

~Script: Pastor Frank Johnson~

Colossians: *Shaped by the Truth of Jesus*  
*"This Is What the Church Really Is!"*  
Colossians 1:1-8

~Take a first look~

I. OK, I want to take you all back to the Preschool Department once again for your opening lesson today. Let's all interlock our hands like this. Now I want to introduce a theologically accurate amendment to a little ditty I learned somewhere when I was a small fry.

"Here's the church-*building*;  
Here is the steeple.  
Open the doors;  
*The Church is the people!*"

Let's do this again, just to be sure we have it down. Now that was almost as hard as clapping and singing at the same time, wasn't it? That's a little lesson that you can take right to your New Testament and not be ashamed of it. You can grow up with it and not have to unlearn it someday when you get older and wiser.

II. When Paul writes to an ancient church to get their ideas straight concerning Jesus Christ, he begins by reminding them of what it means to be the Church. We would do well to let these insights sink in deeply into our hearts today.

~Take a closer look at Colossians 1:1-8~

**I. The Church is a fellowship comprised of saints and siblings. vv. 1-2**

1. *All true followers of Jesus Christ are saints, i.e., "holy ones."* I realize that we have gotten used to referring to only certain (usually dead!) people as "saints." We expect that they have attained this status, a large cut above the rest of us, through a very sacred process. Some important person or persons, maybe the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, has to nominate them, and some other important people, usually within the same ecclesiastical organization, must vote them in. Unfortunately, this practice is a matter of Church history, but it does not square with the teaching of the Bible. When Paul writes to the "saints" who live in ancient Colossae, he is not referring to the super-Christians among the members of the Church. He is referring to *all the Christians*, warts and all. He calls them "saints," or "holy ones," not because they have attained some status of excellence among Christians but because they have been *set apart to God as His very own*. In fact, this is what it means to be *holy*. It means to belong to God, to be set apart from everyone else and everything else as His very own.

A—According to this Biblical understanding, every person who has trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is a saint. Our calling is to <i>live</i> as what we <i>are</i> before God.
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**I—Think of it like this: In C. S. Lewis' book *The Horse and His Boy*,<sup>1</sup> Shasta, a lowly son of a poor fisherman discovers that he is actually Cor, the twin son of a king, the actual heir to the throne of a country bordering on Narnia called Archenland. The story is about his adventure, with a talking horse from Narnia, of returning to his true country. As you might imagine, it was a great shock to Shasta to discover that he was not only of royal blood in Archenland, but that he was also the elder twin and heir to the throne. He was not any of that through his own efforts or through his training (which had been coarse and very limited). He was a prince because of his birth and because of that alone. When he found out this amazing truth, he had to learn what it meant to live like a man of royal blood and no longer as a poor fisherman's son.**

My friends, this is the truth about each of us who belong to Jesus Christ. We are holy because of what Jesus Christ has done for us, not because of what we have done for Him. We are holy because He has taken us into His very family and has sent His Spirit to live in our lives, the *Holy Spirit*, in fact, who has "given us new birth" as Jesus' followers (see 1 Peter 1). We are *saints* because He declares us so. Now the point is that we must learn to live like those whose Father is the King of kings and Lord of lords!

2. All true followers of Jesus Christ are brothers and sisters. Paul calls those he writes to in Colossae "*faithful brothers in Christ*." This is the family spirit that must characterize the Church which bears the name of Jesus Christ.

A—We are the family of God, and we should act like it!
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**I—OK, you might reply. We do act like it. We quibble with each other from time to time like brothers and sisters often do.** We don't speak to each other for years. I will concede this observation. But being the family of God also means that we are fiercely loyal to each other as families *should* be. My friends, it is appalling how temporary and shallow our relationships often are as followers of Jesus Christ! We will bag each other over almost anything that we don't like. The preacher is too hard on sin. The preacher is too soft on sin. The preacher is too prone to sin (I just thought I would begin with the most obvious complaint people have about church-life—me!). We can find an unlimited number of reasons to have hurt feelings about other believers, if we are wearing our feelings on our sleeves where they don't belong. We can find all kinds of things to complain about in each other, if we stick around each other for long enough. But here is the point. *We will live together for eternity* in the new heaven and new earth promised us in the Resurrection. *We must fight to remain together in the meantime* to accomplish the purposes of the kingdom of God. When we must separate, it should be with the sorrow of sending a member of our very family away because of the calling and will of God. It should never be just because we didn't get our way on some non-essential matter.

