

Lessons From the Congo

Colossians 1:1-14

Introduction:

You may think this about most of my sermons, but I want you to know that today's sermon is going to be a little different...

Unless you are relatively new to VCL, you are probably well aware that Jim Uren, the chair of our Missions Ministry Team, and I recently returned from an exploratory vision trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was our intent and desire as a church to see and to hear firsthand what God was doing in and through the CECU, our sister denomination (of the EFC) in that country.

Even before our departure, we set aside a date soon after we returned where I would preach on the lessons learned in the Congo. It was our assumption that, if we were to make an investment like this one, that God would not remain silent—that He would have a message that He would speak to us as individuals and to us as a congregation. I believe God has done just that.

It is my intention, hope, and desire this morning to deliver as best as I can what I believe to be, at least in part, what God would want to say to our congregation given what we saw, heard, and experienced during our time in the Congo.

Transition:

Preaching a sermon like this one offered a unique challenge for me. What text do I choose to preach from? If there is a message for us that God would want to communicate to us this morning, I was convinced that it wouldn't come to us apart from His authoritative Word. I considered several texts, but eventually found myself coming back again and again to one in particular—Colossians 1:1-14.

Turn to Colossians 1:1-14 (pg. 875)

I chose this text for two reasons...

1. **Content**—The very words that the Apostle Paul communicates are particularly relevant for us as we consider the lessons we might learn from the Congo. We will look at these in a moment.
2. **Context**—The people, relationships, and background in which this letter is written is relevant for us as well. The situation is this...
 - Paul is writing a letter to the church in Colossae, a church that in fact he has never personally visited. Paul wasn't about to visit anytime soon. He was in prison as he wrote, likely in Rome. His interest in Colossae is not one of personal investment, but one of general passion and concern for the Church of Jesus Christ and Christians wherever they would be found. He is compelled to connect with them and invest in their spiritual well-being and welfare.
 - The church in Colossae had been started by Epaphras (1:7). Everything that Paul was hearing about this church was coming from Epaphras as he reported to Paul on the condition of the Christians in that city. Paul is dependent on the third-party report of another.

There are some notable similarities here...

1. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a place that few of us have gone or ever will go. When it comes to going to the Congo, most of us might as well be in jail, because it's just not going to happen.
2. All the reports that we have heard as a congregation about the church in the Congo are from third-party sources...
 - a. EFCA Missions
 - b. Other EFCA churches/church leaders
 - c. Jim and I

What the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:1-14 is an accurate summary of what he's heard from Epaphras about the church in Colossae. And it just so happens, it's exactly what I would want to report to you this morning about the CECU churches in the Congo. If 2000 years ago I had the opportunity to travel to the Congo and report to the Apostle Paul what I had seen, heard, and experienced,

and he then wrote a letter to that church—I cannot help but think that this is what it would say.

Main Points:

1. The Congolese Free Church Has Faith in Jesus Christ—a Faith Worth Hearing About. (1:1-4a)

(Read 1:1-4a).

One of the more notable things that Epaphras reported to Paul about the Colossians is their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul refers to their faith in passing on two other occasions in this passage...

- “to the holy and faithful (believing) brothers...” (v. 2)
- “the faith...that spring(s) from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven...” (v. 5)

The faith of the Colossian church in Jesus Christ was something worth hearing about. And I would contend that the faith of the Congolese Free Church in Jesus Christ is worth hearing about as well.

We don’t have the stories recorded for us that Epaphras might have recounted to illustrate this fact to Paul. But we do have stories from the Congo that speak to their faith in Jesus Christ.

Church (as buildings)—3 PHOTOS

- 950 in the Ubangi (size of Indiana)—Compared to 1200 in the United States
- Doubled in size in the last 15 years

Church (as people)

- Full —2 PHOTOS
- Finances—2 PHOTOS
 - Give out of their need

Church (as individuals)

- President Bosakpale—**1 PHOTO**
- Mambo—**1 PHOTO**
 - Solar Engineering
 - Non-Profit Management
 - Returned to Congo
- Dr. Zachary—**1 PHOTO**
 - Salary
 - Single
- Bible Institute Students—**1 PHOTO**
 - Few Resources
 - Context of poverty, ethnic tension, and ostracized from community for talking about sexuality (AIDS)
- Youth Workers—**2 PHOTOS**
 - Travel more than 100 miles to attend.
- Women—**1 PHOTO**

The Congolese Free Church has faith in Jesus Christ—and it is a faith worth hearing about. It is a church that is...

- Numerous
- Healthy
- Generous
- Committed to Jesus Christ

And the sacrifices that they are making for their Savior speak volumes to their faith in Him.

This is the first lesson that God would want us to learn from the Congo.

2. The Congolese Free Church Loves Other Christians—a Love Worth Talking About. (1:4b-6a)

(Read 1:4b-6a.)

The second thing that Epaphras reports to the Apostle Paul is the love that the Colossians have “for all of the saints”. It is a love that is based in the hope of

heaven and that expresses itself to others who share their same faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul speaks of their love again in verse 8—“and who told us of your love in the Spirit”.

