

Colossians 1:23

“This is the gospel you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

Whether you live in the world of e-mail or only of traditional post, you will be familiar with fraudulent letters

- We need to check things out carefully – we need to be sure that the letter is from who it claims to be from
- We check the identity of the person – and, if we are wise, we also check out the authenticity of the contents
- When the letter that we call ‘Colossians’ arrived in the mountains of what is today modern Turkey
- It came from a man the local people had never met, who was probably in prison, hundreds of miles away
- And so it should not be such a surprise that Paul needs to set out his credentials
- ‘Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’ – this is an incredibly dramatic claim
- For an apostle of Christ Jesus means more than just a religious leader
- it is the dramatic claim that Paul is speaking as an ambassador and, if he is right,
- there is every reason to believe that this ancient letter can also be God’s word to his people today
- And that, in itself, is such a dramatic claim that we had better see if it rings true
- And one of the ways to do this is to make a careful study of what the apostles is teaching

The Colossians had first heard the gospel from another preacher, Epaphras

- Paul sets out what he believes is the essence of the gospel, confirming what they learned from Epaphras
- it is the gospel of God who has rescued his people from darkness to light
- in whose Son, believers have redemption, the forgiveness of sins
- The Son is superior to creation, thrones, power, rulers and authorities, he holds the first place in creation
- he must be supreme in the church, in the life of the individual believer
- for he is the ‘eternal Son’, who by his death upon the cross, makes peace with God possible, through his blood

Paul then makes the distinction between Paul the man and Paul the minister

- now, I know it is hard to believe but apparently I have my critics, some years ago a friend said to me.
- ‘I went to visit Mrs Gee, she says she doesn’t like you, I didn’t know what to say
- I replied, go back to her and say, you might not like his hymns, his prayers or his preaching
- But don’t say you don’t like him because you don’t know him, she is confusing the minister with the man
- The people at Colossae had not met Paul and it was too late to meet him now
- Paul is not giving them his credentials as Paul the man, but as Paul the minister – an important point
- ‘Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’ – in the faithful exercise of a divinely appointed ministry
- God uses his letters to communicate his message, then and now, not Paul the man but Paul the minister
- So often the best we say about our ministers and preachers is that they are very ‘nice’ – that may be a bonus
- And ‘nice’ is better than ‘nasty’ but when I was in hospital, the fact my heart surgeon was ‘nice’ was a bonus
- It was ‘nice’ that he was ‘nice’ but first and foremost I wanted him to be a great surgeon, to make me better
- Paul is not commending himself as nice, but as an apostle, a faithful preacher of the gospel

When I worked at Plymouth Argyle a famous manager, Malcolm Allison, signed some very good players

- I am thinking of a particular player – after Malcolm left us for Manchester City a new manager came
- Whether the new manager’s ideas were right or wrong is not the point here
- But he asked the particular player to fulfil a particular role in the game, to do a job within the team
- The player replied, ‘I’m not doing that, it’s not my game’ – but he was not employed to play ‘his game’
- But to play for the team, ‘to serve the club’ and this is something we learn from the Apostle Paul
- he is a servant of the gospel, he is not doing his own thing, he is not working for ‘Apostle Paul Ministries’
- he is serving the gospel, all his authority as apostle is derived from the Lord Jesus Christ
- who has appointed him as a servant of the gospel and in Paul we see a commitment to

I SERVING THE GOSPEL

Paul shows the Colossians the effects of the gospel ministry (Col. 1:21-22)

- ‘once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour’
- You would think that take this straight speaking from someone they had never met is pretty tough stuff
- whereas unbelievers find that hard to swallow, believers accept the extent of their unbelief and disobedience
- it was because they had seen that this was the case that they were receptive to Christ
- religion is all about how much we have done for God, Christian faith is about how much God has done for us
- And here it is: Now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death
- To present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation

This is the gospel, that by faith, we who were unholy can be holy (that is we can be like Jesus)

- we who were blemished by sin can be presented without blemish
- we who stood accused, can be free from any accusation – no guilt standing against us
- This is the gospel, that by faith we can be born into this living hope, it is the gospel of the grace of God
- it is the gospel of the supremacy of Jesus, it is the gospel of his blood shed for us upon the cross
- it is the gospel that peace with God is known by this way, the way of his body given
- so that we who were anything but holy, unblemished and free from accusation
- can be holy, unblemished and free from accusation – and this is effectively the ministry of preaching
- it was for such preaching that the young John Wesley was excluded from preaching at polite London churches
- when he began to preach ‘salvation by faith’, he was soon told by many churches they did not want him
- The gospel is not about the unspectacular transformation from less than average to better than average
- It is the gospel of transformation from darkness to light – a gospel that is dramatic, ‘incomparable’

