


COLOSSIANS 4:16  
SHARING OUR MAIL

“When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”<sup>1</sup>

ometimes we forget that the letters Paul wrote are not mere theological treatises, meant to provide sermon fodder for preachers desperate for something to preach. They are personal letters to churches composed of men and women known and loved by him. This is apparent in the final statements of his letter to the Colossians.

“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord’” [COLOSSIANS 4:10-17].

The Apostle is writing to friends—greeting them by name, encouraging them, forwarding greetings from people known to members of the congregation. This is an excellent example of the forgotten art of correspondence. I do not mean, however, that there is nothing of theological value in what the Apostle has written. Rather, his letters to the churches are designed to provide instruction in godliness and encouragement to be righteous while addressing specific problems.

There are at least three treasures suggested through these closing words of Paul’s letter to the saints of Colossae. These theological gems are the focus of our study today. “When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” The gems I urge you to consider provide an account of the transmission of the New Testament, remind us of the relationship of the churches and reveal the blessings that lie hidden within difficulties. Open your Bible to **COLOSSIANS 4:16** and together, let us mine the riches of God’s Word.

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** — Consider just a few informative facts about the New Testament. This portion of the Scriptures is comprised of twenty-seven books. There are four Gospels—**MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE** and **JOHN**, one historical account of the early church—**ACTS**, thirteen books written by the Apostle to the Gentiles, eight letters we refer to as the General Letters, and one prophetic book—**REVELATION**. All these were written within a relatively brief period. Before the First Century ended, the New Testament was complete and was widely circulated among the churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Bible is both a divine book and a human book. It is divine in that it was given under the guidance of the Spirit of God. Peter says that the Book is the result of men speaking “from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” [see **2 PETER 1:24**]. We make no fantastic claim such as the words of the Bible were inscribed on palm leaves with a golden pen. We do, however, accept God’s declaration that His Spirit superintended chosen men to ensure that what was written revealed the mind and the character of God. Everything that is necessary for spiritual wholeness and to ensure the joy of those who believe has been revealed through this written Word.

Have you ever noticed how frequently Scripture claims divine origin? Consider but a few of the instances when those writing Scripture claimed that God directed them. In his first letter, Peter writes that the Spirit of God was speaking through the Prophets [see **1 PETER 1:11**]. On the day of Pentecost immediately preceding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter made the same assertion to the assembled church [see **ACTS 3:18**]. When the nascent congregation was choosing an apostle to replace Judas, Peter asserted the same truth that the Spirit of God spoke by David [see **ACTS 1:16**]. In saying this, Peter was but echoing David himself, who wrote,

“The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me;  
His word is on my tongue.”

[**2 SAMUEL 23:2**]

This truth is iterated in Scripture: “All Scripture is breathed out by God” [**2 TIMOTHY 3:16**].

I have often pointed out the distinguishing assertion of the Prophets as they delivered their stinging rebukes to Israel. The Major Prophets alone speak in the Name of the Lord with the characteristic refrain, “Thus says the Lord,” over 345 times. The Minor Prophets use that same formula 80 times to emphasise the origin of their message.

We do not worship this Book; but we do recognise that God has given us a perfect treasure in this Book. The Word reveals the mind of God; and if we obey its precepts, it will keep us from sin and guide us into all righteousness. God Himself has given us the Book, and therefore we receive His Word with gratitude and with joy.

There yet remains a human element to be explored in the creation of the Word. God did speak by men; and the Word is given for the benefit of man. Living in this era when multiplied translations of the Word are available, we sometimes forget that there was a time when the Bible as we know it did not exist. On the shelves of my library, I have over 30 different translations of the entire Bible, the New Testament or portions of the New Testament, and the Old Testament. I have five Greek New Testaments and two copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. On my computer, I can access forty five English translations of the Bible, one hundred twenty-nine different Greek New Testaments, Old Testament or papyri copies, seventy-five copies of the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures or portions, three Syriac New Testaments and five copies of the Scriptures in Latin.

The Greek Testaments and papyri, to which I frequently refer in developing messages preached from this pulpit, represent the labour of scholars that have available over five thousand copies of the Greek Scriptures from ancient times. Many of these Greek Scripture portions date to the earliest period of the development of the Christian Faith, some even being dated to the First Century A.D. This says nothing of other ancient manuscripts in Syriac and Latin and Amharic that are available to preachers and scholars.

What happened, from a human perspective, to assure such rapid and wide dissemination of the written Word of God? The Lord Christ was born at just the right time. Would we expect anything other than this when speaking of the birth of God's Son? The Apostle Paul provides insight into this matter. "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" [GALATIANS 4:4, 5].

