

only Christ can give ('love one another' – John 13:34f.), and this is the most effective evangelistic tool at its disposal. Indeed, in parallel to this, we know to our cost that the most effective way to put people off the church is to demonstrate exactly the opposite, dissention and strife!

Paul taught in his letter to the Colossian church that their duty was to be united in their adherence to the Gospel they had been first taught, and wisdom required that they discern the evil distraction of all other philosophies and so-called 'mystery-cults' which were being introduced into their ranks. The unity of God's people the church would be their ability to 'respond to anyone' (4:6) who wanted to know what they believed in a manner that was clear and 'gracious', also 'seasoned with salt'. This was a phrase which simply meant something like 'plain logic', and is found in many writings of the times, yet it summarises very clearly what many people long to be able to do even today, which is to be able to explain their faith simply in a world of doubt.

Application

It is a common presumption today that every church should be involved in pioneering evangelism, and through support of missionary activity, many are. Two things are obvious from these few comments by Paul in our passage today. Firstly, that not everyone is called to the apostolic tasks of evangelism which come from a special gifting, calling and vision from God. Secondly, the main work of a local church in evangelism is to practice the basics of Christian faith in a manner that makes the church commendable in the eyes of the local community. This is not a matter of pandering to the society of the day, but of standing out from it by exhibiting the qualities of love to which we are called in Christ; founded on love and caring for one another. People will always want to be a part of a group of people who outwardly demonstrate those characteristics. Further, it is the job of all Christians, as Paul makes clear so often in his letters, to be able to account for their faith in straightforward ways, whenever asked.

Too often, we shy away from our obligations to both these calls, and some churches today regard the job of evangelism as done by them if they appoint someone to that 'task' or financially support some project in another country. The early church was founded on the dual thrust of evangelism; firstly by the great evangelists and apostles such as Paul who were specially called of God, and secondly the requirement placed on the local churches by the letters of Paul (which became Scripture) to be consistent and public in their witness to the truths of the Gospel through the quality of their lifestyle which could be seen by others.

The passage we have read may seem to be a very simple one, and in many ways, it is. It does however, expose some powerful truths about the life and witness of God's people which transcend time and are an example even to us today.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss ways in which the church can remain 'watchful' in prayer; individually and corporately.
2. Who are the evangelists and apostles who are bringing the word of God to the world today?
3. Is the church of God attractive to other people generally in the society in which you live? If not, why not? What can be done to make the church more Christ-like?

Discipleship

It may be that one or two of the people who read this are those God has called to be pioneering evangelists and missionaries for the Gospel. If so, this is something that the Lord will be revealing to you in special and distinct ways. Most of us are called to the faithful witness of 'loving one another' within the fellowship of the local church, so that the church can be faithful to the call of God in the way described in this study. There is a cost to this discipleship, however, which is that Christian love requires forgiveness, but this has always been the case.

Final Prayer

Call each of us, Lord Jesus, according to Your plans for the world and for the future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever way you require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN

Prayer

As we face the coming week, Lord Jesus, establish our faith firmly within us so that we live the Gospel in which we believe. May we not be guilty of religious hypocrisy, and may we be kept secure in our faith through all the circumstances of life we face. Keep us secure in You, and the truths we have been given through Revelation and the Word. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Ministry to the elderly

Pray today for those who are growing older and have no-one from close family to care for them and help them. They can be some of the most isolated and lonely of people and also those with the greatest need, and it is the nature of their need that you will probably not know about it! Pray and ask the Lord to lead you in prayer and also to lead you to those you can best help.

Meditation

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the wonder, majesty and greatness of creation;
speak to me through the quiet whisper of a breeze,
the wonder of colour, or the flight of a simple butterfly.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through history, and through the lives of great people;
speak to me in the everyday events of my own small life,
both that which seems important, and also what seems small.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the grandeur and power of music which touches the soul;
speak to me in the psalms and hymns and songs of praise
that linger in my mind and teach me truth from day to day.

Almighty Lord and God who speaks to us all
through the epic events unfolding all around us within the world;
speak to me in the trials and joys of life which happen every day
and show me Your care for everything, which includes even me.

