

The Purpose-driven Church

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Romans 10:14–15 (CEB)

¹⁴So how can they call on someone they don't have faith in? And how can they have faith in someone they haven't heard of? And how can they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, *How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the good news.*

2 Corinthians 8:16–23 (CEB)

¹⁶But thank God, who put the same commitment that I have for you in Titus' heart. ¹⁷Not only has he accepted our challenge but he's on his way to see you voluntarily, and he's excited. ¹⁸We are sending the brother who is famous in all the churches because of his work for the gospel along with him.

¹⁹In addition to this, he is chosen by the churches to be our traveling companion in this work of grace, which we are taking care of for the sake of the glory of the Lord himself, and to show our desire to help. ²⁰We are trying to avoid being blamed by anyone for the way we take care of this large amount of money. ²¹We care about doing the right thing, not only in the Lord's eyes but also in the eyes of other people.

²²We are sending our brother with them. We have tested his commitment in many ways and many times. Now he's even more committed, because he has so much confidence in you.

²³If there is any question about Titus, he is my partner and coworker among you. If there is any question about our brothers, they are the churches' apostles and an honor to Christ.

Colossians 1:15–28 (CEB)

¹⁵The Son is the image
of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,
¹⁶Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible
and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created
through him and for him.
¹⁷He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.
¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church,

who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn
from among the dead
so that he might occupy
the first place in everything.
¹⁹Because all the fullness of God
was pleased to live in him,
²⁰and he reconciled all things to himself
through him—
whether things on earth
or in the heavens.
He brought peace
through the blood of his cross.

²¹Once you were alienated from God and you were enemies with him in your minds, which was shown by your evil actions. ²²But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death, to present you before God as a people who are holy, faultless, and without blame. ²³But you need to remain well established and rooted in faith and not shift away from the hope given in the good news that you heard. This message has been preached throughout all creation under heaven. And I, Paul, became a servant of this good news.

²⁴Now I'm happy to be suffering for you. I'm completing what is missing from Christ's sufferings with my own body. I'm doing this for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I became a servant of the church by God's commission, which was given to me for you, in order to complete God's word. ²⁶I'm completing it with a secret plan that has been hidden for ages and generations but which has now been revealed to his holy people. ²⁷God wanted to make the glorious riches of this secret plan known among the Gentiles, which is Christ living in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸This is what we preach as we warn and teach every person with all wisdom so that we might present each one mature in Christ.

Why has called us to his church? What does he expect from us?

This series is titled *Like Jesus*, which I suppose could be taken two ways: (1) striving to be like Jesus and (2) simply learning to like Jesus. Regardless, it all has to begin with a simple question: Who is Jesus? Actually, really, truly. There is no point in constructing a Jesus that fits our perceived needs and desires, a figment of our spiritual imagination. No, if we are to

learn to like and even love Jesus, it must be the Jesus who lived 2,000 years ago and who lives now. And if we want to be like him, then we must know something of the target we are trying to hit. Preferably more rather than less.

Today's passage from Colossian is a great place to begin.

Who is Jesus? (1:15-20)

Colossians 1:15-20 is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul's point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the Lord God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Paul was certainly a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousands to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God's desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of *all* things and *all* powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely

The Letter to the Colossians

Colossae was located about 110 miles east of Ephesus on a major east-west highway cutting across southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Though once the most important city in its region, by Paul's day Colossae had been overshadowed by Laodicea (see Revelation 3:14-22) and Hierapolis. In the early 60's AD, the region was struck by a major earthquake and Colossae never really recovered.

Because letters like this one can only reflect one side of the conversation, disputes rage regarding what Paul is responding to in his letter. But regardless of the exact nature of the problems, Paul points the reader directly to Jesus Christ. In this letter, Paul dwells more upon Jesus Christ – his divinity and his creative and redemptive work – than in any other of Paul's letters. For example, the paragraph immediately following today's scripture passage is one of Paul's classic statements about the nature and work of Jesus Christ (1:15-20)

You may wonder why I include what seems to be historical trivia in these studies – like Colossae's earthquake. I do so because many of us have little idea that some NT “books,” like Colossians, are real letters written to real people in real places to deal with specific and troubling problems. It is my hope that a few details will help make all this “Bible stuff” seem a little more real to you!

human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God's fullness¹ dwells.

And what is God's purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the "blood of his cross." This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus' death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but also offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is true.

So there you have it. In just a few sentences, Paul sets out the most astonishing, even outlandish, claims about Jesus. If they are true, how could we not only "like" Jesus but worship him? How could we ignore the apostolic call to be like Jesus, to be Christ-like?

In a nutshell, if true², what do such claims mean for us?

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians has been of enormous importance to the church. For example, chapter 3 gives us the fullest presentation of the Christian categories of old and new covenants (a.k.a. "testaments"). Yet, in some ways the letter seems a bit of a hodge-podge, ranging across diverse topics and styles. Many scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is actually portions of several letters to the church in Corinth that were merged into a single document.

Despite questions about its unity, Edith Humphrey writes that the theological drive in the letter is integration. "Above all others, this letter reminds us that pastoral, academic, and theological roles are best held together. Paul addresses the particular questions of his beloved church without losing sight of the larger picture."

Paul seeks to resolve problems with church authority and structure. He calls the people to holy lives in which even the mundane is God's. He urges them toward generosity as he reminds them of Jesus own "generous act" (8:9). Paul defends his own ministry against those he believes are trying to pull the people away from the one true God. Through it all, Paul seeks to build up this still-fragile community of believers.

Y'all

I've mentioned before in these studies that I'm drawn to Paul's letters. I think, in large part, this is because Paul is doing the hard work of building up Christian communities. He is encouraging, instructing, and even rebuking these young communities as he goes about the work of the kingdom – inviting people in, welcoming them, challenging them to be true disciples of Christ and summoning them to their own work for the kingdom.

One of the tricky things in Paul's letters is reading the second person (you) correctly. Does Paul mean "you" as in just me or does he mean "you" as in all of us? Sometimes the context makes it clear; sometimes not. You'll read Paul better if every time it is unclear whether the "you" is singular or plural, assume it is plural – just a big "y'all" sitting right there on the page. I often wish someone would come out with a "y'all" translation.

Case in point -- Colossians 1:24. The "you" is plural. The whole passage is plural, focused on the community of believers. Verse 27, "Christ living in you," again, plural. This is about us, the community of those who placed their trust in Jesus.

Today's passages give us a peek inside Paul's exhortations to these believers to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to be eager messengers of the church in all that they do.

The Good News

It is worth reviewing what we mean by the Good News, or more precisely, what Paul means. The Good News (*evangelion* in the Greek, also

¹Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." From *The Message*: "So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding."

² What proof would Paul point to in support of his claims? Jesus' resurrection. It all hinges on the veracity of that claim.

translated “gospel”) is *not* a summary of Jesus’ teachings nor a synopsis of his life and not even the comfort of knowing that Jesus loves us. Granted, all of that is good and much of it is news to many of us, but it is not what Paul nor the other NT writers mean by “Good News.” The Good News is a proclamation to the entire world that Jesus is Lord. It is no more complicated than that and no less profound. It is a public proclamation of something we claim is true. This world, indeed all of creation, has one Master and that person is Jesus. It is to him and him alone that every knee should bow (see Philippians 2:6-11).

This is the Good News that transcends all other news because unless it is so, the world and all its inhabitants are adrift in a cosmos that is still lost. Richard Burridge writes, “Paul says remarkably little about Jesus’ ministry, and rarely quotes his teaching. Instead, he sees the whole nexus of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as a totality. In the ‘Christ Event’ God has acted to save men and women – and the whole cosmos. It is the central pivot of the ages.”³

But how is this Good News to be believed, to be trusted? In a series of four rhetorical questions (Romans 10:14-15, above), the ever-practical Paul urges the Christians in Rome to understand that for the Good News to be trusted and embraced by people, it must first be proclaimed to them, and it can only be proclaimed if there are those willing to go out and do the proclaiming. But who is to do this proclaiming?

The messengers

The words can get a bit tricky here. In 2 Corinthians 8:23, Paul describes Titus and the unnamed “famous” brother as *apostolos*, which the NRSV kindly translates as “messengers,” though the CEB retains the more traditional “apostles.” We often mistakenly assume that when the New Testament writers refer to apostles they mean only the twelve⁴ plus Paul. But, in truth, the NT uses a wide range of meaning for “apostle,” which is simply a Greek word for “messenger,” or more fully, “one who is sent.” For example, Paul refers to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, specially commissioned by the risen Lord just as were the original twelve. And he clearly sees this as differentiating himself from other Christians. But he also lists Junia, a woman, as “prominent among the apostles” (Romans 16:7) and lists “apostles” as among the gifts given to the church (Ephesians 4:11).

Christians have disagreed about exactly what to make of the varying distinctions among *apostolos* in the NT. Roman Catholics and Pentecostals have arrived at very different conclusions and, as you might guess, we Methodists are somewhere in the middle. Yet, all Christians find unity in Christ’s call for *us all* to be the light to the world, to go and make disciples, to be messengers of the Good News. We may be given different gifts of proclamation, some of us may be better at deeds than at words, but we are all sent.

The glory of Christ

Paul writes that these messengers of the churches are the “glory of Christ.” Glory is the image of God, the divine transcendence, made visible to others, to the world. It is a social term. It is about seeing God. Thus, Jesus is the glory of God, for he makes God visible – see Jesus, see God. The cross is the glory of God, for it makes God’s redeeming love visible. Titus and the unnamed brothers are Christ’s glory because others can see God at work in them and through them. Their dedication and devotion to their God-given vocation glorifies Jesus Christ because it helps the world to see that Jesus is who they claim he is, namely, Lord and Savior of all.

We too are messengers of the church, called to invite others to the Lord’s table here at St. Andrew. We too are the glory of Christ, for our friends and neighbors can see God at work in us as we lovingly and enthusiastically invite them to join us at St. Andrew! Pray that we may truly be lights in an increasingly darkened world.

³from “And in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord,” in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, Ed. Roger Van Harn, Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.

⁴You’ll recall that Matthias was chosen to replace Judas (Acts 1).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The difficulty of writing a background study on this passage from Colossians is that, like so much of Paul, every sentence, every phrase, is packed with meaning and power. Yet, we sometimes shy away from such passages. If we do more than let our minds dance across the surface of the words, it can all seem so “heavy.” Do you ever feel intimidated by such passages? Do you find yourself reading quickly past much of it? What can we do to help ourselves to be ready for, to even desire, “solid food”?
2. Do you see how even in these few verses (1:15-20), Paul blasts away any notion that we could think of Jesus as a mere man? Why do you think this is so important to Paul? We have to be careful to give up our claim that Jesus was fully human while we proclaim his divinity, though this is not Paul’s emphasis here (see Philippians 2: 5-11 for that).
3. Try to imagine the very best news that you could take to your friends and neighbors. Maybe it is a cure for cancer. Or the end of hatred. Maybe money pouring out of the sky . . . or the promise of eternal life. Would you hesitate to invite them to join in this exciting news? Wouldn’t you pound on their front door until they answer?
4. Why do you think that so many of us hesitate? What makes us hesitant believers? Is it our own lack of excitement? Is it a public world that increasingly insists the messenger keep the news to himself? How could we begin to overcome our hesitancy? How could we help each other in this?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Isaiah 52:7-10 How beautiful are the messengers of the peace.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Romans 10:5-21 The larger passage from Romans that quotes from the Isaiah passage</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 What does Paul preach? What should we proclaim? See verse 23.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 Paul is especially grateful for the Thessalonians because they have been an example to others.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Peter 2:4-20 Why have we been called out of the darkness? See verse 10.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

