and #2 Be A Building That Takes Heed To God’s Work.

#1 Be A Builder Who
Takes Humility In Your Work
(v7-14)

Here are four additional points to consider regarding your assumed participation in a particular local church:

1. Jesus gave the church authority and responsibility to discipline its sinning members when necessary (Matthew 18). This can't happen in a universal setting! It assumes you will belong to a particular assembly of believers.
2. In some cases of discipline Christians are told to put someone out of the church (First Corinthians 5). It assumes a particular church, *not* the universal church.
3. On a more positive note, membership in a particular church is assumed when the New Testament discusses the care that pastors and elders are to show for the flock in their charge (Acts 20:28). This makes no sense if you don't need to belong to a local flock.
4. Finally, Christians are told to gladly submit for their own good to the godly leadership of those over them (Hebrews 13:17; First Thessalonians 5:12-13). You can't do that unless you are a member of a local church.

All this background is necessary because our theme in these closing verses is to discover the kind of builder you are or ought to be in God's church. If you are an "intermittent" or an "unattached" or a "blender," **then you are not going to be on-board with building the local church.**

If, on the other hand, you understand the biblical priority of membership in a local church, you will be greatly impacted by this section of Scripture.

As we look at each of the men Paul mentioned we will see some of the qualities of church-builders. In a very real spiritual sense, every Christian is helping to build God's church on the earth. We should ascribe to be like these men.

Colossians 4:7 Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me.

He is named five times in the New Testament. He was given the responsibility of delivering or co-delivering three of Paul's letters - Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. After Paul was released from prison Tychicus went with him to Crete and probably replaced Titus as pastor there. He is with Paul again during his second imprisonment but is sent to Ephesus just before the apostle is martyred.

Three quick qualities describe Tychicus:

1. He was "a beloved brother." The fact we are born-again by God's Holy Spirit makes us brothers and sisters. It's up to each of us as to whether or not we are "beloved" in our spiritual family.
2. Tychicus was a "faithful minister." Again I'd say we are all called to be "ministers" in the church. It's up to us whether or not we are "faithful."
3. Tychicus was a "fellow servant." It's one thing to "minister" to Christians. It's another to consider yourself a "fellow servant" while doing so. Implied is a total submission to Jesus and His will for the church.

Working backwards through these qualities we would say that the kind of builder who takes humility in his or her work is a slave to Jesus who carries out ministry as unto the Lord and with love for the Lord's people, putting them ahead of himself or herself.

Colossians 4:8 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts,

Here's a good definition of how to minister to others: "know [their] circumstances and comfort [their] hearts" in the Lord. Hear - really hear - what others are saying. Listen for what they are not saying by thinking through what their circumstances imply. Pray. Then offer real comfort - which can be sympathy but often is an exhortation for them to be strong in the Lord.

Colossians 4:9 with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here.

Onesimus was the unsaved slave of a Christian master in the city of Colossae. After he had wronged his master he ran away to Rome. There, by God's providence, he encountered Paul and was led to faith in Jesus Christ. Upon hearing his story, Paul told Onesimus that he knew his master, Philemon. He sent Onesimus back with Tychicus carrying another letter that we have in our Bibles - the letter to Philemon.

Onesimus, too, is described as "faithful" and "beloved." He is also called "one of you." He had previously been an unprofitable servant. He returned a co-worker, a co-builder of the church. Of the many lessons we might glean from Onesimus, one is that every person has his or her place in a local fellowship. They are "one of you," a precious soul that Jesus died for and wants to see nurtured and cherished.

Colossians 4:10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him),

Aristarchus was a Jew who had been converted to Jesus during Paul's brief ministry in the city of Thessalonica. He began travelling with Paul and was one of two who were almost martyred by the angry mob of silversmiths in the city of Ephesus.

He is described here as a "fellow prisoner." Whether he was currently a prisoner in Rome with Paul or had been one previously, Paul considered this high praise. Aristarchus was willing to take his faith to the next level, as it were. No matter the cost, he would follow Jesus.

Being a beloved brother, a faithful minister, a fellow servant who has found their place in the local church is great. Beyond that the Christian life requires sacrifice. Aristarchus gives us pause to consider if we are truly sacrificing in areas of our lives for the sake of the Gospel.

Mark the cousin of Barnabas is the famous Jon-Mark of the Book of Acts who deserted Paul and Barnabas on the mission field. It led to contention between Paul and Barnabas. In fact, they split up over it and went separate ways on the mission field.

Paul and Mark had reconciled and the apostle considered Jon-Mark a trusted faithful servant. There is an obvious lesson there about being ready to forgive and about seeking reconciliation.

We want to look at this comment, “about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him.” The word “instructions” is an authoritative injunction. Without speculating as to why this was necessary, Paul had commanded them to receive this young man with a hearty and hospitable “welcome.”

From a builder’s standpoint this reminds us that at times those over us may give authoritative instruction about church matters. If it is biblical we ought to submit to it and obey joyfully.

Colossians 4:11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me.

“Jesus” was his Hebrew name; “Justus” was his Greek name. At this point Paul felt it important to identify Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus as “of the circumcision.” It meant that they were Jews who had converted to Jesus. Two facts are then given:

1. They were the only such completed Jews who were working with Paul.
2. They were a great source of “comfort” to him in his work.

Paul was dogged by Judaizers - Jews who taught you must first convert to Judaism before you could be saved. He was troubled in spirit by Hebrew Christians who were defecting - returning to Judaism. So you can see why these three would be such a comfort.