Paul wrote to "the *faithful brothers* in Christ." May we be no less in this time and place!

The Church is made up of *saints*, because we have been set apart to belong to God, and it is made up of *siblings*, because we have been drawn into the very same family of God.

## **II. The Church is a fellowship created by grace and peace. v. 2**

1. *Grace is the basis of our fellowship with Jesus Christ and with each other.* This is a standard greeting that we observe throughout the correspondence of the New Testament. "Grace and peace to you..." *Grace* is that wonderful quality in the character of God that causes Him to offer His love to us purely on the basis of His generosity and with no reference to

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration by Pauline Baynes from the following URL: <http://books.narnia.com/movielanding.html>.

whether or not we deserve it (which we all know we do *not*). There is both a mystery to understanding it in the nature of God and there is an offense in it as we understand our own complete unworthiness to receive His love. The only ones worthy to receive it are those who admit they are not worthy to receive it.

2. *Peace is the effect of God's grace in our lives both as individuals and as a fellowship.* Paul will always have more to say about this, but we must note both the personal and the corporate elements to God's peace. Ultimately, God's work in our lives makes possible *peace within*, a settled inward sense that everything is going to be alright in the end, *peace with each other*, an outlandish and yet well-founded hope that we can actually get along and work together for the common good, and *peace with God*, the resolution of our spiritual and moral conflict with our Creator. This ultimately comes from "God our Father."

A—Are we receiving His grace and peace today?

I—I read several years ago about "a South African man who surprised nine men robbing his home. Eight of the robbers ran away, but the homeowner managed to shove one into his backyard pool. After realizing the robber couldn't swim, the homeowner jumped in to save him. *The Cape Times* reports that once out of the pool, the wet thief called to his friends to come back. Then he pulled a knife and threatened the man who had just rescued him.

"The homeowner said 'We were still standing near the pool and when I saw the knife I just threw him back in. But he was gasping for air and was drowning. So I rescued him again. I thought he had a cheek trying to stab me after I had just saved his life.'"<sup>2</sup>

God's grace is what transforms us into saints, "even though we were still sinners" when He dragged us out of the depths. Of course, if we are truly saved by His grace, we aren't going to turn on Him and try to stab Him or His people in the back with our words and actions right after He pulls us from the water!

### III. The Church is a fellowship known by faith, hope, and love. vv. 3-5

1. *The Church's faith is in Christ Jesus alone.* Faith is both a specifically shaped content of belief and a focused trust in a clearly identified object. In the case of the Church, our faith is *in Christ Jesus*.

A—We must trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness of sins and our acceptance with God.

2. *The Church's love must be expressed to each other; it is expressed in the realm of the work of God's Spirit* (v. 7). In another letter, Paul will say that "*the fruit of the Spirit is love*" and much more (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). The hallmark of Jesus' true Church is that the members of it love one another. They are not self-seeking people who only use others for their own advantage. They are not proud people who look down on everyone else's ideas and perspectives. They are self-giving people who are seeking to make each other successful.

A—God's Spirit frees us from the tyranny of self to serve others in love.

3. *The Church's hope causes both faith and love.* It is because we believe the promises held out in the Good News of Jesus Christ that we have put our trust in Jesus. It is because we

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<sup>2</sup> *USA Today* (12/12/01); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky.

know that we will live together forever that we can learn to love each other, warts and all, in the here and now.

