

Series: *Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ*

Lesson: *Everyone a Gospel-Minister*

Text: *Colossians 1:24-29 (L5)*

Date: *Sunday, February 12, 2012*

*Colonial Hills
ABF
Baptist Church*

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TEACHING TIP

- Per our teachers meeting last week, it was recommended that the teachers consider sending out the following emails to enhance your students' study outside of the Sunday morning ABF hour: (1) Before Sunday: perhaps on the Friday before, send an email providing a key discussion thought over the upcoming passage or a short paragraph summary of its main points, etc.; (2) After Sunday: perhaps on the Monday after, send an email providing a link to the webpage (<http://www.singlefocusindy.org/colossians.html>) where the full lesson manuscript can be viewed; you may also want to summarize the point of the lesson or provide some clarifying or concluding thoughts to what you shared on Sunday.

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Colossians 2:1-7 – Continue in Christ

INTRODUCTION

Is the church in America dying? Unlike Colossae, is the gospel decreasing and floundering in our nation's churches (cf. Colossians 1:6)? Statistics and societal trends certainly seem to indicate a negative answer to those questions, but perhaps the most disturbing symptom of such decay is the spiritual coldness and godless indifference numbing our own hearts.

In an article entitled "A Church Halfly Reformed," Dr. Peter Adam describes the Puritan attempts in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries to reform the church in England "by political action [which he calls 'reformation from above'] and by the preaching of the word [which he calls 'reformation from below']."¹ Dr. Adam sees many similarities between the state of Christianity in the day of the Puritans and its quality in the 21st century, and he carries the same burden as the Puritans in that day: "How can we best achieve reformation, and what should we do when that reformation limps on 'but halfly forward,' or when it seems to be going backward? This is the problem of living in a mixed church, when those opposed to its reformation by the word of God seem to have power and influence, and when ungodly patterns of life and ministry seem to be increasing." His answers to that question are insightful:

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

¹ Adam, Dr. Peter. "A Church Halfly Reformed." An article in *The Theologian*, an online theological journal (<http://bit.ly/zvB4jU>).

God's call to the Puritans in 1559-1662 was to preach the Gospel, to convert unbelievers, to reform the church, and to shape their lives by the Bible. His call to us is the same. We can learn much that is useful and positive from them, especially in their work in reforming the church 'from below', by the preaching of the Word. We might remember that all effective reforms come 'from below,' as they have again and again over the last four hundred years of the church.

What we should gain from the Puritan attempt to reform the church is an encouragement to follow their example in so far as it reflects the instructions of the Word of God, and the encouragement of seeing our place and role in God's great Gospel plan for the world for the 21st century, "that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let me urge you to find your place in this Gospel plan, to do the work of an evangelist, to build up and reform the church, and to preach Christ in all His glory as God's Son, the Head of his church, and our Saviour.

Such tremendous counsel echoes what the apostle Paul penned and practiced some 2,000 years ago when He was striving by God's grace to establish the newly inaugurated church. His admonition and personal example in establishing the church has been the same successful method of reforming (or reviving) the church throughout the ages, as was demonstrated by the Puritans. God has always been pleased to use His Word—especially its message of the gospel—to change people and bring glory to Himself.

In Colossians 1, Paul has just urged to Colossian believers to “continue in the faith grounded and settled,” by not being “moved away from the hope of the gospel” (v. 23). In the next several verses, he leads by example, demonstrating what gospel-ministry is all about. Those who reform the church—those who are “ministers of the gospel” (v. 23d)—will give themselves (v. 24) to fully proclaiming God's Word (v. 25), especially its rich message of God's sufficient Son (v. 27), so that God's people are fully matured in that message and mission (vv. 28-29). When God's people are presented to Him “perfect in Christ Jesus” (v. 28), there will be no need to call for reformation or revival, for that will be the constant experience within the church.

So, if the church is dying—if the gospel is decreasing—this passage provides the solution. Bottom line: *you* are the solution. To draw it out: the hope for the church is the gospel, the source of the gospel is the message of Christ in God's Word, and the messengers of God's Word are all those who will give themselves to be “ministers of the gospel.” Such a role is not reserved only for those who have degrees and pedigrees; no, everyone can be—indeed, everyone should be—a gospel-minister.

In Colossians 1:24-29, Paul describes the gospel ministry. We'll consider his exemplary description under four headings.

