

Introduction:

A. Near the end of last year, I read something about Christians who were especially fervent for Jesus despite persecution and I began to wonder just what God thought about the quality of my Christian walk. I also wondered what God thought of our church, something I've often thought about. So during the seven weeks of Lent I decided to fast one day each week, and to devote most of Thursday mornings to seeking God regarding my own spiritual health as well as VCL's.

Instead of taking me to the woodshed—confronting me with my failings—as I expected, God delighted me again and again, even when gently correcting me. I actually couldn't wait for each Thursday to come.

As to our church, I had already begun to think about a sermon series from Rev. 2 and 3 where Jesus speaks to the seven churches. Several times in those assessments the Lord says, "*I have this against you...*," and I expected God to say something like that about VCL as I spent those Thursdays with him. But he didn't. I felt no confirmation from the Lord about that direction. Instead, I sensed God's delight—his joy—over us, despite our weaknesses.

- B. On a separate track, I have thought a lot about what I should preach in my last months among you. As I was thinking through ideas, especially of sermons I've wanted to preach here **one more time**, the Holy Spirit reminded me, "*Don't forget to preach Christ!*" That reminder brought me to Colossians, an epistle where the glory of Christ is on full display. I preached Colossians exactly 20 years ago here, and now we'll just have time for about a chapter and a half. **Turn to Col. 1.**
- C. Before Paul rhapsodizes about the supremacy of Christ and his amazing salvation purchased for us on the cross, he

speaks of his great thanks to God for the Colossian church, which is why I thought of my prayers for VCL this spring. Paul never visited Colossae, in present-day Turkey, but he knew the church there well. Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this. He sent it through two trusted aides, a man named Tychicus and a beloved spiritual son to Paul named Onesimus, who *happened* to be the runaway slave of the church's leader, a man named Philemon. The short letter to Philemon was delivered along with this letter. But that's another story. So listen to **Col 1:1-8...**

- D. When I read those words a few weeks ago I thought Paul could have been writing to Village Church. What struck me is that **what makes our church praiseworthy are God-given wonders that don't meet the eye.**

Paul never failed to see the miracle that is the church. It is evident, not only in his great teaching passages on the church, but in his most basic communication. Even just the opening words of this letter remind us how absolutely unique a church is. I'll focus on them for a few minutes because it is so important that *you* know who you are—who your *people* are—in the church.

I. WHAT MAKES GOD'S CHURCH PRAISEWORTHY IS OUR UNIQUE IDENTITY (1:1-2)

- A. Paul sends greetings from "*Timothy our brother,*" to "*the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.*" (A quick parenthesis. The Greek word translated *brothers* is a masculine form but when it is applied to a household it means *siblings*, both male and female. So translators aren't adding to the intent of the Bible's writers when they translate this masculine-form word as '*brothers and sisters*'.) Someone told Jesus that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him. Jesus said, "*My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*" That's us!

If an outsider came into our church and watched us with one another they might well say that we seem to be good friends. But we're more than friends; we are family. I've tried to impress upon you that we are not using a metaphor when we describe the church as family; as God's household. That is a *literal*. We are not *like* a family here. We *are* a family. We *are* brothers and sisters. In fact, if you are going to believe the Bible, this is our *first family*.

Illus.: Do you remember when our brother here, who is from Muslim-dominated Uzbekistan, described the threats on his life when he became a Christian? Remember how his uncle pressed a knife to his side, demanding he turn away from his faith in Christ! He told us, "*Before Christ I didn't like my family. But when I saw Christ and Christ transformed my heart, Christ give me big love for my family, for my parents. I was really a good son. I obeyed my parents and I love them with Jesus' love, but [even though] I loved them they hated me.... I love my family, my brother and sisters, but they beat me, they hate me and it was hard to understand. I said, 'Oh God, I am losing one valuable thing—my family—and it was very hard to understand.'* But God said, *'I will give you a new family.'*"