The Roman rule of the European, North African and Mediterranean world assured peace that permitted relative ease in spreading the message of a Saviour that conquered death. An absence of wars and conflicts ensured unhindered spread of the Faith. The system of Roman roads assured rapid travel between distant points. Whilst we cannot compare the spread of news in this day to that ancient day, the time for travel between major cities had been reduced from months and even years to days. This permitted relatively rapid communication between the peoples of that ancient day.

Greek had become the *lingua franca* of that day, much as English is the language of commerce throughout the world in this day. This meant that almost any resident of the most far-flung outpost of the Empire would be able to understand what was being said or written by a resident on the opposite side of the Empire. The Bible was written in that trade language that ensured it would be readily understandable. Thus, the Word of God spread rapidly, enjoying a period of peace, being carried quickly between distant points, and being understood by both the cultured and the uncultured peoples of the nations.

There were no computers, no word processors and no printing presses available for printing the Bible. There were no colporteurs to distribute the Scriptures among the populace. I suppose we might consider this a handicap in spreading the Good News of Christ, but within one generation, the entire Roman world was evangelised. Paul could exult to the Colossians that the Gospel had become known in the whole world [COLOSSIANS 1:6, 23].

Think about that! The first Christians had proven so faithful to the commission of our Lord that the entire world knew of the Faith within one short generation. In Thessalonica, Paul and his missionary band were haled before the courts with this charge, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" [ACTS 17:6]. At the time this charge was levelled against the missionaries, not three decades had passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What a challenge for us! We have radio and television, satellite telephones and computers—and we still have not evangelised our world, much less our own community! The problem is not that we do not have opportunity or equipment to spread the Good News of Christ; rather, the problem is that we do not spread the Gospel of Christ the Lord. Perhaps it is a matter of priorities, or perhaps it is that we no longer are excited by the freshness of life itself, but we still have a great task before us. Moreover, we have a great example in the first saints of what can be accomplished if we are willing to work.

Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians. He did not produce hundreds of copies for each of the churches to read. Instead, he included instructions for the Colossian church to read the letter—publicly. Then, when the letter had been read, it would be carried to the nearby city of Laodicea where it would be read before the Christians in that city as well. Moreover, a letter that had been sent from Laodicea was to be read in the church at Colossae. In other words, Paul's letters were to be copied and read among the churches. Two truths stand out in the scenario.

First, **the reading of Scripture was an integral part of worship in the early church.** Today, we think it boring to hear the Scriptures read. However, consider this charge to the Thessalonians. “I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:27]. In one memorable service, my pastor, Dr. Jim Higgs read the Book of First Thessalonians. The people expressed their discomfort as he read such an extended portion in a public service. It was only when he had reached the end of the book that they realised he was actually fulfilling a neglected scriptural mandate.

Public reading of the Scriptures was expected because worship was integral to who the believers were. They did not go to church—they were the church; worship was neither occasional nor optional in the New Testament church—worship was constant. Consequently, we read some phenomenal statements in the accounts of the early church. One account of the Jerusalem Church informs us, “Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” [ACTS 2:46, 47]. The experience of the Jews was also the experience of the Gentile congregations. Following the Jerusalem Conference, Luke makes an exciting and powerful observation. “The churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” [ACTS 16:5].

I am deeply concerned at the lack of Bible reading—both private and corporate—among contemporary Christians. Too often, we Christians know a few Bible stories, but we are biblically illiterate. We do not know the books of the Bible. We are hesitant in finding Scripture passages, because we are uncertain where to look. Consequently, we are uncomfortable telling others about Christ the Lord, because we are unsure of our facts and we do not wish our ignorance to be exposed. We must read the Book, and you must encourage those who preach to integrate the Word skilfully into their messages.

Again, **the Message was powerful and compelling.** The Faith was not compelling because it was novel; the Faith was compelling because it set worshippers at liberty. Tragically, contemporary Christians have become casual concerning this powerful message of life. We have become so familiar that we miss the power of the Gospel. Each of us has undoubtedly read Paul’s words to the Roman Christians. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” [ROMANS 1:16].

The Gospel of Christ is the power of God for salvation. Therefore, this message of life must become our priority. The earliest saints could not help but speak of Jesus and the freedom they had found in Him. Haled before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John attested, “We are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” [ACTS 4:20].<sup>2</sup>

Too many of us are able to be silent concerning the Gospel. Too often, I fall into the trap of thinking that I am a “minister” in the official sense, forgetting that I am a sinner with a message of life. Too often, I fail to remember that I have discovered life in Christ, and so the power of God is kept bottled up inside while those about me are dying. I grieve to think that our youth are not excited by the Faith. Perhaps it is because they see so little excitement among those of us who have walked long years in the Faith. Too often, we are content to go to church instead of being the church. Release the power! Tell someone of Christ the Lord. You will do so if you become familiar with the Word.