The extent of the gospel ministry is provided in verse 24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my physical body—for the sake of His body, the church—what is lacking in the [afflictions] of Christ” (NET). Paul admitted that in choosing to be a servant of the gospel (v. 23), he had also chosen to suffer for the gospel (v. 24). The New Testament makes it clear that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:12). This is largely because, as the world hated Christ, so it will hate His followers, as Christ promised: “if they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18-21). So, Paul had counted the cost of discipleship (cf. Matthew 10) and had concluded that Christ was worth it. Therefore, in ministering Christ's message to others, he was willing to be Christ's servant even unto and through suffering.

1. Purposeful suffering

Twice in this verse, Paul uses the Greek preposition *huper*, which means “on behalf of, for the sake of.” Paul saw himself as suffering for the sake of the Colossian believers—yes, even suffering on behalf of the universal body of Christ, His church. While the same preposition is used for Christ's suffering (cf. I Peter 2:21), it obviously carried a different meaning.² The point of Jesus' sacrificial and substitutionary sacrifice was that it provided atonement by paying the penalty for our sin and absorbing God's wrath (I Corinthians 15:3; I Peter 2:24; 3:18).

Paul's suffering was not propitiatory or redemptive, but it was still experienced “on the behalf of” or for the benefit of the church. See, Paul practiced what both Peter and John wrote concerning our response to Christ's sacrificial suffering. Peter wrote in I Peter 2:21, “For even [unto suffering] were ye called, because Christ also suffered for [*huper*] us, leaving


² “Jesus' afflictions became Paul's sufferings. Paul carefully distinguished between the two. He suffered in his body (‘in my flesh’), and there was a real struggle. The text reveals some parallels between Jesus and Paul. Both suffered in the flesh; both suffered vicariously; both suffered for the gospel; and both suffered for the church. Many differences between them occur, however. Paul did not suffer redemptively. Jesus completed the work of redemption for all people. Paul's task was to open the door for a universal proclamation of the gospel. At the least, he hoped to convince all people of the validity of the gospel and its application to all persons, Jew or Gentile” (Melick, Richard R. Vol. 32, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, electronic ed., Logos Library System in *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. P. 240).

“Participating in the sufferings of Christ is a spiritual experience which is born out of the believer's union with Christ. Paul is one of a great army of believers who, having taken up their cross and followed Jesus, contribute to the growth of the church worldwide. Christ suffered in death to save the church, and Paul is suffering in life to help the churches. Paul can add nothing to the redemptive work of Christ; there is no sacrificial act of atonement suggested here, rather a participation in the reproach of the Saviour which Paul faced as God's messenger” (McNaughton, Ian S. *Opening Up Colossians and Philemon*. Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006. P. 33).

us an example, that ye should follow His steps”; John concurred in I John 3:16, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for [huper] us, and we ought to lay down our lives for [huper] the brethren.”

In this passage, Paul demonstrates that he was presently enduring suffering (in the form of Roman imprisonment; cf. Colossians 4:3, 10, 18) for Gentile believers (including those in Colossae—“for you,” v. 24) to whom he had been preaching the gospel. Paul’s ministry was primarily geared toward Gentiles (cf. Romans 15:16; Galatians 2:7; Ephesians 3:2, 7-8), and his suffering came from both Jews and Gentiles who felt threatened by Paul’s gospel message.³ As a servant of the gospel, Paul willingly faced this suffering so that others might come to know the hope of the gospel and thereby continue in the faith (v. 23) and be reconciled to God (vv. 21-22). He willingly sacrificed his own temporary comfort and convenience for the everlasting glory of gospel fruit (cf. II Timothy 2:10).⁴

The phrase “fill up that which is [lacking in] the afflictions of Christ” has been variously interpreted.⁵ While an eschatological interpretation seems legitimate here,⁶ we may simply understand it to refer to “the persecution that was intended for Christ.”

 How was Paul’s suffering for or “on the behalf of” the Colossian believers? See paragraph for answers

³ “[Paul] preached a message of inclusion: Gentiles were included in the work of God. This meant that the Christ could be—indeed was—resident among the Gentiles. The message was broadly messianic and offended many Jews who did not want the blessings of the messianic kingdom to go to Gentiles. It also caused a reaction among Gentiles who saw a threat to their religious practices and economic livelihood. Paul suffered in two ways. He suffered the attacks of those he sought to reach with the gospel, and he suffered at the hands of the Jews who sought to stop the advance of the gospel. His suffering related to the Colossians in that his personal difficulties came because of his attempts to convince the Jews to accept the Gentile believers” (Melick, p. 238).

