

The Pattern for Christian Ministry

Colossians 4:7-18

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We live in a world where very few people write letters anymore. We write emails and now, even that is going by the wayside. We write blogs, comments, Instagram's, twitters, texts, WhatsApp's, messages. The art of writing letters is almost gone. Emails are not letters. In fact, if you receive an email that starts to feel like a letter, many of you will scan it, mark it as read (no you didn't), and discard it. The world's inboxes are full of unread, uncared for, unloved emails.

When was the last time you went to the mailbox hoping for a... letter. Besides Christmas cards, which don't count, when was the last time you received or wrote a real letter to someone?

Just like many other things in the Bible, this aspect of the Scriptures is lost on us. All of Paul's writings in the New Testament were letters. Yes, we call them "epistles". Epistles is nothing but a fancy word for "letters". Just as our letters used to have a generally accepted format, so the letters of Bible times had a generally accepted format. This format was deeply influenced by the fact that letters were written on scrolls. Whatever material the letter was written on was then rolled up. Wax was applied where the roll ended to seal it. A splotch of wax was dropped on the seal and then the sender's signet ring pressed into it, if the sender had one. Paul did not. Though his letters were sealed, they were certified to be genuine, not by a signet seal on the outside, but by his distinctive, large handwriting somewhere in the contents.

Paul generally dictated his letters. He was going blind during the last part of his life and ministry. His health was starting to fail. Often, the person who would be carrying the letter to its destination took the dictation and wrote down what Paul said. This is the case with the letter we are studying and its closing paragraphs before us today. This is the part of a letter that gives a closing prayer wish or blessing. It also tended to have greetings and short messages from people around the letter's author to the recipients.

We are beginning in Colossians 4:7 to the end of the letter, or book, if you will. First, let me draw your attention to verses before our text. They contain the closing blessing and exhortation. They also established a program for Christian engagement with God and with the world.

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

There was an engagement with God in faithful prayer (v.2-4). A Commisssional people engage God in the principles the shape praying. They also engage God in praying for the particular needs of Christian people and leaders. Commisssional people will also be engaged with the world In faithful witness (v.5-6). They are careful about how they live and what they say.

Therefore, the pattern for Christian ministry begins with prayer and witness. These are foundational to being a Biblically Commissioned church. Commissioned ministry will see the importance of personal and ministry relationships. No one in the New Testament operates on a principle of individuality. The stalwart missionary serving for years alone but undaunted is the stuff of missionary stories. But it is unknown in the New Testament. The reason the Apostles wrote letters to people and to churches is because they had relationships. There were much loved people who needed to be encouraged, exhorted, corrected, taught, and commended.

Paul seems to have surrounded himself and filled his ministry life with people. He had a vast network of relationships. Some were near to him. Some were far from him. Some were close, dear, trusted, relied upon. Some were connected to him through others – second-hand relationships. Through these relationships, Paul shows us a Pattern for Christian Ministry.

Remember we are not now looking at what appears to be a logical argument. We are now listening to the words and ways of relationships. But these are not without their order and structure.

Alongside of Faithful Servants (v.7-13)

I love how Paul speaks of the people who are around him and with whom he serves.

⁷Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Two Fellow Ministers (v.7-9)

Biblical leaders humbly develop relationships with fellow servants, ministers, deacons.

Tychicus

Tychicus is with Paul and attending to his needs. He will be traveling with Onesimus to bring the letters to the church and to Philemon. He has been given a report of Paul's activities, probably referring to his gospel efforts in prison and his letter writing to the churches. Remember, Paul is what we would think of as a missionary. Since he is writing such a powerful letter, he wants the church to know more about him.

I am challenged by the way Paul describes Tychicus. Why? Because I am not sure that we tend to attach these kinds of descriptors to people we serve with. Beloved brother... faithful deacon (*diakonos*)... a fellow servant of the Lord. Do you have relationships that sound and feel like this? Was Tychicus perfect? Of course not. He had faults, I am sure. But he was commended as a brother, as a deacon/minister, and as a servant. He was loved. He was faithful. He was a partner in the Lord.

He was sent to Colossae on a mission, with a purpose. He would later be sent to Ephesus to assist Timothy. He was to give them a further report on how Paul was doing. There was more to say than Paul wanted to put in the letter. Tychicus was also sent to encourage them in the things Paul was writing.