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<sup>2</sup> Holman Christian Standard Bible (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003)

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCHES** — At this point, the message turns from consideration of the way in which the New Testament was distributed so widely and so quickly to a study of the interrelatedness of the churches. Co-operation among the churches was not so much organic as it was functional. Co-operation was not determined by a constitution; rather, it was determined by the faith shared among the saints.

In the apostolic church, churches were identified by doctrine and not by a name. There were no mission boards—no “arms” or “wings” or “legs” of the churches; instead, the churches related to one another on the basis of common doctrine—a shared faith [TITUS 1:4; JUDE 3]. Each church was an independent entity, but because they shared the Faith of Christ the Lord as revealed through His written Word, they received one another as brothers and sisters; and they held one another accountable for faith and practise. Should a church deviate from the Faith, that congregation would no longer have been considered to be in fellowship. To have tolerated doctrinal error among those claiming a relationship through Christ the Lord would have been to deny the Faith.

Jude’s powerful warning against error is made still more powerful through reading a recent translation of his pungent letter. “Some people have infiltrated our ranks (our Scriptures warned us this would happen), who beneath their pious skin are shameless scoundrels. Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license—which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master.

“I’m laying this out as clearly as I can, even though you once knew all this well enough and shouldn’t need reminding. Here it is in brief: The Master saved a people out of the land of Egypt. Later he destroyed those who defected. And you know the story of the angels who didn’t stick to their post, abandoning it for other, darker missions. But they are now chained and jailed in a black hole until the great Judgment Day. Sodom and Gomorrah, which went to sexual rack and ruin along with the surrounding cities that acted just like them, are another example. Burning and burning and never burning up, they serve still as a stock warning.

“This is exactly the same program of these latest infiltrators: dirty sex, rule and rulers thrown out, glory dragged in the mud” [JUDE 4-7].<sup>3</sup>

Whenever a church begins to preach error, to practise error or even to tolerate error—whether doctrinal, moral or ethical error—that church must no longer be thought to share this common Faith. Those sharing in the services of such a congregation may share elements of the Faith with us, but they are no longer walking in obedience to Christ the Lord; and the Faith of Christ the Lord is a transforming faith. We cannot believe Him without being changed into His likeness by the grace God extends toward us.

Whenever a church begins to participate in immorality—blessing same sex unions, condoning wickedness through failure to exercise discipline, refusing to hold to a biblical standard for church membership—that church must no longer be thought to be in fellowship with churches committed to the standard presented in the New Testament. Holding errant churches to account does not consist of “process”; rather, if we love these fellow Christians, we must hold them immediately accountable to the truth of the Word. If the wayward saints refuse to turn from the error they are embracing, we must declare them to be out of fellowship with Christ, and thus out of fellowship with us.

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, **The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English** (NavPress, Colorado Spring, CO 1993)

Some may object that demanding accountability does not demonstrate love. Too often, we dare not speak of anything that divides because we imagine such to be unloving. However, tolerating error does not demonstrate love; love consists of obedience to Christ the Lord. Tolerating error demonstrates that we do not love the Saviour—demonstrates, in fact, that we love personal comfort more than we love Him.

In his second epistle, the Apostle John instructs Christians concerning real love. “This is love: that we walk according to His commands. This is the command as you have heard it from the beginning: you must walk in love. Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves so that you don’t lose what we have worked for, but you may receive a full reward. Anyone who does not remain in the teaching about Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God. The one who remains in that teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home, and don’t say, ‘Welcome,’ to him; for the one who says, ‘Welcome,’ to him shares in his evil works” [2 JOHN 6-11].<sup>4</sup>

Churches that shared the common Faith shared the message they had received. The preachers did not deliver an economic treatise, calling it worship; they read the Scriptures, providing sound prophetic preaching based on what was read. Many today complain that the message is irrelevant, outmoded, antiquated. The biblical message is not designed to tickle the ears of modern listeners; but it is anything but irrelevant. The Gospel we have received and which I preach is the message of life. As such, it is exciting and alive, transforming all who believe from death into life, and from darkness into light.

We do know what was contained in this letter to the Colossians; we do not know what was written in the letter from Laodicea. Scholars have speculated about that letter, but the issue is unresolved. Some believe that the letter from Laodicea is our letter of Ephesians. Some think that it is a letter written by the Laodicean church to Paul, or that perhaps it was a letter written to the Colossian saints. We have no mention of the letter from the Laodiceans beyond this reference in closing of the letter to the Colossians.

