

The Eight Habits of a Highly Effective Church

A sermon for Saint Paul's – January 17th, 2010

Welcome to the third in a series of talks based on a letter written by Paul, the great first century missionary. This is the letter to the people at Colosse which is why we call it Colossians.

I grew up in a Methodist Church in Sydney where my Dad was the Sunday School Superintendent and choirmaster. My dad, the Sunday School Superintendent, had a wonderful book called "101 Object Lessons for Sunday School Students." The aim of object Lesson number #5 of 101 was to demonstrate that the Bible is in fact not one book, but a book of books. It recommended that you make a bookcase, and then take a bunch of old books that were all about the relative thickness of each of the books of the Bible, paste some blank paper over the spines of the books, and write the names of the books of the Bible on the spines – Genesis, Exodus, etc – and then arrange them in the bookcase.

So my Dad went to an old book market and carefully selected 66 books of the correct thickness. He recovered the spines and in his beautiful engineering handwriting wrote Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, etc right through to Revelation. And then he made a perfectly sized bookcase and placed the books in the right order.

Dad would use this object to teach kids about the Bible. With a Baptist pastor friend, he travelled all over New South Wales with an organisation called Campaigners for Christ. The Baptist pastor was the preacher and Dad would do the children's address with his Bible bookcase.

It was a great object lesson. I've never forgotten it—you can tell.

You could count the books. There were 66. 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New.

You could play memory games by removing a few books and giving prizes to the first kid to name the missing ones. And the prize was usually the privilege of standing up in front of the Sunday School and putting the book in the right place.

You could take them all out and try to put them back in the right order. And Dad would explain why the books were grouped together. The Old and New Testaments. The Pentateuch at the beginning. The History Books. The Gospels at the front of the New Testament. The book of the missionary journeys. The letters of Paul and so on.

And he would let us observe that in many cases, the books were arranged in size rather than date. This was especially true of Paul's letters. The longest and therefore thickest book was the letter to the Romans and it was first. And the skinny, one chapter letter to Philemon was down the end. This was a way of ordering that made sense, even though it seemed odd to a young boy who had recently learned the alphabet or to read a calendar.

I am remembering this today because I recall learning some things about today's topic, the letter to the Colossians.

First, the book seemed oddly named. In my child's mind, I thought there must be some connection between Colossians and colossal. Yet the book was not colossal at all. It was a skinny little thing. Maybe, I thought, the town of Colosse must be itself colossal. I was to discover that the town of Colosse was just as thin as the book that bears its name.

And secondly, I learned that although it was pretty much in the middle of the collection of Paul's letters, Colossians was one of the last letters that Paul wrote.

By the way, and I still remember this from Dad's bookcase object lesson, "After the first eleven chapters of Genesis, what is the next oldest book in the Bible?" Job. If I had Dad's bookcase with me still, I could let you come up here and show us where it is in the Bible.

Well, I discovered that it's generally agreed that the first letter Paul wrote is actually Galatians. And the last is second Timothy. And as Ken, who apparently reads the same commentaries as me, mentioned, Colossians was written towards the end of Paul's life, while he was in prison in Rome.

Why is all this important or interesting? Well, in the first place, we read in these later letters the result of Paul's theological journey. We see the end result of someone who lived every day of his life, from the moment of his blinding conversion on the road to Damascus to his death in Rome, we see his understanding of the Christian faith at its most mature.

And secondly, some may say not as important, but I wonder, this skinny, non-colossal book, this book that contains Paul's most refined and mature understanding of God, is not written to a colossal place at all.

Colosse was a little place. Once important, but by the time of Paul's journeys, it was almost forgotten. It was the smallest of three towns in a valley in Turkey. The others, Laodicea and Hieropolis, were much bigger and more important, but Paul writes to the little town and urges the Colossians to share the letter with the bigger towns.

It's like he writes to a little church in Boronia and asks us to share this precious Good News with more important and richer places, like Toorak and Kew.

And isn't that the way of the Good News? The message is often given to the weak and small, to be shared with the rich and powerful. Is that not our role even today? Even in a little place like Boronia? We are given a precious thing, and it is stored in plain earthen vessels. That's how God's mission works in the world. The small, humble and poor often carry the Good News to the world.

And so it was in the case of the Colossians.