The church there was going through the struggles that are reflected in this letter. They needed strong words of encouragement in the pushing back against error. They would need help thinking through the will of God in all areas of wisdom.

Onesimus

Paul also is sending Onesimus with Tychicus. Onesimus was the run-away slave of Philemon who was converted under Paul's ministry while in prison with him. Along with this letter to the church, Paul was sending another to Onesimus' owner which is the book of Philemon in our Bibles. Notice Paul's description of Onesimus: "a faithful and beloved brother who is from Colossae and now will be in the church." So faithful and beloved here are not tied to what a person does, but rather who a person is. Maybe Onesimus has a good start in serving. But beloved and faithful are how we are described by God. Therefore, we should not tie our relationships with other Christians with what they do, particularly what they do for us, but rather who they are in Christ.

Some Fellow Countrymen (v.10-11)

Biblical leaders develop relationships with others who may have stumbled and even failed in ministry.

¹⁰ 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), ¹¹ 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.

These were Paul's Jewish fellow workers for God's kingdom.

Aristarchus was in prison with Paul. He was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:5) and joined the missionary band traveling with Paul. He would be known to the Colossian church. So the "Hi" from him.

Then we get an interesting commendation of John Mark. He is specifically identified as Barnabas' cousin. There is no mistaking who this is. He had set out with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. He turned back and quit the team. Paul refused to take him on the second journey. That argument led to Paul and Barnabas separating. However, we see that Paul has reconciled with John Mark. He has sent specific instructions, probably related to people not accepting him due to the split. Paul is now commending him and has told the churches to welcome John Mark if he comes to them. This is wonderful to see this kind of reconciliation and commendation. Paul has set an example for willingness to work with and develop someone who might have failed in ministry.

And finally, a "Hi" from Jesus who, understandably, was also called Justus. The only other Justus mentioned in the New Testament was Titus Justus where the church in Corinth met after being ousted from the synagogue. However, it is

unlikely this is the same person. If not, this is the only mention of him by name. However, he is with Paul, either in prison with him or attending to Paul while he is in prison.

A Faithful Pastor (v.12-13)

Biblical leaders spend a great deal of ministry time to disciple and mentor men who serve in the eldership, that is, pastors.

¹² 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. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Epaphras is significant person serving Paul and the church. We don't know as much about him as we do Timothy and Titus. But the references to him highlight how important he was in serving in the churches in the region around Colossae and Laodicea. He was one of the elders in the church at Colossae and had led and served them well.

What strikes me here is what Epaphras struggled for. In Colossians 1:5–8

Of this [hope laid up in heaven] you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Epaphras is an example of prayer and witness. He struggles for them in prayer having preached to them the gospel. His aim in ministry is twofold:

That the congregation will become mature, will grow up in Christ.

That the congregation are confident that they are obeying the Lord, doing His will.

These two aspects of ministry are being commended by Paul. They are what he wants elders to aim for. Prayer and preaching that help people to maturity and to confidence in God's will. Is this what you prize from elders/pastors?

With Faithful People (v.14-15)

Biblical leaders sometimes have people who are near to help them in practical ways.

¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

A Caring Physician (v.14)

Luke is interesting. He wrote two books of the Bible. He was a physician by training and by trade. At some point, after Paul had suffered great persecution and injuries, Luke joins the traveling team of missionaries. The book of Acts

switches voice from *they* and *them* to *we* and *us*. He seems to be traveling around with Paul, not only to assist in ministry, but also to use his skills to attend to Paul's physical needs. We often forget what Paul went through over the course of his ministry: stonings, beatings, shipwrecks, failing eyesight, long terms of imprisonment. What a joy to have people who care about you enough to sacrifice themselves to be sure leaders are sustained.

A Possible Failure (v.14)

Demas also sends a greeting. He is with Paul. He may be in prison or is another of those who are in Rome because of Paul and others. At this point, Paul conveys the greetings but does not commend him. That would not be significant if we did not have 2 Timothy 4:9–12, written in the latter years of Paul's ministry.

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.

Here is that team of people serving, going, and coming. Over the next few years after the writing of the Colossian letter, Demas begins to love this present world, possibly its comforts and ease after the troubles, hardships and suffering of ministry. Therefore, he leaves and goes home to Thessalonica.