A—The Christian hope is not merely wishful thinking. It is a clearly reasoned response to the promise of Jesus for our future that we simply believe and apply to our behavior. We know what lies in the ultimate future, so we don't have to fear what lies ahead tomorrow.

A—The Church should be characterized by faith, hope, and love. These are positive qualities that only God can produce in us by His Holy Spirit. They should be the hallmark of the Church. We should be known more for these qualities than for what we oppose or what we forbid.

**I—I have reminded you before about some of the amazing things that William Wilberforce and his prominent Christian friends accomplished in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Great Britain.** Over about 5 decades, they brought about the end to the slave trade and finally an end to the institution of slavery itself. They did so through earnest campaigning, publishing, and creative thinking about how the British economy might continue to flourish once human slave labor was no more. These prominent personalities were dubbed “the saints” (used in somewhat the Catholic sense). This was a compliment from their supporters and a slur from their detractors. There were political cartoons drawn showing them to be prudes and prigs. In one of them (see slide)<sup>3</sup>, Wilberforce is caricatured holding a hat over the private parts of a statue of Achilles in Hyde Park Corner in London—between the hours of 10 a.m. and dusk. It has the caption “Making Decent.” Because Wilberforce and his friends had set themselves to abolish slavery and to reform “manners” (i.e., public morality), they became bitter enemies to those who wanted to maintain the status quo in human trafficking and loose living.

Yet, Wilberforce, to those who knew him, was a man of great heart and great joy. He could be found frolicking around on the yard with the children even when important dignitaries came to call. He was known for his sense of humor (God knows that this alone will get one through sometimes!). He wrote that many of his contemporaries in the Church were a joyless and austere sort and that this should not be so! We should be known for positive qualities and not just for what we are against. *We must express growing evidence of faith, hope and love if we are really the Church of Jesus.*

#### **IV. The Church is a fellowship shaped by Good News and growth. vv. 5-6**

1. It is the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ that gives us hope and inspires both faith and love among God's people. This was the message that these folks accepted that brought them into God's family. They not only accepted that message as interesting and good but also supremely as *true*.

2. This Good News brings about growth both in the Church and in the individuals who comprise the Church. You notice that Paul thanks God that the Good News continues to grow and bear fruit “in all the world” but also in those who were in Colossae.

A—The only sound basis of the teaching of the Church is the Good News of Jesus Christ, as we have received it through the writings of the New Testament of our Bibles. It is this alone that can bear fruit for the kingdom of God in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Christian History*, Issue 53, p. 17.

**I—Jesus said, “I will build My Church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18).** In the parts of the world, notably Africa and South Korea, where the Good News is simply believed and boldly proclaimed, the Church is growing stronger and in number.

We were all thrilled several years ago at the Annual Meeting of the Central Washington Baptist Association, when Danny Kuykendall shared the results of the WorldChangers youth-missions event in 2005. Danny was the Youth Strategist for the NW Baptist Convention. The group of nearly 100 spent 14 days in Tanzania. They were working in areas where many of the people are connected to Islam. They were told not to expect much response, because it would take 30-40 contacts with a Muslim person to reach them for Jesus Christ. However, through the simple sharing of Bible stories about Jesus Christ, nearly 250 decisions for Christ were registered! They were floored! Even the missionaries who had coordinated their efforts could hardly believe what was happening. God showed up, all based on simply sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ from the New Testament of the Bible.

## **V. The Church is a fellowship formed by apostles and other servants. vv. 1, 7**

1. *The Church is based on the teaching of Jesus’ apostles.* Paul referred to himself as “an *apostle* of Christ Jesus *through God’s will* ....” Paul was not doing what he was doing because he grew up hoping he would become an apostle of Jesus. In fact, he grew up distrusting and ultimately dismissing and then persecuting the people who carried His message. It was only “through God’s will” that his eyes were opened to the truth that is in Jesus Christ. At that point, he changed from persecutor to preacher of Jesus’ message. He became *an apostle*.