What we can deduce is that since Paul’s letter was read to the assembled church. Christians recognised quite early that what he wrote was of more than passing interest. We also see that interaction between the churches to build one another, to strengthen one another, to instruct one another in the Faith of Christ the Lord through sharing their mail.

Preachers would refer to the writings, each contained on a separate papyrus scroll. Finding a particular citation would be awkward, requiring rolling and unrolling the scroll on some of the longer letters. Moreover, it would be impossible for members of the congregation to have their own copy of the scroll. Therefore, early in the history of the Faith Christians began to do something radical. They cut the scrolls into pieces, collating them and stitching them together into a volume. The preachers were then able to find quickly the reference they were seeking, reciting accurately what was written.

This was novel and daring at that time, and it was unheard of before the churches were compelled through necessity to take this action. The bound copies could be more readily shared with sister churches and they facilitated reading of the Word, both publicly and privately. These bound copies of the Scriptures were referred to by the common Greek term for a book—*biblíon*. We get our word **Bible** from this Greek word, and our modern books arose from this innovation of the churches.

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<sup>4</sup> HCSB

**THE BLESSING ASSOCIATED WITH DIFFICULTIES** — There is yet one other truth suggested through reading this brief passage—that truth is the blessing associated with trouble. We don't like to think of troubles in a positive light; we think of trouble and trial as hurtful. However, consider that without trouble among the churches, we would have no New Testament epistles to guide our conduct or our understanding of God's will. Each of the Pauline letters was necessitated because of one problem or another. **COLOSSIANS** was written to counteract false teachers—likely teachers who embraced the Gnostic heresy. These heretics were attempting to impose strict rules concerning lifestyle upon the Christians, arguing that such strictures would make adherents holy before the Lord God. What is important for each of us to see is that God is always at work in the life of His churches to bring glory and honour to His Name, and to give His blessing to those who obey Him, despite the difficulties we may face.

Take note of the fact that without difficulties, we would have no New Testament. The letters were written in most instances to correct problems among the churches. I am not saying that we should seek trouble, but when problems come to a church, Christians should have confidence that God is always at work to bring glory to His Name through meeting those difficulties. Isn't that the teaching we have learned in **ROMANS 8:28**? "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."<sup>5</sup>

God, through Isaiah, provides a beautiful promise that has often given me fresh courage while giving me strength.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.”

[**ISAIAH 43:2**]

God does not promise that He will keep us from trouble. Though we are His children, we share the common plight of fallen mankind. God does, however, promise that we will not be deserted in our trials. God does not promise that we shall never suffer conflict; He does promise that we will not be forced to face our battles alone and unaided.

The New Testament churches were promised that they would not be left as “orphans” [see **JOHN 14:18**]. The Lord promised that He would come to them, and He did come to them. His Spirit is ever among His churches, just as John saw while in exile on Patmos.<sup>6</sup> When Jesus identified Himself to the Church in Ephesus, He presented Himself as He “who walks among the ... lampstands” [**REVELATION 2:1**]. Jesus is here with us; His Spirit watches over us. More than that, He has given us His Word—a treasure revealing His heart and giving us His wisdom so that we can walk in confidence before Him.

When trials come—and trials shall come, when difficulties arise—and difficulties shall arise, when conflicts rage—and conflicts will rage and the enemy will assail us, Christ Jesus our Lord is with us. We have the Word of God to instruct us, to comfort us, to guide us. The Hymn writer was correct in saying,

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<sup>5</sup> **New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update** (The Lockman Foundation, LaHabra, CA 1995)

<sup>6</sup> Jesus appeared to John, standing “in the midst of the lampstands” [**REVELATION 1:13**].

**My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus Name.**

This is the Faith we share in common with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ. Redeemed by His grace, recipients of His mercy, we walk together in love and in power. Facing trials, we do not despair; instead, we courageously seek to build His Kingdom and we labour to tell the entire world of this Faith.

Perhaps you share the service this day and somehow you have yet to know the grace of Christ our Lord. Perhaps you have somehow yet to believe this great Good News of life in the Son of God. The message we bring is that God will forgive your sin, adopt you into His family where you are assured of an inheritance with the saints in Heaven, and give to you eternal life—not mere length of days, but a new quality of life that you could never begin to suspect until you have experienced it. That life and all that is associated with it is found through receiving the Risen Christ as lord of your life. This is the message we bring and this is the message we urge upon all who will receive it.

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Amen.