⁴ John Foxe, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

⁵ John MacArthur explains why this cannot be a reference to “Purgatory”: “Roman Catholics have imagined here a reference to the suffering of Christians in purgatory. Christ’s suffering, they maintain, was not enough to purge us completely from our sins. Christians must make up what was lacking in Christ’s suffering on their behalf by their own suffering after death. That can hardly be Paul’s point, however. He has just finished demonstrating that Christ alone is sufficient to reconcile us to God (1:20-23). To do an about face now and teach that believers must help pay for their sins would undermine his whole argument. The New Testament is clear that Christ’s sufferings need nothing added to them. In Jesus’ death on the cross, the work of salvation was completed. Further, the Colossian heretics taught that human works were necessary for salvation. To teach that believers’ suffering was necessary to help expiate their sins would be to play right into the errorists’ hands. The idea that Paul refers to suffering in purgatory is ruled out by both the general content of the epistle and the immediate context, as well as the obvious absence of any mention of a place like purgatory in Scripture. Finally, *thlipsis* (afflictions) is used nowhere in the New Testament to speak of Christ’s sufferings” (Colossians. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996. Pp. 74-75).

⁶ “These sufferings are part and parcel of Christ’s afflictions—not His death on the cross or redemptive sufferings which are ‘finished’—but the afflictions of His people which He endures [cf. Acts 9:4]. The expression Christ’s afflictions is to be understood against an OT and Jewish


MacArthur explains:⁷

Jesus, having ascended to heaven, was out of their reach. But because His enemies had not filled up all the injuries they wanted to inflict on Him, they turned their hatred on those who preached the gospel. It was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions. In 2 Corinthians 1:5 he wrote that “the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance.” He bore in his body the marks of the blows intended for Christ (Gal. 6:17; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–28).

Paul recognized that his suffering served God’s gospel purposes—by suffering for the sake of the Colossian believers, he “filled up” the ordained afflictions of Christ’s body and gave the Colossians the opportunity to hear the message of salvation and respond in faith. For him to avoid suffering could only have come by his ceasing to proclaim the gospel, thereby forfeiting the opportunity of salvation for those who might hear. So, while suffering is never pleasant, in God’s sovereign plan for His gospel-ministers, it is purposeful.

2. Joyful suffering

For this reason, Paul could consider his suffering with rejoicing (cf. James 1:2-4), because it contributed to the salvation of the Colossians. Furthermore,

 What are some reasons why we can be joyful in our suffering for the gospel? See the paragraph for answers

Gospel suffering can be considered joyfully because it pleases God (I Peter 2:20), it identifies one with Christ (Acts 5:41; John 15:18; Philippians 1:29; 3:10; I Peter 4:14), and it brings a future reward (Romans 8:17-18; II Corinthians 4:17). Therefore, like Christ (cf. Hebrews 12:2-3), we can endure our

suffering with joy in what God is accomplishing through it (cf. II Corinthians 4:8-9; Philippians 2:17; I Thessalonians 2:19-20).

Application: Included in God’s gospel-call is the promise that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:12). Those who will be active in gospel-ministry, like Paul, will often find themselves at the

background with its notion of the afflictions of the end time. These were called the ‘birth-pangs of the Messiah,’ those pains and woes which would occur before the arrival of God’s anointed ruler, the Messiah. In the NT they occur between the first and second comings of Jesus. The exalted Christ is in heaven and before His return He suffers in His members [that is, His spiritual body, the church], not least in the life of Paul himself [II Corinthians 11:23-29]. These afflictions have been limited by God; the quota will be complete when the end comes. All Christians take part in these sufferings; it is through them that we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 1 Thes. 3:3, 7). Suffering with Christ is essential if we are to be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:17). Through the sufferings he endures in his own flesh, Paul contributes to the sum total, to what is still lacking. The more he suffers the less the Colossians have to” (Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994. Colossians 1:24–2:5). Cf. Melick, pp. 139-140.