Bible Study - Colossians 4:2-6

² Give yourselves to prayer, and be watchful in this, with thanksgiving.

³ At the same time, pray for us as well that God will open up for us a door for the word, that we may preach the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, ⁴ that I may reveal it as clearly as I should when I am able to speak.

⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time available. ⁶ Let your words always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to respond to anyone.

Review

We are coming towards the end of the letter to the Colossians, and Paul had finished the main points he wished to make to the church. But before Paul finished his letter in the customary way with greetings to the church from a variety of individuals who were with him at the time of writing, he offered a final summary of thoughts that came into his mind as he finished writing. But these were no random thoughts. They were naturally effected by the whole subject of the letter itself and what was on Paul's mind throughout the whole letter, and also his desire to provide a memorable and concluding piece of advice that would summarise all he wanted to say to the Colossian church.

There are three small sections to this brief ending to Paul's letter to the Colossians; firstly, advice about prayer (v2), secondly an appeal for support in the proclamation of the Gospel (vv3,4), and thirdly some concluding advice to the Colossian church (vv5,6). It may be that verse 2 was really part of the previous verses which were about family relationships and in particular the position of slaves (3:20-4:1). The advice appears to be simple, but it was cautious; live a life of prayer and thanksgiving, Paul said, but 'be watchful' and do this with care. It has always been easy to pray about personal or family matters in a way that reflects our own feelings and desires rather than the Lord's will, and this is what Paul wanted the Colossians to guard against. All the good advice in the world would not deal with real situations unless God's people were in touch with their Lord through prayer.

The next two verses asked the Colossian church to remember Paul in his ministry of evangelism. They are an extraordinary reminder that Paul, whilst bound in prison, still considered himself 'on mission'. He asked for prayers that he would be able to continue his preaching the 'mystery of Christ' despite his circumstances and extremely limited ability to speak of the Gospel in prison. The beginning of the prayer is astonishing for one who was undoubtedly bound as he dictated his letter; 'pray for us ... that God will open up a door ...' (4:3). What he wrote was written to a secretary who wrote for him, possibly from the other side of prison bars (4:18). Paul was probably in Rome when this letter was written and hoped for the opportunity of the ultimate Christian witness, to stand before the Emperor of Rome and testify to Jesus Christ. We do not know whether he ever did this, but it was his desire.

The last two verses are clearly Paul's final words of instruction to the Colossian church. His words were chosen with care, for the majority of his letter had been about how the Colossians had handled the problems of heretical teaching. The church needed to know who were the 'insiders'; and who were the 'outsiders' (4:5), and there is no doubt that Paul regarded 'outsiders' as those who did not agree with the teaching of Jesus Christ that the church had first received. He commended to the Colossians the wisdom of knowing how to 'respond to anyone' (4:6) with a defence of what they believed, by which he meant the traditional teaching of the Gospel. Heresy always creeps into the church when the people of God do not know how to answer questions put to them about what they believe.

Going Deeper

This is only a small text, but there is more to discover and apply. Paul's advice about prayer reminds us of Christ, and his comments about his own mission and the duties of the church are a fascinating insight into his thoughts about the role of the missionary and the local church. As we look deeper, what he says is not what we might expect.

Paul's final advice, and prayer.

Everything Paul had written to the Colossians was designed to call the church to stand firm against heresy and identify with the Gospel of Jesus Christ; a message that bound together the churches of God throughout the world. It is extraordinary to think that God used Paul's letters to establish orthodoxy amongst the early churches of the first century, but this is a reminder to us that God uses practical and real means to accomplish his will. The Gospel was the unifying truth of the early church, but as the individual churches to which Paul wrote received his letters, they quickly saw in what he wrote the distinct truth of the Gospel as something which stood out from the culture of their day and bound them together with other Christians. It is no wonder that as time went by, early records from the second century onwards list the four Gospels, Acts and some of the letters of Paul as the earliest collection of what the wider church regarded as 'holy'. This formed the basis of what we now know as the New Testament which was gradually accepted by most Christians over the first three centuries AD.

