

Acts 2:42–47 (NIV)

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Colossians 1:1-8(NIV)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. ⁷You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

*Paul writes another letter to more house churches,
providing them the pastoral leadership they need*

This week, we begin a new series on Paul's letter to the church in Colossae (modern-day Turkey, then called Asia Minor). Like many of his letters, this one is written as a pastor to a church. We don't really know what role Paul might have played in founding the church in Colossae, but we do know that he understood his vocation to be creating communities of people committed to being Jesus' disciples and to living in faith and love and hope. So he writes what is in essence, a "dear church" letter and begins with the customary words of praise and thanksgiving. He is grateful for the witness that they have been in their communities and even in the world. Paul has heard of their genuine faith and abiding love that is grounded in the hope we share in Jesus Christ (1:4). Here are some reflections from NT Wright on the opening sentences of Paul's letter.

The main thing Paul wants to say can be summed up quite simply in terms of the gardening illustration, which he himself uses in verse 6. He is delighted to hear that the wonderful new plant of the **gospel** has been planted in Colossae, and that it's bearing fruit and growing, as indeed it is doing in the rest of the world. Since Paul himself is responsible for bringing the plant to this part of the world, he wants them to know that

he's thanking God that it's taking root with them, and he wants to tell them how to nurture it and help it to bear more fruit.

The fruit, in fact, has already begun to appear, and it's interesting to see that this is what Paul focuses on when he tells them how he heard about the new church coming into being. He doesn't say that he's heard about their new learning and wisdom; he does of course want them to grow in understanding and wisdom, but that's not the tell-tale first sign of life. He doesn't say that he's heard about their new-found holiness and obedience to a strict new moral code; he does indeed want them to live a new sort of life, but that will come in due time. He puts his finger instead on the key thing, the fruit that appears quietly but surely within a genuine Christian community soon after it's been planted. Epaphras, he says (a man from Colossae who has come back to Paul in Ephesus) has told us about 'your *love* in the **spirit**' (verse 8). That's the sign.

This love doesn't simply mean that they all (as we might say) have good feelings about each other. They may or they may not. What matters is that the behavior which marks out so much of the world—lust, anger, lies and so on, which split up families and communities—is being replaced by kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and an acceptance of one another as members of the same family, even where there were major differences of race, background and culture. This, as far as Paul is concerned, is the true sign of God at work, and he is thrilled and grateful to hear about it.

How has this come about? The seed which was planted in Colossae was what Paul describes as 'the **word** of truth of the gospel' (verse 5). When Paul thinks of someone—himself, or in this case Epaphras, or anyone else—talking to people about King Jesus, the **Messiah** of Israel who is now the Lord of the world, he doesn't think of them simply conveying information, as though one computer was talking to another. This word is powerful. When it is spoken, God himself works through it, spreading the plant of new life, color, fragrance and fruit in every place. The word of the gospel 'bears fruit and grows'. This phrase reminds us both of Jesus' parable of the sower (Mark 4:8) and, way back beyond that, of God's command in creation to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28). As we shall see, the gospel doesn't just produce a new religious experience for those who might like such a thing. It brings about something much greater: nothing less than new creation.

If the key tell-tale sign of that new creation is the love that marks out the Christian community, Paul can also speak of the three main features of Christian living: faith, hope and love. As in the famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13, so here in verses 4–5 these three stand out. They are there in the individual Christian, and in the community, from beginning to end: the faith which reaches out to grasp what God offers in King Jesus; the love which binds the community together; the hope that looks eagerly forward to the time when God completes what he began in Jesus. Paul has heard that this is all there in Colossae, and

verses 3–8 declare that he is repeatedly thanking the God who has done it all. The garden is in good shape, and he's delighted.¹

The church?

When we speak of the church in Colossae, it is not a church as we you and I think of it. These early churches were just very small communities of Christians that met in people's homes, maybe 10 or 20 or 30 at a time who would gather to worship and to pray and to share communion and, perhaps, to share the latest piece of writing from Paul that they had gotten their hands on. It's an outgrowth of what we see in Acts 2:42-47, wherein the earliest Christians gather at the temple to eat and pray and fast and live their lives together in Christ. So let's talk a look at what we really mean by the church and why it matters.

What is a church? Why go? Those are pretty basic questions, and you'd surely get a wide variety of answers if you went out on the street and asked a bunch of people those two simple questions. Many people have had wonderful experiences with churches, but many have had just the opposite. Philip Yancey, the well-known Christian writer, talks straightforwardly about his own church upbringing and that he became a Christian despite it. On the jacket of his book, *Soul Survivor*, he writes, "I have spent most of my life in recovery from the Church." That's quite a statement from one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation. Given that Yancey speaks for far too many, including some who lost their faith entirely, let's look at those two basic questions.

What is a church?

First, a church is not a building. We may use the words that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on a mountaintop to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called "the Church."

There are many images of "the Church" in the Bible. It is we who are God's sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a "chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

Why go?

I sometimes get a question something like this: "I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can't I love Jesus just as well in my living room?" I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I'm not much of a joiner myself. And I'm pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that Bishop

¹ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 142–144.

Wright writes elsewhere, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus.

So, why go to church? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God’s new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no church will meet all our expectations, nor will any church meet all of God’s expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew 25 years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we’ve been here ever since, in good times and bad. We’ve been able to share the baptism of one son, two grandsons, and a daughter-in-law, as well as two marriages – all here in this place and with the wonderful people of St. Andrew.

But even more important, it has been here that Patti and I found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used all these faithful Christians, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *The gospel of Luke*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *We began 1 Kings last week, so now is a great time to join us!*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my

podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: *Special guest, Holly Stevens: Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew"

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.