⁷ MacArthur, p. 75.

forefront of such suffering. While our freedoms in America may cause us to question such a promise, Jesus provided his disciples with three key warnings in Matthew 10 that we would be wise to consider: (1) don't make trouble for yourself, for it will come anyways (vv. 16-23, 34-36); (2) as goes the Teacher, so go the followers (vv. 24-33); (3) therefore, we must count the cost (vv. 37-39). While not facing this type of affliction is a manifestation of God's grace for which we should be thankful and with which we should be faithful, facing such affliction is a possibility and probability for all of us. We must count the cost, then, and conclude with Paul that gospel-ministry is not inexpensive, but it is worth it. Be a servant of the gospel, even unto suffering.



How do we apply this point when we live in a nation that offers such religious freedom? See the paragraph for answers

Transition: We've considered the extent of gospel ministry, but what is at its heart? How do we know if we are following Paul as "servants of the gospel"? In this passage, Paul parallels being a "servant of the gospel" (v. 23) with being a "servant of the church" (v. 25). Therefore the gospel minister will also be a church minister. The fulfilling of his ministry will be accomplished within the context of the church. Paul fleshes out this truth by discussing both the subject and object of gospel ministry. Let us first consider the subject of gospel ministry.

THE SUBJECT OF GOSPEL MINISTRY: SPREADING GOD'S WORD (vv. 25-27)

In its subject—or content or expression, etc.—gospel ministry is all about spreading God's Word. Paul writes in verse 25, "Whereof [that is, *of the church*] I am made a minister, according to the dispensation [or better, *stewardship*] of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the Word of God." Paul wants to "fulfill" (or, *complete* by making it known to every person—i.e., *spread*⁸; cf. Romans 15:19-20) God's Word. In the next two verses, he demonstrates that the specific message of God's Word that he has been entrusted (cf. I Corinthians 4:1-2; 9:17) to spread is the "riches of the glory [or, *the glorious riches*] of the mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." In other words, the specific aspect of God's Word that he is burdened to spread is the "mystery" of verses 26 and 27. Paul first defines

⁸ All the words for communicating God's Word throughout this passage are non-technical terms. In other words, none of these words deal with the official act of preaching or evangelizing. "Fulfill" (v. 25) simply carries the idea of bringing to completion by spreading the message abroad. "Preach" in verse 28 is not the New Testament word usually translated "preach," but rather simply means to proclaim or announce publicly. Both "warning" and "teaching" in verse 28 are activities commanded of all believers, as we will see later. Thus, while Paul had a specific stewardship that is not necessarily shared by all believers (i.e., he was the "apostle to the Gentiles"), the application of his pattern of gospel ministry is far-reaching for all believers.

what he means by "mystery," then extols its nature, shares its content, and finally shows what is the promise of this mystery.

Paul **defines** a "mystery" as a truth "which hath been hid from [past] ages and from [past] generations, but now is made manifest to his saints" (v. 26; cf. Ephesians 3:5). Paul uses this word several times throughout his epistles, not to refer to some mystical or secret teaching, but to describe a truth that was hidden in the Old Testament, but revealed in the New—such as "the mystery of the incarnate God (Col. 2:2-3, 9); of Israel's unbelief (Rom. 11:25); of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:7; cf. Rev. 17:5, 7); of the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church (Eph. 3:3-6); and of the rapture (1 Cor. 15:51)."⁹ These mysteries are now clearly revealed in God's Word, but only His people through faith will understand them ("made manifest to His saints, to whom God would make known"; cf. I Corinthians 2:7-16).

The mystery Paul refers to in Colossians 1:26-27 is "gloriously rich" in its **nature**, because its **content** is "Christ in you." This is the climax of the gospel—the reality that through Christ, you get God—or in the words of I Peter 3:18, you are "brought back to God!"¹⁰ The Old Testament phrase that corresponds to this idea is, "God is our portion" (cf. Psalm 73:26; Lamentations 3:24). When John Piper answers the question, "What is the gospel?" he does so with a list that climaxes in this "gloriously rich" reality—the gospel is "a plan, an event, an achievement, an offer, the application [of that achievement], and God."¹¹

In this passage, Paul specifically refers to the "mystery" that the Gentiles ("among the Gentiles") would share *equally* with the Jews in this gloriously rich possession. John MacArthur explains:¹²

Of all the mysteries God has revealed in the New Testament, the most profound is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The Old Testament predicted the coming of the Messiah. But the idea that He would actually live in His redeemed church, made up mostly of Gentiles, was not revealed....Believers, both Jew and Gentile, now possess the surpassing riches of the indwelling Christ (John 14:23; Rom. 8:9-10; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:7, 17-18; 3:8-10, 16-19; Phil. 4:19). The church is

⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰ "The gospel is not a system, hierarchy, or set of regulations. It is the person and work of Jesus, which is, indeed, the message" (Melick, p. 242).

