

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14 Paul's letter to the Colossians

I wonder if you know what your name means? Were you given your name because of its meaning, or did your parents give you your name for some other reason?

When Jay and I were first expecting our first child, we bought a book of 'baby names'. We settled on the name Bethany because the book said the name came from the Hebrew word "bethel", meaning 'dwelling place of God'. That sounded lovely. It was what we wanted for our child. The second reason we chose the name was because we had friends who'd called their daughter Bethany, and we really liked it.

Your parents may have had similar reasons - they liked the meaning of your name, or perhaps the name meant something special to them.

In the middle ages, a name could describe or even determine a child's future. A surname described a person's profession or calling. And so we have surnames like Cartwright - people who made carts, as in Bill & Iris, Constable, as in Colleen & Trevor, Shepherd as in Joan & Enid and Wagoner - from wagon maker - as in Carol & Jay and so on. There are so many others: Smith, Weaver, Spinner, Baker, Tinker, Thatcher and so on.

The surname of one of my childhood friends was 'Paine'. I've heard of a dentist with the same surname. Would you go to a dentist called Dr Paine? Not sure I would....

A name, especially one that describes one's calling, is very important indeed.

Paul naming himself

In our Epistle reading today, Paul begins his letter by naming himself and his calling.

Paraphrasing....Dear friends in Colossae - this is "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus" ([Col 1:1](#)). writing to you.

In calling himself this, Paul was not elevating himself as a church leader or office holder. Rather his identity was in the calling he'd received. He was reminding the church that the risen Christ had appeared to him and called him. We're told in Galatians, that his orders came "not from men nor through men" ([Gal 1:1](#)), but from the Lord Himself, who commissioned Paul to speak and act in His name. In beginning his letter by referring to his calling, Paul hoped to underline the things he felt God wanted him to say in his letter.

You might be interested to know that there is no consistent leadership pattern or leadership blueprint in the New Testament. Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans and Orthodox denominations believe in the validity of what we call an 'episcopal' leadership. So we have what we call a three-fold order of leaders; Bishops, priests and deacons, with a bishop as head of a diocese.

Denominations such as baptists, presbyterian, and congregational, have a leadership structure that is more congregationally based. They have elders, and sometimes deacons. It is the local congregation that makes major decisions. They have a more loosely affiliated external hierarchy.

Then there are other churches where the congregation is completely autonomous, and answerable to no other group or person. They can be a bit scary....

Each model of leadership can find justification for its structure somewhere in the New Testament. Leadership in the New Testament kept evolving, as new needs and problems emerged.

I was talking to an enthusiastic Pentecostal believer one time, who proudly told me his church was a true "New Testament" church, inferring that the others had lost the plot. I found myself wondering which part of the New Testament his church had focused on.

Naming who we are

After Paul says, (this letter is from) Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and (also from) Timothy our brother", he goes on to name those to whom he is writing:

Col 1:2 It is "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

There is no feeling of hierarchy here. Rather, there is a sense of intimacy, warmth, belonging and family. He refers to Timothy as "*our brother*," and he addresses the recipients as "*the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ who are in Colosse*" (Col 1:2).

In calling the believers *saints*, Paul is bringing them together under this encouraging term. Saints are simply believers in and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. So they were all saints. As are we.

Paul also calls them "**faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.**" In highlighting this, he is pointing out that they are part of a common family of believers. There is nothing that separates them - not race, nor creed, nor position in society, nor gender. No one believer is more important than another. They

are all part of the one spiritual family, with God as their father and Christ as their brother.

The natural, organic unity of the family was way more important than how the church might organise itself to function. It really was only as the church spread and grew, that it became necessary to become more organised. Hence the organic nature of church government in the New Testament. I suspect we are now at the other extreme -possibly over governed. I find myself wondering, as more and more churches struggle to maintain this model of ministry we are part of, whether we may find ourselves needing to return to this more simple, family-oriented church structure. Food for thought there.

Celebrating who we are

After Paul has named himself, and the people he is writing to, he moves into celebration mode. At the heart of celebration is gratitude, and Paul overflows with it! In v3, we read:

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus....

- *Paul is so thankful for their faith.*

Paul was passionate about communicating the freedom we have in Christ, through being justified by faith. It was a mind-blowing truth to his hearers then, and still is today.

Commentator Matthew Henry said, "Faith opens the door of the soul to receive Christ; faith admits him, and submits to him."

That's powerful, isn't it? Think of a closed door. For Christ to enter, the door must open. Faith is what opens the door. Faith is our hand on the handle, as we respond to the prompting of the Spirit; faith is the drawing open of the door; faith is our welcome to God as the door swings open; and faith prompts our surrender to the Lord.

Faith is the foundation of our encounter and walk with God. Paul sees faith in this Colossian church. He's excited, and he thanks God for it!

at the end of v3 he also adds love:

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus....and for the love that you have for all the saints.

- *Not only is Paul thankful for their faith, he is thankful for their love*

The love these believers had for one another was something that stood out, something out of the ordinary that was very noticeable. The Colossian church was putting into practice the teaching that called them to care for the

widow and orphan; to share with those in need, and to practice hospitality. A report had been sent to Paul, and his heart was full.

Sadly the church is not always like that. Ghandi is reported to have said, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ."

However, when a christian lives in love, it's powerful. Toyohiko Kagawa was a **Japanese Christian pacifist**, Christian reformer, and labour activist in the first half of the 20th century. In Kagawa's home town there was a missionary named Logan. Someone asked Kagawa if he knew Dr. Logan. A radiant smile spread over Kagawa's face as he responded, "He was the first one who showed me the blueprint of love."

Tertullian, one of the early church Fathers, reported a comment he heard one pagan make to another. That comment was, "See how these Christians love one another!" More food for thought - How might we at St Paul's/All Saints shine more brightly in the expression of our love for one another?

The Colossians had love for each other and Paul was thankful.

Paul is thankful for something else in this passage. He is thankful for hope.

Why were the Colossian Christians able to love so noticeably? Paul tells us in v 5:

he says, **"for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."**

Paul believes the church is so loving, **because of the hope laid up for them in heaven."**

The early Christians' hope not only encompassed their relationship with the risen Christ and his people in the present, it very much included a strong belief in the return of Christ in their lifetime. That belief enabled them to not only hold lightly to their possessions, but to be extravagant in generosity, and overflowing in love.

We in the 21st century - understandably - have lost something of the sense of anticipation the early Christians felt as they awaited Christ's return. They looked back only 60 or so years to the crucifixion and resurrection. We look back 2000 years.

We all know that it's easy to be loving in the short term. Just look at newly weds! The challenge is to keep it up in the long term.

A helpful prayer might be, “Lord, please rekindle our *hope* in our salvation, both now and at your return.” And pray for extravagant generosity and overflowing love to permeate our church more and more.

Paul, closes this section of his letter with an inspiring prayer for this young church.

May it be our prayer for each other this morning.

Let's pray:

Lord, may we be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

May we be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen