

# Hope of the World

## Part 1, Colossians 1:3-14

### Colossians 1:3-14 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints--<sup>5</sup> the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. <sup>7</sup> You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. <sup>10</sup> And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

If the church was a person and as one of the powerful biblical images for the church is the bride (Revelations 19:7), then if the church was a person today, she would be deep in therapy. Think about it, for the last fifty years the bride of Christ has been the subject of systematic disrespect, vilification, and name calling in an increasingly secular culture. She has been derided by the beautiful and the powerful and ignored by her neighbours. She has been told that she is a stupid superstitious bigot by a sneering intelligentsia and in recent years she has had to endure the complete trashing of her reputation through the royal commission on sexual abuse. Worst of all many of her friends have stopped believing in her and have abandoned her. If a person was to go through that sort of experience, you can rest assured that they would end up in the foetal position on a therapist's couch going through boxes of tissues like lollies.

But the church isn't a person, it's a community, an incredibly resilient community still alive and kicking after two thousand years of coping everything history can throw at it. However you have to wonder about the impact this flow of increasingly negative and hostile opinion has had on the church? At the very least it must be making some kind of a dent in our collective self-esteem and our sense of identity.

Now you have probably heard the illustration of the frog in the pot, that if you were to pop a frog into boiling water it would jump out but if you pop a frog into warm water and then slowly raise the temperature the frog does not notice the slow temperature change and eventually boils to death (I actually think this is a myth but

the illustration still holds). I want to suggest that something like that has been happening to the churches confidence over time, gradually, so we haven't really been aware of it, our confidence and sense of identity has been eroded. Let's turn to the little survey we got you to do at the beginning of the service and see what that might indicate.

### Survey results

I believe there is nothing more important in this world than Jesus – average 4.75

I can share my faith in all circumstances – average 3.75

The best cause I can invest my life in is the local church – average 4.3

I am totally clear about Christ's mission in the world – average 3.8

I believe that the local church is the hope of the world – average 4.3

What concerns me most is that slowly, without realising it, the church may have lost some confidence in itself and then by extension in the message of Jesus, because I believe, and I will attempt to demonstrate over the next few weeks that, Jesus is literally the hope of

the world and the church, the bride of Christ, has the incredible honour to be the bearer of that hope, and that anything which makes the church lose confidence in its mission must be resisted because when the church drops the ball on its mission, it's not just bad for the church it is bad for the world.

So how does a church regain its confidence? Well, in the same way that you or I regain our confidence, by remembering who we are and the purpose for which we were created. Let me give you an example, the high school I attended decided to put on a musical when I was in year 11 and of course the obvious choice for an Australian beach high school was a musical about farming in the American Midwest.

*Oh what a beautiful morning,  
Oh what a beautiful day,  
I've got a wonderful feeling,  
Everything's going my way.*

Get the picture? We did Oklahoma. Anyway I was about the only male willing to sing so I ended up with the lead part of Curly, which was fine except the girl who played Laurie, the female lead, was a six foot tall Amazon and I had to stand on a hay bale to do any of the romantic scenes which worked out OK. The rehearsals were hard work and fun and then came opening night. I was completely unprepared for the intense feelings of panic that hit me just before the curtain went up. My pulse began to race, I was drowning in sweat and I threw up all over the hay. While someone went to the front to tell the audience that the start of the musical was delayed because of a few technical issues – i.e. cleaning vomit out of hay, which turns out to be pretty difficult,

Dear Friends

This is a short anonymous survey, the results of which are going to be used during the message this morning. If you could fill it out early in the service it will be collected during the offering. Thank you.

Blessings, Steve

Please respond to the questions with the following numerical responses:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Moderately disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

I believe there is nothing more important in this world than Jesus

I can share my faith in all circumstances

The best cause I can invest my life in is the local church

I am totally clear about Christ's mission in the world

I believe that the local church is the hope of the world

I was hiding out back trying to breath in all the air on planet earth, when Miss Carney, the teacher directing the musical sat next to me. She asked me how I was feeling, and I pointed out that I was dying and I was sorry for the inconvenience. Pausing for a moment Miss Carney, began to remind me of all our rehearsals, saying that I had been pretty good through all of that and there was really no reason to presume that tonight would be any different. She did have to repeat that message quite a few times before my breathing settled down and I agreed to go on. I don't think it was the best ever performance of Oklahoma, but I didn't die and people clapped at the end, which I guess was expected as they were mostly family. But the point of all this is that the antidote for a loss of confidence is remembering the importance of our calling and that we are well equipped and capable of fulfilling that calling through the gifts God has given us.

This is what the Apostle Paul is attempting to do in his letter to the Colossian church. That church was having a case of the confidence wobbles, confused over a number of different versions of the Gospel that were circulating. They had the original version of the gospel they had received from the Apostles and then people came along and told them about a new Jewish version that insisted on a bunch of extra beliefs. You see nothing messes with a church's confidence more than confusion about the vision. So Paul begins his letter by clarifying what he loves about this church.

*<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—(Colossians 1:3-4)*

Paul is saying to the church, I really love you guys and I'm so glad that you are where you are doing what you are doing, because you are the bearers of the most precious thing in the universe, Jesus, you are in Christ Jesus. In you Jesus lives and moves and has his being. (Acts 17:28). He is your all, you have left everything you knew, everything familiar, in order to follow Jesus and we know that it's true because of the love which flows from your lives.