II SERVING THE CHURCH

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

(Colossians 1:24)

This is one of the trickiest verses in the letter, Paul cannot mean that the death of Christ on the cross was incomplete

- He means that his sufferings benefit the whole body of Christ (the church), not in the same way as the cross
- But in the unbloody, living sacrifice of which Paul speaks elsewhere (Romans 12:1)
- Therefore, the sufferings that Christ's people endure continue Christ's sufferings, we suffer his afflictions
- Yet, because, Christ is the Head and his people the body, he suffers with his people – we are in it together!

Paul gives his credentials as minister of the gospel, a servant of the church, the body of Christ, by God's commission

- His commission is to present the Word of God in its fullness, he calls this a 'mystery'
- Paul does not mean this is a riddle to crack or a secret to discover, but something hidden now revealed
- Paul had been appointed to 'present the word of God in its fullness' - 'Christ in you the hope of glory'
- 'hope' is a joyous expectation, 'glory' belongs to the Christian in heaven – in presenting the gospel
- Paul does not overlook the difficult bits, being a disciple can be hard
- his path of discipleship has been fellowship in Christ's sufferings (hardships)
- but it is truthful content and not merely attractive packaging that is the heart of the gospel message
- There is glorious expectation, there is the vision of heaven, but now there is striving, with the power of Christ
- How important this is for the believer today – aren't we so conscious of our powerlessness?
- The job seems too big, our power too small – and humanly speaking it is possible simply to be overwhelmed
- But then remember, 'Christ in you the hope of glory' (Col. 1:27). A servant of the gospel, of the church

III SERVING CHRIST

The essence of the gospel is the person and work of Christ

- the essence of our response to the gospel is receiving Christ
- receiving Christ is not the end but the beginning of the Christian journey
- and the journey should be consistent with the beginning
- this is what the minister/preacher is called to make known

That said, receiving Christ is often spoken of as if it is simply an emotional experience

- I would expect receiving Christ to be an emotional experience, but not only that
- Receiving Christ is, in effect, receiving the truth of Christ
- One of the great mistakes of the church of the present age is with regard to ‘worship’
- For many people, ‘worship’ has become little more than singing songs
- Or it has been used to describe those components of the Christian service that are not ‘Word’
- For me, Christian worship is declaring the truth about God in the context of the truth about ourselves
- Perhaps we might describe Christian conversion in similar terms
- receiving the truth about Christ in the context of the truth about ourselves – this is not easy
- but if we make the beginning too easy, people will eventually discover that the road is not easy and give up
- To become a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, believing in him and trusting him, is not easy
- Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, believing in him and trusting him is not easy
- The cause of serving the gospel – doing it for Christ rather than for ourselves
- The cause of serving the church – doing it for Christ rather than for ourselves
- Is the Christian calling – it is not easy but we are inspired by this, ‘Christ in you the hope of glory’

The great truth is that all that is deepest in God is summed up in Christ

- we never move beyond the person and work of Christ
- for in everything he must have the supremacy
- to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord is the essence of being a Christian
- to continue to live in him is what the Christian life is about
- and while there is nothing wrong in Christian experience
- the Methodist movement was animated by the Christian experience of John Wesley's heart strangely warmed
- we are not experience centred, but Christ centred, rooted and built up in him

There is a great need to build adequately and firmly on the foundation of Christ's Lordship

- If we are right in dating this letter towards the end of Paul's ministry
- He is under house arrest and living in a 'rented house' (Acts 28:30)
- Yet, he is still able to pray and to preach, to exercise a ministry of exhortation

It is vital that Christians grow up in their salvation

- They received Christ Jesus as Lord – now they must continue to live in him
- Rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as they were taught, overflowing with thankfulness
- the very basis of our faith in Christ is that faith taught in the scriptures
- and as we are strengthened in that faith, so we are overflowing with thankfulness
- and we may recall also the ministry of Paul and gospel of which he had become a servant
- The cause of serving the gospel – doing it for Christ rather than for ourselves
- The cause of serving the church – doing it for Christ rather than for ourselves
- This is the Christian calling – it is not easy but we are inspired by this, 'Christ in you the hope of glory'