A Sacrificial Home (v.15)

The church in Colossae has a sister church in Laodicea. So, Paul sends greetings to them. Of note though, he greets Nympha. This lady hosts a church, a gathering in her home. Given the sentence order, this is probably in Laodicea. The wording, as it does in a couple of other of Paul's letters, notably Romans, implies multiple gathering places of the church in a city.

By Faithful Ministry (v.16-17)

Biblical leaders recognize and commend the work God is doing in other churches and with key people.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

A Charge to the Church (v.16)

This letter is not only to Colossae, but also to the church in Laodicea. Colossae was the parent church and Laodicea, the daughter church. So, the letter was to be read in both churches. The problems faced on one were being faced in both. The heart of the leadership was to be sure that the congregations both rejected error, were established in God's will, and were walking in wisdom.

From the shared letter, they were personally, practically, with visible progress, to live the gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross embracing, God-glorifying Christian life

A Charge to a Person (v.17)

Archippus was serving in one of the two churches. It is likely that he was in Laodicea. He had been given a ministry that we he was responsible for in the Lord. He seems to be wavering or possibly not completing it. This charge is to the church. At least the elders and possibly, in the public reading of this letter, Archippus is being exhorted... no, he is sternly commanded to finish what was put in his charge. Gulp...

In Faithful Suffering (v.18)

Biblical leaders will continue to be faithful even in physical affliction, suffering, limitations while relying on the grace of God.

¹⁸I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains.
Grace be with you.

With Physical Infirmary

Paul's handwriting was distinct. All the evidence points to failing eyesight and possibly, physical difficulties as we mentioned earlier. As with most of his correspondence, this letter was dictated. But because there were forgeries going around the churches, Paul began signing or writing something in his letters that signified it was truly from him. Despite all this, Paul simply kept on serving as he could. You see, the strength of your commitment to ministry is not in how much you are doing, but in what it takes to stop you from doing it.

In Ministry Limitation

Paul is chained... why chains? Why remember, "chains"? This presents a kind of limitation. The people he is sending and the people he is writing to are free. They are not in prison. So, if Archippus is to complete the ministry given him, and Paul is fulfilling his own ministry in spite of physical decline and imprisonment, then *what are they doing?*

Remembering his chains is a way to ask for prayer for God's grace to bear up under it and God's providence to free him from it.

Bu Sustaining Grace

The grace that sustains Paul in such suffering will sustain the church at Colossae. Ministry is done by people, by human effort. But that human effort, that work that believers do, is all enabled and empowered by the grace of God.

Reflect and Respond

What have we observed from the life of Paul that helps us think about Biblical leadership?

- Biblical leaders humbly develop relationships with fellow servants, ministers, deacons.
- Biblical leaders develop relationships with others who may have stumbled and even failed in ministry.
- Biblical leaders spend a great deal of ministry time to disciple and mentor men who serve in the eldership, that is, pastors.
- Biblical leaders sometimes have people who are near to help them in practical ways.
- Biblical leaders recognize and commend the work God is doing in other churches and with key people.
- Biblical leaders will continue to be faithful even in physical affliction, suffering, limitations while relying on the grace of God.

I hope that this simple introduction to several people in Paul's circle has challenged and convicted you. Some of you need to think deeply about your own life and ministry. Are you faithful? Are you committed? Are you sacrificial? Are you trending toward more maturity, more wisdom, greater sacrifice? Or are you trending toward ease, comfort, self-focus, incompleteness?

Some of you are struggling with what often are perceived as significant obstacles to serving. Frankly, Paul, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Epaphras shame us. No, you are not them. But sadly, you also often are not even close.

I also pray, for many of you, that you will be encouraged by it. Many of you who serve well also have tender consciences. You hear this and you are concerned. But do have an accurate assessment of your work in the Lord. Stay faithful, as you have been. Continue to do the ministry you are committed to. Continue to offer your time, energy, abilities, gifts, and money to sacrificial service in the church. Fulfill what was given you to do.

All of this is your responsibility to do the work. It is God's responsibility to enable by His grace. Don't resist that grace. Do avail yourself of the grace.

May we all, personally, practically, with visible progress, live the gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross embracing, God-glorifying Christian life