¹¹ "Piper on 'What is the Gospel?'" an article on the *Desiring God* blog at <http://bit.ly/woahot>.

¹² MacArthur, pp. 76-78. Cf. "The mystery was not that Gentiles would be saved but how they could be "fellow-heirs" (Eph. 3:6, kjv), on the same level with Jews, with no middle wall of partition between them (Eph. 2:12-14). In the Old Testament Gentiles who believed and became a part of Judaism were still considered lower than Jews. This special union in which there 'is neither Jew nor Greek' (i.e., Gentile, Gal. 3:28) was nonexistent before Christ died and the Spirit descended to baptize all believers into this new body" (Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983. Colossians 1:25-26).

described as “the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (2 Cor. 6:16).

It is because “we get God” that we have the **promise** or “hope of glory” (cf. Colossians 3:4). Since God within us is the downpayment of our complete inheritance (II Corinthians 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:13-14), we know that the best is yet to come. God has promised to “afterward, receive [us] to glory” (Psalm 73:24), and having Him now seals that promise in eternal hope!¹³

What an incredible message is discovered in God’s Word, and Paul understood his awesome responsibility to spread it everywhere he could. This stewardship drove Paul. He wrote in Acts 20:24, “Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.” Therefore, he gave himself “to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Paul recognized that in being a recipient of God’s grace, he had also been made a steward of God’s grace (cf. I Corinthians 9:16-17).

Application: Christian, in church ministry, God’s Word is your subject matter, and its gospel message should be the first part of it that you master. While God gives different gifts to different people, He has given one gift equally to all His people—that is, the gift of His grace. You are a steward of that gift. Are you being faithful in your stewardship (cf. Ephesians 4:29; I Peter 4:10-11)? Effective gospel ministry hinges on our spreading God’s Word and preaching its message of Jesus. More specific application, though, needs to wait until we’ve considered the next point.

Transition: We’ve learned that within the context of the church, gospel ministry has as its subject the spreading of God’s Word, especially its rich message of the gospel. Now, in verse 29, Paul informs us concerning the object of the gospel ministry.

¹³ “They are thus ‘in Christ’ (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:4), and Christ is in them (cf. Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5). Because of Christ, believers look forward to sharing His glory (Col. 3:4; Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 30; 2 Cor. 4:17; Gal. 5:5; 1 Peter 5:10; also cf. Rom. 8:24)” (Ibid., Colossians 1:27).

THE OBJECT OF GOSPEL MINISTRY: STRENGTHENING EVERY PERSON (v. 28)

In verse 28, Paul states that his goal in spreading God’s Word (i.e., specifically “proclaiming Christ”¹⁴) was to “present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Put succinctly, in his gospel ministry Paul’s object was every person¹⁵ and his objective was their maturity.¹⁶ In Titus, we learned that the gospel and godliness go hand-in-hand; complementing that partnership, Paul is demonstrating here in Colossians that the gospel and maturity go hand-in-hand. Paul’s gospel ministry had no room for the lifelong immature believer; he had no place in his gospel philosophy for an anemic church.

To Paul, if a believer or church wasn’t growing in maturity, then its real possession of the gospel message was in question. Part of the reason for this mentality was due to the nature of the gospel: the gospel presents a totally supreme and sufficient Savior, One who saves from the penalty, power, and presence of sin—if growth and maturity aren’t being enjoyed, it’s not the Savior’s fault.¹⁷ The other part of Paul’s thinking here had to do with his own philosophy of gospel ministry. Paul refused to bring someone to saving faith and then walk away to his next prospect. Paul gave his life to helping others “continue in the faith” even as he admonished them to do so (Colossians 1:23). This was his “servanthood” to the gospel—he was not just an evangelist of the gospel, he was a discipler in the gospel; he didn’t just continue in the gospel himself, he caused those around him to continue in the gospel.

This is what true gospel ministry is—it’s a commitment, a full-time participation in the message and mission of the gospel, no matter what one’s profession may be.¹⁸ It is both evangelism and discipleship, both giving the gospel and growing

¹⁴ “Whom we preach” is better translated “Whom [i.e., Christ from v. 27] we proclaim,” for the Greek word simply means to announce or proclaim in a public manner. Thus, this passage is not simply referring to preachers and preaching, but to all those who should be making Christ known.