When it came to deciding what writings were part of the New Testament and what were not, one of the important features of the letters of Paul, and all other letters that were considered for inclusion, was the connection that could be seen with Christ and the stories of his life that had been passed down. Paul himself was not one of the twelve apostles, but he had spent time with some of them (Gal 1:18f.) and also claimed a special vision and experience of the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:8). However, it is doubtful that these claims impressed the people of the early church about his personal connection with Jesus. Rather, they saw that in his words, he

reflected what they knew of Jesus, and of his life and death. In verse 2, for example, Paul wrote in a way that strongly reflected the most powerful moment of prayer recorded in the Gospel stories of Christ; the occasion when the disciples were with Jesus on the night before he died, and Jesus called on three of them, Peter, James and John, to come with him while he prayed, and asked them to 'keep watch' (Matt 26:38 etc.).

The Colossian church were well advised to 'be watchful' through prayer. They had been infiltrated by false teachers, and their only defence was their Lord; if they knew His will, then they would not have to ask for Paul's advice about what was right and wrong! Indeed, if they had been watchful in prayer, they should have known the difference between true and false teaching. From that day to this, watchfulness in prayer is an important hallmark of the authentic Christian life.

Advice for missionaries

It is at this point in the letter to the Colossians that we learn that Paul was a prisoner whilst he wrote. Apart from brief spells in jail (such as that at Philippi – see Acts 16:16f.), it is commonly reckoned that Paul may well have spent some time in prison whilst at Ephesus because of the stir he caused there, even though imprisonment is not specifically recorded (Acts 19,20). After this, he was arrested at Jerusalem and held in Caesarea (Acts 24f.), and finally, after being escorted there, he was imprisoned in Rome (Acts 28:17f.) where Paul was held in a kind of house arrest, with access to personal assistance and people who came to see him awaiting his trial before the Emperor.

For a variety of reasons, mostly due to the timing of his association with the various people named in the last part of this letter (see tomorrow) and the passages of time needed for the picture to emerge that we have in the letter to the Colossians generally, it is most likely that this letter was written while Paul was in Rome awaiting a hearing before the Emperor. For reasons we do not know, Acts does not tell us more of what happened after Paul arrived at Rome and lived under house arrest there for two years, and we wish that we knew more! The generally contended picture presented by the last few verses of Acts may not have lasted, and there are some indications in later traditions that they did not. The uncomfortable reality of waiting on the Emperor, possibly for years, may well be the circumstances that lay behind this letter and its writing.

Even so, Paul felt that he was commissioned by God to bring the Good News of Christ to the Gentiles of the world; he was a 'missionary', and an apostle sent by God with a specific task. This is clearly shown in his words here in verses 3 and 4, which speak of Paul's sense of duty to the evangelical mission even though he was still in prison. What 'open door' could the Lord give him for the preaching of the Gospel (4:3)? He could preach to his jailers of course, having previously had some success with this (Acts 16:31), but it is most likely that Paul still hoped that after appeal to the Emperor, he would be freed from the charge of soliciting religious violence in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27f.) and be able to re-commence his active missionary activity. We know from his letter to the Romans (15:24,28) that he intended to go beyond Rome as far as Spain; a journey that would take him to the very edge of the known world. He wanted to fulfil his mission to the uttermost, even if he was not able!

Advice for the local church

However inspiring this is, it is important for us to notice that Paul thought of the church as having a completely different role in the continuance of the Gospel than his own calling as an evangelist. His was the gift of the evangelist and missioner, seeking to go further to spread the Gospel. For him, a local church could not do this. It could witness in its own locality but not do the same pioneering work that he was called to do. His advice to the Colossian church in the Lycius valley of Galatia was to establish itself in being the true church of God in its own locality. This is what lies at the heart of verses 5 and 6.

Paul spent no further time discussing the internal affairs of the church, such as the relationships of families (see 3:20f.) or of slaves and masters (3:22-4:1); rather, he talked of its local role in testifying to the Gospel. The most important thing was to act 'wisely towards outsiders'. I have already commented on the need to know the difference between insiders and outsiders, but it appears as if Paul knew the truth of the maxim that if a group of Christians demonstrates godly qualities to those who are not part of the fellowship then people will come looking for what it has to offer! The church of God has always been called to demonstrate a quality of love within its own ranks of a kind that