You know, I feel a bit the same way about this congregation. I am so glad that you are where you are doing what you are doing. For example, from time to time I find some people working in the front garden of our church. One of those people has lived such a traumatic life that it permeates every part of her being. But she comes to our garden for the refuge it offers and for the love that is shown to her. She told me that it is all that keeps her going - that and the hugs. When you bear the love of Christ to people in the world you are the hope of the world.

*<sup>5</sup> the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. (Colossians 1:5, 6)*

It is good to love your church, she is the bride of Christ and deserves our love, but it is equally good to know that it is not about us. We didn't event our church, we didn't stumble accidentally upon Jesus and his love, it is a gift of God from God, from heavenly places. I became a Christ follower after I was loving rescued and restored

by a dear couple and a wonderful church. I am clear as crystal that the light they breathed into my confused life did not come from their human nature but came from Jesus himself through them and into my life.

Since those days I have had the privilege of visiting many different people in many different countries and seeing the truth that Paul speaks, that all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing. I have seen this truth in the Pacific in Africa in America and most recently in China. It was in China that Clive introduced us to a house church leader and we heard both the dreadful stories of the government's attempts to crush and destroy this church and the wonderful grace of God that had enabled this same church to flourish and grow strong in love, in the face of persecution. So we know as Paul knew; *that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:38-39). You see the church is the hope of the world because it bears a divine power and truth that is not present in the world but is desperately needed by the world.

*<sup>7</sup> You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*

*<sup>10</sup> And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. (Colossians 1:7-12)*

As busy as Paul must have been he promises that he has never stopped praying for this little church in a minor town of the Lycus valley, because they are precious bearers of the loving spirit of Christ, and the hope of their community. I say the same thing here. I and others, have never stopped praying for this congregation because you are precious bearers of the loving spirit of Christ. Like Paul I want God to continually fill you with the knowledge of his will and his spiritual wisdom and understanding and mighty power, because as the bearers of Christ you are the hope of the world because: *salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12)

*<sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)*

Paul finishes listing what he loves about this church by framing its vision and purpose against the backdrop of a world full of darkness. Bill Hybels shared at a global leadership conference a few years ago a seminal moment in his growing appreciation of the role of the local congregation. He told of a time when he was in the airport in Puerto Rico and he was confronted by two young boys fighting, trying to hurt each other badly and he jumped in to pull them apart. On the plane flying home he was

still shaking from the encounter and the Spirit of God began to nudge his thinking around. Bill understood that these kids probably had a lot of terrible things going on in their lives to make them so angry but what was the likely trajectory of their lives? What is going to happen to them? Probably they will go on and continue to fight and hurt others and probably end up in a Puerto Rican prison which is no picnic. They will grow from angry young boys to hard angry young men, inflicting darkness and hurt on another generation unless something breaks that chain of causality. Unless something intervenes, something transforms their life and changes its trajectory. It is probably not going to be a government program. It is probably not going to be some accidental transformation of their destiny. It is probably not going to be an intervention of the UN. It struck Bill Hybels like a thunderbolt that the only power that transfers people's lives is the power of Christ and the only way people like these boys are going to discover the power of Christ is that a member of a local congregation begins to love them with the love of Christ and set them, like so many others, on the path of personal transformation. I have seen this miracle happen to hardened criminals, people trapped by drugs or gambling addictions, even victims and perpetrators of genocide. This is why the local congregation is the hope of the world because in a world of darkness we are the bearers of the transforming light of Christ.

So what I want you to do is to remember whenever you hear a criticism or a snide comment about the church, say to yourself, the church is the hope of the world because Christ is the hope of the world and we are the bearers of Christ. Can we say that together?

*The church is the hope of the world  
Because Christ is the hope of the world  
And we are the bearers of Christ.*

Let that high calling fill your soul, lift up your head, grow in confidence that giving our lives to Christ is the best and most finest service we can give to the world.

## **Communion**

### **Positive role of the church in marginalised African American communities**

*The role that Black churches played in the early 20th century was multifaceted. They served as a harbor that temporarily shielded African Americans from the harsh realities of a nation filled with bigotry and mistreatment. They provided a place where people who were otherwise oppressed could find a voice and dignity among their own. The Black church was a shelter that gave a sense of belonging, security, and power to its members. Today, the Black church has taken on additional outreach responsibilities, especially for its youth. Tutoring, conferences, rites of passages, essay and rhetorical contests, concerts, Black college tours, childcare, health education, and employment preparation are just a few of the Black churches' outreach programs. (Effects of Faith and Church on African American Adolescents Olivia A. Williams, Michigan family review)*

### **Importance of the church as a positive force within society**

*A steadily increasing body of evidence from the social sciences demonstrates that regular religious practice benefits individuals, families, and communities, and thus*

*the nation as a whole. The practice of Religion improves health, academic achievement, and economic well-being and fosters self-control, self-esteem, empathy, and compassion.*

*Religious belief and practice can address many of the nation's most pressing social problems, some of which have reached serious levels (e.g., out-of-wedlock births and family dissolution). Research has linked the practice of Religion to reductions in the incidence of divorce, crime, delinquency, drug and alcohol addiction, out-of-wedlock births, health problems, anxiety, and prejudice. Faith-based outreach has been uniquely effective in drug addiction rehabilitation and societal re-entry programs for prisoners. Furthermore, the effects of religious belief and practice are intergenerational and cumulative. In a sense, they "compound the interest" of our social capital.*

*Allan Bergin, a research psychologist who received the American Psychological Association's top award in 1990, summed up the impact of Religion in his acceptance address: "Some religious influences have a modest impact whereas another portion seems like the mental equivalent of nuclear energy." (Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability By Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D.)*