¹⁵ Three times in the Greek, Paul uses the phrase “every man.” “Clearly he could not rest until all Christians lived up to what God expected” (Melick, p. 242). Cf. I Thessalonians 2:11-12. This goal is no less than that of our Savior—cf. Ephesians 5:27-29; I Peter 5:10; Jude 24.

¹⁶ The Greek word for “perfect” is better translated “mature” here since Paul has a present goal in mind, not an eschatological completion. Cf. Ephesians 4:11-13.

¹⁷ Like we saw in Titus, an ungodly (or immature) believer actually defames and discredits the saving ability of God and His gospel (cf. Titus 2:5, 8, 10).

¹⁸ The 50+ “one another” references throughout the New Testament demonstrate this kind of life-on-life, day-by-day, practical gospel ministry. Galatians 6:1—“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Hebrews 3:13-14—“But exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin; for we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.” Hebrews 10:24-25—“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” I Thessalonians 5:14—“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.”

in the gospel, both studying God's Word and proclaiming God's Son, both maintaining my own spiritual fervency and encouraging the spiritual passion of others. It requires personal devotion, one-one-one mentoring, group discipleship, corporate worship, and any other method that may contribute to "presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus."¹⁹ This kind of gospel ministry was not entrusted just to the leadership, for they cannot fulfill it alone. Every member of the church should be this kind of a gospel minister, committed to "presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus."



Why might this consideration of verse 28 not rebuke us more than it does? (1) *Because we're not all that concerned with "presenting ourselves perfect in Christ Jesus"—we're not committed to this standard for ourselves;* (2) *because we've never seen this modeled in our churches as a pattern*

Notice both the means and the manner of this gospel-objective pursued by Paul.

1. *The means*

Paul sought to "mature" those around him through "warning" and "teaching."²⁰ The Greek word for "warning" is *noutheteo* and means "to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct; [to] admonish, warn, instruct."²¹ Paul regularly engaged in such counsel (cf. Acts 20:31; I Corinthians 4:14), and wise shepherds will counsel their sheep (I Thessalonians 5:12). Furthermore, Scripture makes it clear that every believer ought to be engaging in this ministry one with another. Colossians 3:16 tells us to be "admonishing one another"; I Thessalonians 5:14 exhorts all believers to "warn them that are unruly"; and II Thessalonians 3:14-15 calls us to "admonish" the disobedient and disciplined individual "as a brother." Every believer can engage in this means of objective gospel ministry, because in Christ "ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another" (Romans 15:14). MacArthur begins the application, "If there is sin in the life of a believer, other believers have the responsibility to lovingly, gently admonish them to forsake that sin."²²

¹⁹ Cf. II Timothy 2:2—"The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

²⁰ "'Admonishing' in Scripture has the connotation of confronting with the intent of changing one's attitudes and actions. Here the term speaks to the task of calling to mind a correct course of action. It encourages people to get on with what they know to do. 'Teaching' complements 'admonishing.' 'Teaching' is the orderly presentation of Christian truth for converts so that they may know how to grow" (Melick, p. 242).

²¹ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. P. 679.

²² MacArthur, p. 78.

The second word Paul uses to describe his means of gospel ministry is a more positive word—"teaching." "Teaching" is the imparting of truth and the instruction of appropriate response to such truth. Teaching uses the "subject" of gospel ministry (i.e., God's Word—see above) to accomplish the "object" of gospel ministry (i.e., maturity in believers), for "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Timothy 3:16-17). Teaching should especially characterize the ministry of church leaders (I Timothy 3:2), but all believers are expected to engage in teaching one another (Colossians 3:16) as part of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:20). Whether negatively warning or positively teaching, believers have been given the means by God to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

2. *The manner*

Such warning and teaching need to be done "in all wisdom." Wisdom is "the capacity to understand and function accordingly."²³ Wisdom is knowledge applied, the ability to take one's understanding of God's Word and use it to make godly decisions and go a godly direction.

Such wisdom is crucial when it comes to "presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Paul told us that in our gospel ministry of maturing and strengthening our fellow believers, we will be confronted with all different levels of maturity and all different kinds of needs—for example, we will need to "warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (I Thessalonians 5:14). We need wisdom to know how to "fulfill" the Word of God in our ministry to them. In addition, Paul tells us in Galatians 6:1 that there are times when we will need to "restore" the one who has "overtaken in a fault." Such a sobering need requires great gentleness and wisdom. Furthermore, the need for wisdom is evident when we consider that God is so committed to corporate gospel maturity that he provided the church with the means to deal with those who are uncooperative—church discipline. We need great wisdom to know when to be patient, when to just pray, and when to bring God's discipline to bear upon someone.