As Ken pointed out in the first two weeks of this series, Paul wrote to the Colossians for a purpose. His letter is in response to some issues that the church in Colosse was experiencing. We only know what those issues were from the way Paul addresses them. We only have one side of the conversation here, but it is enough for us to see that Paul was concerned about some misguided ideas that were being promoted. Not just in Colosse but also in the nearby towns. And he gives the responsibility for setting the record straight to this little church in Colosse. A colossal task perhaps for a not very colossal church.

I won't spend any time reminding us of what those issues were as Ken did a good job of that last week. If you missed that, go to the website and have a listen.

But having said some things to set the record straight about who Jesus is and what God's purpose is in the world, Paul then moves on to talk about how the church ought to be. He talks about the characteristics or marks of an effective church. Not just an effective church in Colosse, but everywhere. Including Boronia.

What are those features of an effective church? We find them listed in chapter 2 verses 2 through 7.

With the help of the Scottish Bible Commentator, the late William Barclay, we can identify eight distinguishing features of the effective church. The eight habits of highly effective churches, if you like.

Feature number one is that the effective church has people with **encouraging hearts**. This is in verse 2. Paul says "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart." And the word that is translated as *encouraged* here is the Greek word *parakalein*. Maybe *parakalein* doesn't mean a lot to those of us who read the Bible in English. But it's a word that is also used in Greek for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is often described as the *paraclete* – a word that means *the one who speaks for another or an advocate*. Isn't it encouraging when we are in a difficult situation and someone comes to our help and speaks on our behalf? That's one of the things that the Holy Spirit does for us.

So for Paul's readers, they would get this connection with the Holy Spirit. For them Paul is not just saying "Keep your spirits up". He's not just saying "Don't worry, be happy." He's reminding them that they are not alone. That God is on their side and that He has sent his Holy Spirit to advise, guide and encourage us.

Feature number two is that the effective church will be **united in love**. Our love for one another is the primary thing in a church. It is more important to be united in love than being united in tradition. It's more important to be united in love than being united in our building plans. It's more important to be united in love than being united in agreement around ritual, or music, or how to pray, or when to stand and when to sit, or whether to say "Lead us not into temptation" or "Save us from the time of trial." None of these things will matter at all, if we are not first united in love.

Feature number three is that the effective church will have **understanding**. Well, actually, Paul uses three words here. Understanding, wisdom and knowledge. He says in verses 2 and 3 "They may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Now the word translated as *understanding* in verse 2 is the Greek word *sunesis*. It means the ability to know the right thing at the right time. It's about applied wisdom. It's not just about knowing stuff. It's about knowing what to do in each situation.

I don't know if you've ever been subjected to a Myers-Briggs Personality Type questionnaire. This is a personality test based on the work of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. One of the personality characteristics it tests for is our ability to judge what is right in the circumstances. If we are given certain facts, how easy or hard is it for us to make a judgement about what they mean, or what action we should take. If you have a Myers-Briggs code of four letters, the last letter is either a P or a J. If you have a P, then you'll find it easy to keep a decision open, to wait for more information before deciding. If you have a J, you'll be quick to make a decision, based on whatever information you have already.

Well, I think, without the benefit of Carl Jung or Myers-Briggs, I think Paul is saying something similar here. He is saying that the effective church knows how to make the right decision at the right time with just the right amount of information.

Personally, I think the history of our back block isn't a bad example. There were many times in the past couple of decades when we could have decided to go ahead and sell the block, and renovate or even relocate the church. But this church had the wisdom, the understanding, to know when the time was right. To know when we had just the right amount of information to make a decision. I think we have got it right this time.

There are two other words used here for wisdom. One is translated *wisdom* and the other is translated *knowledge*. And Paul says that wisdom and knowledge are *hidden in Christ*.

Now we might miss this, but Paul is playing a word game with the bad teachers. As Ken pointed out last week, there were people in this church who were saying that they, and only they, had the true knowledge of God. They actually used this Greek word *gnosis* which is here translated as *knowledge* to describe their own secret knowledge. Which is why they were later called the *Gnostics* a kind of ironic term meaning *the people with the knowledge*. It was meant as a joke on these people at first. Oh yes, you're the guys who have the knowledge, we'll call you the Knowers. But the name stuck. In fact, of course, the same was said about Christians. The term *Christian* was not intended to be a nice label. It was said with derision when it was first used to identify the early followers of Jesus. But like so many things, the church took the label and redeemed it.