An apostle was one sent out with a special mission and message. We have taken this word right out of the Greek New Testament (ἀπόστολος=apostolos). The Greek word ἀποστέλλω (apostello) means to *send out with a message/on a mission*. The one so sent is the *apostolos*. So why should that matter to us? Just this. The New Testament of the Bible was compiled on very strict and important criteria. One criterion was that the writing must be *apostolic*, meaning that it should either be written by an apostle of Jesus Christ or be clearly associated with an apostle. These founding messengers of Christ are the primary teachers of the Church. Their teaching has become not only influential for the Church’s doctrine, it is absolutely authoritative.

A—Once again, only teaching which is founded on and in harmony with the teaching of the apostles—our New Testament of the Bible—can be recognized as legitimate Christian teaching. Any other teachers cannot be recognized as having the same authority.

2. *The Church is formed by the work of God’s servants, such as Paul, Timothy, and Epaphras.* It is significant that Paul was a man of personal initiative, but he was also a team player who relied on many others to do what he himself could not do. He co-wrote this letter with “Timothy the brother,” and right away he mentioned Epaphras, “a faithful servant of Christ on your behalf,” as one who was instrumental in the Christian teaching of the Church in Colossae. Paul worked hard, but he did not work alone. It took all of these “fellow-slaves” as Paul refers to Epaphras in v. 7, to get the message of Christ out to the people.

A—It takes all of us today to get the word out about Jesus and His saving grace and power.

**I—Each of us has contact with people who need Christ that no one else can reach.** For some people, when they find out I am a pastor, they either withdraw or become hostile to my witness. For those folks, some of you are the link between them and the living God! In fact, sometimes, faith, hope and love are expressed in the most unexpected and extreme circumstances by those who represent Him in life and in word and in action.

For about 15 years, I played basketball 2-4 times a week at the Wellness Hour. Lee Bivens told me about this, and we enjoyed it—for me, until we did this our major rebuilding project in 2007-2008, and I could not pull away at noon to go up there. I then got out of the habit. My 3-inch vertical leap is not too commanding at present. During that time, I played with a man that I will call Reggie. Reggie did not have a background in basketball as some of the rest of us had. He was just running up and down to get exercise and to enjoy some social interaction. I noticed over time that he observed the actions of those of us who claimed to be Christians, even making comments—eventually the cat gets out of the bag, and people find out I am a pastor. One day, Reggie volunteered this comment to me: “You know, if I ever became a Christian, I would want to be one like you.” [Now that I say this out loud, I hope that was an actual complement!] I do remember praying almost daily about my witness on the court and in the locker room. I did not want to be perceived as a “ball hog” or someone who left out mediocre players like Reggie from handling the ball. I wanted to curtail the spirit of fierce competition that marked my younger years in the sport and just enjoy the game and the people. I wanted to contain my frustration when I was shooting poorly or dribbling the ball off my foot or missing passes. It was a crucible of character-formation. It was sometimes referred to as the *hell-ness* hour by those who played basketball [My recreation glasses were broken twice while playing there over the years, and our beloved Dr. Akker put stitches in my lip once.]

God calls each of us to bear witness in life, in word, and in action wherever He has strategically placed us. That strategy is required over the backyard fence, across the table in the coffee shop, in the seats of the school room, and on the gym floor.

~Take it home (applications)~

I. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we must *be* what we *are*!

So what is the Church? According to this passage, we can form this definition: *The Church is the family of Jesus’ followers who have come to belong to Him through His grace and truth, who express His peace through the qualities of faith, love, and hope, as they grow up in Him and represent Him in His world.*

II. Have each of us developed the relationship with Jesus Christ that brings us into the family of God and makes us holy?

III. Are we expressing the trilogy of facets that should reflect from the members of Jesus’ Church?

1. *Faith* in Him?
2. *Love* for each other?
3. *Hope* for the future?

IV. Are we growing up in Him, allowing Him more and more to fill every aspect of our being? Are we growing by reaching out to others with this message of grace and truth in Christ Jesus?