You have no other people in all the world like your Christian family. These are the people who will be with you forever. These are the people knit to you through the Lord Jesus Christ, our Brother and Bridegroom. **Not just friends; family.**

- B. Look at **v.2**: "*To God's **holy people** in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.*" People who know a little about you might say you're a very spiritual person, or that you're religious. But we're more than religious; we're God's holy people! *Saints*, as some translations have it. Not in the sense of impeccable lives but **because we are set apart for God**. We are sprinkled by the life-giving blood

of Christ. We are dressed in white robes of his righteousness. We are set apart for his service—his ambassadors and agents of his grace. We are his royal priests, raising prayers to God like incense and representing God to this dark world. **We're not just religious; we are God's holy people!**

- C. Look again at v.2, “*Grace and peace to you from **God our Father**,*” who is in the very next phrase identified as “*God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” People might identify us as people who believe in God. We don't just believe in God; we approach him as our Father. We are his adopted sons and daughters.
- Only the redeemed can call God *Abba [Papa] Father*.
 - Only the prayers of the redeemed are heard by God as a Father hears his children.
 - Only the redeemed have any hope of gradually bearing a striking resemblance to their Father God.
 - Only the redeemed may bear his name.
- D. Here's another thing: people naturally assume that anyone who goes to a church—even who *used* to go to a church—is Christian. We surely do espouse Christian teachings and meet under the Christian cross, but we are more than Christian; we are “in Christ.” V.2: “*The faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.*” Paul uses that phrase **17 times** just in this letter. **Our Christianity is not only what we believe; it is where we live and breathe and have our being—in Christ.**
- As Noah was *in the ark* so we are *in Christ*.
 - As Moses was sheltered from God's holiness *in the cleft of the rock* so we are *in Christ*.
 - As a High Priest would stand *in the Holy of Holies* in the very presence of Yahweh so we are *in Christ*.

- Our faith puts us *in Christ on his cross and in his tomb* and we were *in Christ* when he rose from the dead and ascended on high. We are there even now, in that heavenly place, because **we are more than Christians; we are *in Christ*.**
- E. One more, again in v.2: “***Grace and peace to you from God our Father.***” That is not just a greeting or a good wish, a Christian Hallmark card. It is a blessing. I heard someone call us “people of faith.” **We are not just “people of faith;” we are a people blessed with God’s grace and peace.** “Grace and peace” describe our culture, our environment, our birthright. No other people live in the undeserved grace of God nor in the unassailable peace of God. That why we sing, “*It is well with my soul.*”
- F. So do you see what I mean? What makes our church praiseworthy are wonders that don’t meet the eye. None of those privileges would be true if it weren’t from the Lord’s grace to us. They are not true of any other people! Brothers and sisters in Christ, sons and daughters of God our Father, his holy people, living *in Christ*, rich and resting in our birthright of God’s own grace and peace.

When we talk about a church that impressed us we will usually talk about their building, or preacher, their music, or maybe how friendly they were. But what had gotten back to Paul in a faraway Roman prison about the Colossian church wasn’t that kind of news. **Vv.3-4:** “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people.*” These two qualities are what stood out to Paul and what prompted his thanks to God. They stand out to me about this church, too. These are the things about us that delight God!

II. WHAT MAKES OUR CHURCH PRAISEWORTHY ARE THE UNIQUE QUALITIES SPRINGING FOR OUR HOPE IN CHRIST (1:3-8)

A. First, “your faith in Christ Jesus.” I suspect Epaphras, who had first brought the gospel to Colossae, had told Paul specific stories of how this one and that came to trust Christ. We do that here, too. Every conversion story, after all, is a wonder, a miracle! These stories of how our “*faith in Christ Jesus*” began are our entrée into the church. The key requirement for membership here at VCL is that you tell us how you came to trust Christ and we always rejoice to hear each story.