Application: What would this kind of gospel ministry look like in the lives of those at your table? Where should we start to engage in gospel ministry? (1) *Gospel ministry starts in the heart (loving worship for what God has done for us) and in the mind (the commitment to give oneself to living out God's work and Word, even in the "messiness" of peoples' lives);* (2) *then, start small—target yourself in a renewed commitment to growing maturity (what will this look like?), then target your wife and children;* (3) *finally, move outside the home—pray for one or two Timothys at church that you can begin to mentor; look*

²³ Arndt, p. 934.

for an opportunity to be “formally” involved in the gospel ministry of your church on “church days”; be sensitive on “non-church days” to how you can be engaging in gospel ministry toward the saved and unsaved around you; perhaps schedule how you can actively minister grace throughout the week via emails, texts, phone calls, social media; be careful to not react against people, but to respond to their needs with gentleness and wisdom, skillfully using God’s Word to address their unique needs, etc. Will you commit to making the spiritual maturity of “every person” your concern by actively and lovingly warning and teaching them?

Transition: Gospel ministry is a high calling (cf. Ephesians 4:1ff), but if you will commit yourself to it, God promises to infuse it with enablement and effectiveness. So, having considered the extent, subject, and object of gospel ministry, we conclude by considering its effectiveness.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOSPEL MINISTRY: SERVING BY DIVINE POWER (v. 29)

Paul demonstrates that effective gospel ministry has both a human and a divine aspect to it.

1. Human responsibility

Gospel ministers don’t give up when their admonitions go unheeded, their proclamation seems unheard, and their ministry is unappreciated. Like Paul, they “labor” and “strive” (Gk. *agonizomai*) as a faithful steward (I Corinthians 4:1-2). The word “labor” carries the idea of exerting oneself unto the point of exhaustion, and “strive” was used of fights and athletic contests. Both are very rigorous words denoting intense effort on the part of the gospel minister. Cf. I Corinthians 9:25; 15:10, 58; II Corinthians 11:23-28; Galatians 4:1; Colossians 2:1; 4:12; I Thessalonians 1:3; I Timothy 6:12.

2. Divine enablement

Such effort on Paul’s part was enabled by God Himself. Paul says that he labored and struggled, “according to the working [Gk. *energeia*] of Him who is working [Gk. *energeo*] in me in power [Gk. *dunamis*].” The idea is that God’s power both enabled Paul’s faithful labor and made it effective, by bringing forth fruit. This divine power was the very power that had raised Christ from the dead (cf. Ephesians 1:19-10) and completely transformed Paul (cf. Ephesians 2:1, 5-6). Therefore, Paul knew that his gospel ministry would be effective, because it was not he that worked, as much as it was God that gave the increase. Paul rejoiced, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain. But I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (I Corinthians 15:10). Mere human effort may be commendable, but it will prove to be ineffective. The wise and balanced gospel minister will “continue in” Christ’s power, just as

he initially experienced. Paul explains, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). It is only “through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13) that we can hope to strengthen others by our gospel ministry.



Application: What attitudes or actions need to change in order for you to be faithful in your “labor” and “striving” for Christ? *Laziness to diligence, half-heartedness to hard work, lack of perseverance for patience, aimlessness to concentrated focus, comfort to self-sacrifice, letting go of the fear of man, etc.* How do you need to make sure your efforts are “according to God’s working”? *More prayer, more arming oneself with God’s wisdom from His Word, less pressure on oneself to change people, more patience with God’s timing, more joy that God is working, less frustration when people don’t get it, more humility in one’s own ability, more awe that God uses us, more recognition that any fruit is solely because of Christ, etc.*

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we’ll simply end with our initial observation:

If the church is dying—if the gospel is decreasing—this passage provides the solution. Bottom line: you are the solution. To draw it out: the hope for the church is the gospel, the source of the gospel is the message of Christ in God’s Word, and the messengers of God’s Word are all those who will give themselves to be “ministers of the gospel.” Such a role is not reserved only for those who have degrees and pedigrees; no, everyone can be—indeed, everyone should be—a gospel-minister.