Anyway, when Paul writes that the wisdom and knowledge of God is hidden in Christ, he is not too subtly pointing out that the wisdom and knowledge is NOT a secret known only to the Gnostics, the so-called Knowers. And more, it's not even a secret. If you look to Jesus Christ, the secrets are no longer hidden. The understanding is available to everyone.

Feature number 4 of the effective church is in verse 4. The ability to avoid being deceived by fine-sounding arguments. The word Paul uses here is the word that would be used for a barrister arguing a case in the law courts. There's a place for apologetics in the church. There's a place for good preaching. But all of it, everything that is said from here, and everything we share between us in the corridors of the church, is secondary to what we may discern by looking first to Jesus and what he reveals.

Feature number 5 of the effective church is order and firmness. Paul says in verse 5 that he "delights to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is." Order and firmness are the features of an effective church. The words for order and firmness in the Greek are both military words. So Paul is inferring the kind of discipline that one sees in an effective army. So Paul would have thought William Booth got something right when he invented the Salvation Army.

The word for *order* is the Greek word *taxis*. Yes, it is the same word that we get our English word *taxi* from. It means *rank*. You know when all the taxis are lined up in order in a taxi rank, that's a *taxis*. In reality, the phrase *taxi rank* is a tautology because both words mean the same thing. A taxi rank is a rank rank. It's a feature of many churches that things are done properly and in the right order. Paul is saying this is a good thing.

Feature number 6 is in verse 6. The life of an effective church is *lived in Christ, rooted and built up in him*. This is a central message for the church in Colosse because there were people preaching a contrary

message. Something a bit like modern-day scientology. Claiming that they had the truth, and only they had it. Paul reminds us that the truth is found in Christ. And we are to live in that truth every day. And he invokes two strong images. One of the tree with deep roots in the soil, and the other of a building, built on effective and strong foundations.

This is about living consciously in the presence of Jesus. There's not some special supernatural magic about this. It is a conscious decision we make. Faith is both a gift and a choice. It's like so many other gifts we have. Some of us are gifted with more faith than others. Some of us are gifted with more administrative skills than others. Some of us have more musical gifts than others.

You know, I have two sisters. We were all musically gifted. We all were given the opportunity to learn piano as a child. Only one of the three children made the conscious decision to keep playing. Although I have to say in fairness, that one of the sisters decided to keep singing.

Faith is like that. We all have the gift in some measure to believe in things unseen. But faithful people are not born, they are made. We have to make the conscious decision to live daily in the faith. For some it will mean reciting the rosary as they go about their daily work. For others it will mean spending thirty minutes every morning or evening in quiet meditation. For others it will mean a life of Bible study and theological reading. For others it will mean wearing an armband that says WWJD – what would Jesus do?

So Paul says, keep your roots well nourished, and build well upon those foundations.

Feature number 7 of the effective church is that it is “strengthened in the faith as you were taught.” Remember Paul is attacking a heresy in the Colossian church. But it is more than saying “I was right” and these other guys are wrong. Paul reminds the church that Jesus Christ has to be central. It's all about Jesus. If you're being taught something else, it ain't right.

Feature number 8 of the effective church is it is “overflowing with thankfulness.” Thank you, Jesus. This should be the most often heard prayer in our church life. And lives and works of thankfulness should be seen as the product of an effective church. Thankfulness will be on our lips and in our actions.

I have a Lebanese friend who used to work for me in Beirut. When I visited him, he would drive me around the chaotic traffic of Beirut in his little Peugeot. Now Beirut traffic makes Bangkok look civilised. It has all the crowding of the Asians, but it is also blessed with the cut and thrust of the Arabs. So a car journey across Beirut was always like dodgem cars. My Lebanese friend, whenever confronted by some aggressive driver or another bizarre interpretation of the lack of road rules, would simply dodge around and say aloud “Thank you Jesus.”

At first I thought this was a bit irreverent, but as I got to know this friend I realised it was an honest expression of how he lived. Thankful to Jesus for every thing, good or bad, that came across his path. And, do I need to say, that his life of good works, and concern for others in his own war-ravaged country was a clear demonstration of his thankfulness. He lived thankfulness every moment of every day. Do we?

So here are the 8 Habits of the Highly Effective Church.

Encouraging hearts

United in Love

Understanding

Not deceived by fine-sounding arguments

Order and firmness

Lived in Christ

Faith as we were taught

Overflowing with Thankfulness

May we exhibit these eight Habits of the Highly Effective Church here at Saint Paul's.

A-men.