But Paul was also thinking of their everyday, working faith as Christians. Six times in this letter he makes reference to their faith. He talks about them *continuing in their faith*, being *firm in the faith*, being *strengthened in the faith as you were taught*. He is thinking, on the one hand, of their steadfast commitment to the truths of the Gospel as they had been taught. He also means their faith given voice and muscle in their prayers and exercised as they sought to trust and obey God in their trials, decisions, relationships, and evangelism. All that reflects “*your faith in Christ Jesus.*”

There’s a curious thing here. He says, “*We thank God for your faith.*” Not to be difficult, but if it is *your* faith why thank *God* for it? Why not thank *you* for *your* faith? Because we have nothing to believe in without God’s good news, nor would we have the capacity or even the inclination to trust God unless he drew us to himself and instilled in us the gift of faith, nor would our faith accomplish anything unless God chose to accept it in lieu of any action on our part. Faith, after all, isn’t really *doing* something. It is simply *receiving* God’s promise of salvation as true. So that’s why we thank *God* for *your* faith.

B. The second quality is “Your love for all God’s people”.

Paul uses the word *love* six times in this letter, and he devotes a good part of his letter to the love skills a church should have. Look at **3:12-14**, what I call “love’s coat of many colors”...

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.***

Think again of all the things we use to measure a church. I often repeat something I read by **Dallas Willard**: “Pastors need to redefine success. The popular model of success involves the ABCs—attendance, buildings, and cash. **Instead of counting Christians, we need to weigh them.** We weigh them by focusing on the most important kind of growth... *fruit in keeping with the gospel and the kingdom.*” [LJ, Summer ‘05]. **And “love for all the saints” is what adds weight to a church.**

Illus.: Last Sunday I was visiting with a new TEDS student. I suppose the service had been over about 20 minutes and the foyer was still crowded as you visited with one another. He looked around and asked me, “*Is it always like this?*” Meaning, do people always stay around like this? “Yes,” I told him, “*but that doesn’t come about automatically. That kind of fellowship takes some doing.*”

We have learned here to love one another. Twenty-two years ago this church was, you might say, war-torn. People were demoralized. There had been a lot of mistrust and hurt. Most of the attention went to especially gifted or wealthy people. People were leaving, not coming. So we prayed. We addressed the sins of the past. We got rid of

pretense. We established small groups—Growth Groups—to foster more intimate relationships and to give a place where we could pray for one another. We sought to make our worship services a reflection of our church family’s love for Christ instead of a performance for the sake of a visitor. We worked at learning names and faces, even though people come and go so quickly here. We made time and places for fellowship. We worked to be more than friendly to our guests, but to make friends. And all this was because of what Scripture teaches us and thanks to the Holy Spirit who gave us the will and the strength to do it. So it is only right to thank God for your love for all God’s people.

- C. These uniquely God-given qualities spring from our hope, secure in heaven. **V.5**, “*the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you.*” Hope is a code word for Paul, a kind of shorthand. It doesn’t mean *hope so*. He means our *certain hope* in what God has promised. In v.23 he speaks of “*the hope held out in the gospel,*” and in v.27, he says, “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” Our rock-solid *hope* is that Christ is in us, and we are in Christ, a hope that rests on Jesus’ death and resurrection for us.

We cannot generate faith in Christ and love for one another by our own effort. They are the flowers that grow from the soil of our hope in Christ. “*Christ in you, the hope of glory,*” is the seedbed of all that distinguishes us as God’s holy people, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as people singularly blessed by God’s grace and peace.

Conclusion

Churches so easily forget just who they are; forget what matters. We so easily substitute *our* desires of our church for *God’s*, our methods instead of God’s, our reputation instead of

God's. It is so much easier, we think, to walk by sight instead of by faith.

I think God delights in Village Church. Not because we do all he desires, for we don't. Not because our relationships are all that they should be, for they aren't. Not because we exercise faith as we might, because we ask too little of him. But **what makes our church praiseworthy are God-given wonders that don't meet the eye, our unique identity and qualities.** *"I always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when I pray for you, because of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven."*