The encouragement for us as builders is to persevere. Endure. Press on. As we gather together it is a comfort in itself to see others growing in the grace and knowledge of God. It’s a bummer to see saints sidetracked by one thing or another.

Colossians 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

Epaphras had founded the church at Colossae. He had been led to Christ by Paul in Ephesus and had returned home to share the Gospel. It seems he also founded the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Thus we see in him the office of evangelist.

In Ephesians Paul describes the building of the church by saying God gives it gifted men in particular offices. He lists “pastor-teachers” and “evangelists.” The church was founded in the first century by the apostles and prophets. It is furthered through the centuries by pastor-teachers and evangelists.

Don't be discouraged if you don't hold one of these offices, or that of an elder or a deacon. What we learn from Epaphras is the precious value of prayer.

- “Laboring fervently” is an athletic metaphor. Epaphras approached prayer the way a professional athlete approaches their sport - with preparation, training, effort, etc.
- The subject of his praying was other believers, not so much himself.
- His objective for them was that they would submit to “the will of God” and thereby find themselves being perfected as God worked in them to “complete” the work He had begun at their conversion.
- Epaphras prayed with “zeal.” Because he would rather pray than anything else, he was successful in everything else.

One commentator said that it might be better to pray for a person for half an hour than to counsel them for hours. I think it's true - but too often we've lost sight of the power of prayer.

Prayer is definitely a mark that you are taking humility in your work as a builder.

Colossians 4:14 Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.

Doctors may not have been as revered in first century Rome as they are today. Luke likely was the slave of Theophyllus, for whom he was commissioned to write the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Whether revered or not, Luke reminds us that no matter your career you are first-and-foremost committed to serving in the church. Your career belongs to Jesus.

Demas is mentioned with no description. Demas is mentioned three times in the Bible and there is a sad digression each time:

1. First, he is called “Demas... my fellow laborer” and is linked with three godly men - Mark, Aristarchus, and Luke (Philemon 24).
2. Next, he is simply called Demas here in our verse with no word of identification or commendation.
3. Finally, it is said of him, “for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (Second Timothy 4:10).

There you are, building within the church. But always there is the world wooing you, seducing you. Let me say this: In context of what we are discussing, I’d say that your sincere, committed involvement in the local church is itself a powerful defense against the world.

The world is getting worse and worse. The temptations facing us and especially our children are mind-blowing. Is this the time, really, to be unattached? To be intermittent? To be a blender?

I don’t think so!

Look at yourself in comparison to these godly men, to this building crew of the apostle Paul’s. Make any necessary adjustments. Throw yourself in to helping build God’s church - His local church, this particular church. Let’s build it together!

We’re not done!

#2 Be A Building That Takes Heed To God's Work (v15-18)

In the analogy of the church as a building, you are both a builder and part of the building itself.

In these closing verses he was talking to all of them, and to all of us, as a building that ought to take heed to God's work.

Colossians 4:15 Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.

Colossians 4:16 Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

The church over in Laodicea met in the home of Nymphas. Some Bibles translate the name in a feminine form, Nympha; thus we cannot be certain if this was a man or a woman.

The church initially met daily in the Temple at Jerusalem and in private homes. As Christianity spread the Gospel was preached in synagogue meetings and in private homes. If a building was available, it was rented or utilized - like the school of Tyrannus in Acts 19. About the third century, when Christianity ceased being officially persecuted, the church started meeting more conveniently in buildings.

The church can meet anywhere that it is led to meet because Christians are the real building. Still I for one am grateful we have God's provision of these very fine facilities and want to use them to their fullest potential.

The "epistle from Laodicea" is most likely the letter we call Ephesians. It was meant to be read in all the churches and just happened to be at Laodicea at the time.

What we learn is that all the letters to any of the churches were for every assembly of God's people. "Read" means *read aloud*. Even though we now have our own copies of those letters, we should still gather to "read aloud" the Word of God.

Colossians 4:17 And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

Archippus was most likely Philemon's son and the current pastor of the church at Colossae. What they - the believers - were to "say" to him cuts both ways:

1. Obviously it is an exhortation to him as their pastor to not neglect the ministry. Part of that ministry, a huge part, is reading and teaching the Word of God. This seems so obvious but in every generation pastors and church leaders drift willfully away from the foundation of the Word of God into all manner of weirdness and wickedness.
2. Not so obviously this is an exhortation to the believers. In saying to their pastor, "take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it," they were putting themselves in submission to it as unto the Lord.

Look briefly with me at two elements of the statement:

1. It was "the ministry" their pastor "had received in the Lord." It was a recognition that here was a man, the man, God Himself had raised-up for them and gifted them with. That is saying a lot. As long as your pastor is biblical and not in sin, if he is the man God has given you, build according to his leading.
2. "That you may fulfill it" carries the idea of a definite purpose to fulfill. It's been my experience these almost twenty-five years in the pastorate that each local church has its own work to fulfill. Every church God has raised-up has its own mission and mission parameters. No one church can do everything, even if it's a good thing. There must be focus and it ought to come from vision as we seek the Lord's leading.

Colossians 4:18 This salutation by my own hand - Paul. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Amen.

It's believed by scholars that Paul dictated his letters to a secretary called an *amanensis*. He would always sign them to verify authenticity.

“Remember my chains.” How do you read that? I see Paul reminding them of the joy of sacrifice and suffering for the sake of Jesus.

“Grace be with you” is more than a quick end to the letter. It is a reminder that having begun in grace we must continue the Christian life by God’s grace.

“Amen.” So be it.

You are the building; **we are the building**. If we measure ourselves against these men, and make any necessary adjustments and corrections, we’ll be in a good place spiritually to continue to “build something together.”