Again, we don't have the stories recorded for us that Epaphras might have recounted to illustrate this fact to Paul. But we do have stories from the Congo that speak to their love for all of the saints.

The Congolese Free Church...

- **Loves the Loveless**—They are committed to reaching out with the compassion of Jesus to those who are most harassed and helpless in the world—widows, orphans, unwed mothers, and the handicapped. They are loving the loveless by...
 - Creating the Elikya Center—soap, sewing, carpentry, masonry, etc.—**5 PHOTOS**
 - Committed to the success of the Elikya Center—**1 PHOTO**
 - Pastor at Elikya Celebration—“If Elikya fails, it is **our** fault”.
 - Elikya Site Plan—at this location and plans for future sites!
 - Holding Participants Responsible
 - Pastor at Elikya Celebration—“You have been given skills here that will allow you to be able to provide for yourself and for you families. You are responsible for to God for the skills you have been given. No stealing. No begging. God does not play favorites. You are responsible for the skills you have been given.”
- **Love for Us (EFCA)**—President Bosakpale—“If you love someone, you come and visit them.” He may want to talk of our love for them, but their love for us is the real story to be told!
 - Saints that have gone before...
 - Missionaries have made many mistakes, but the Congolese Free Church appreciates the work who have gone before them and prepared the way for the physical and spiritual progress that they are now experiencing.

- Government official from Gemena—**1 PHOTO**
- Saints that are still going...
 - Read **“Letter of Gratitude”** from Mowa—**2 PHOTOS**
 - Practical hospitality
 - Youth Ministry Team
 - New house (that the pastor would inherit)
 - Hot baths
 - Food—Water Buffalo

The Congolese Free Church is reaching out in love to the weakest among them. They are reaching out in love to us who seek to come alongside them in this effort. There is no judgment for our past failures. There is no jealousy for the current disparities between us. There is simply love—“for all the saints”—and they are showing it in both word and deed—and it is a love worth talking about.

3. The Congolese Free Church is Bearing the Fruit of the Gospel—a Message that Must Be Shared. (1:6b)

Read 1:6b

The third thing that Epaphras reports to the Apostle Paul is the Gospel is growing and bearing fruit among them, just as it is in other parts of the world.

Once again, we don’t have the stories recorded for us that Epaphras might have recounted to illustrate this fact to Paul. But we do have stories from the Congo that illustrate how the Gospel is growing and bearing fruit in their particular context.

The Congolese Free Church is seeking and seeing the Gospel grow and bear fruit...

- Seeing it bear fruit among Christians—**1 PHOTO**
 - Elikya widows
 - Gaining confidence in who they are in the eyes of God.
 - Productive and active members of the church.
 - Cleaning the church
 - Working in the pastor’s garden
 - Widow’s assistance fund

- Seeking to bear fruit among Christians—**1 PHOTO**
 - Committed to youth discipleship
 - Pastor Passi—“I want to see a youth Bible study in every church.”
- Seeing it bear fruit among non-Christians locally
 - 50% of all Global Fingerprints orphans and Elikya Center participants must come from outside the church. They want to see the Gospel bear fruit in the lives of non-Christians locally.
 - Mama Wesse—**1 PHOTO**
 - Bible studies (stories of Joseph)
 - Muhammad—Global Fingerprints child (Muslim)
 - Broken leg
 - 5 months at Tandala hospital
 - Imam came to the church on a Sunday morning to thank the church for what they had done.
 - Tandala hospital—prayer and evangelism with patients is made a priority. This Christian hospital is drawing non-Christians to come from far and wide. (Muslim man from Zongo)
- Seeking to bear fruit among non-Christians regionally
 - Kinshasa—Street children (Nightline documentary)
 - Pygmies—Central African Republic

The Congolese Free Church is seeking and seeing the Gospel grow and bear fruit in their context—and it’s a message that must be shared.

Conclusion:

If there is one lesson to be learned from the Congo, it is this...The Kingdom of God is alive and well!...

- They have a faith in Jesus Christ worth hearing about.
- They have a love for all of the saints that is worth talking about.
- They have a Gospel that is bearing fruit that is worth sharing.

I am personally in awe of what God is doing in and through the Congolese Free Church. It is the best kept secret in the Evangelical Free Church today. It is a story that must be told. It’s a story that I’m excited and privileged to share with you. I trust and hope that you will leave here today inspired and excited by what

you have heard. If so, I would simply invite you to allow that excitement to impact you the way that it impacted the Apostle Paul.

Upon hearing the news from Epaphras, Paul was moved to do two things...

- Give thanks
- Get praying

Read 1:3. Lessons learned for Colossae and lessons learned from the Congo should find their fulfillment in thanksgiving and prayer by all who hear them.

And how should we then pray? Read 1:13-14. Pray for...

- Knowledge
- Spiritual wisdom and understanding
- Bear fruit in every good work
- Strength
- Patience
- Endurance

The challenges facing the Congolese Free Church are still significant...

- Syncretism—Christ and animism
- Sexuality—a problem that is difficult to address
- Suffering—“Who sinned—us or someone else?”

Let's pray!