

Feature Articles

1. COLOSSIANS 4:7-18 AS A MODEL OF FAITHFUL MINISTRY

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Author's Profile

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Abstract

In Colossians 4:7-18, Paul deliberately lists the names of his various ministry partners in his greetings. While greetings in epistles are often overlooked, this article argues that these passages carry significant theological and practical implications. It highlights three key characteristics that Paul teaches regarding a faithful Christian worker. First, their core identity and value lie in being "in Christ." Second, they are faithful in proclaiming the truth of the gospel and persistent in prayer. Third, they are committed to serving alongside other faithful Christian workers. The individuals listed are presented by Paul as exemplary figures for the Colossian church, teaching them what it means to serve faithfully.

Introduction

Though sometimes passed over quickly, greetings in the Pauline letters play important theological and practical roles.¹ Often, in the final greetings, Paul will reemphasize important points or give final exhortations intended to aid readers in applying the theological themes of the letter. As Thurston notes, “the greetings often give ‘flesh and blood’ to the Pauline epistles.”² For example, at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians, having updated the Corinthians on his plans, Paul urges them to “Be alert, stand firm in faith, act courageously, be strong. Let everything you do be done in love” (16:13-14).³ Then, in his final greetings, Paul draws special attention to love: “if anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. O Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus” (16:22-24). The connections to the body of 1 Corinthians are obvious: the Corinthians are called to faithfulness to Christ and unity in love.

The final greetings of Colossians are especially prominent as they “are more extensive than in any Pauline letter except Romans, and the longest in relation to the size of the letter.”⁴ Moreover, the Colossian greetings are striking as the names listed are those participating in gospel ministry as Paul’s coworkers.⁵ The final greetings in Colossians focus on faithfulness in serving Christ and, therefore, tie together the main teaching of the letter in encouraging ministry leaders. This essay will explore the greetings of Colossians 4:7–18 and argue that Paul gives a compelling vision of faithful gospel

¹ See Jeffery A.D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

² Bonnie Thurston, “Paul’s Associates in Colossians 4:7–17,” *Restoration Quarterly* 41 (1999), 46.

³ All New Testament quotations are my own translations.

⁴ Jerry Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 266.

⁵ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 655.

ministry that flows from the theological instruction of the letter.⁶ As such, the closing greeting is immediately applicable to church ministers today.

Thurston argues that the passage divides into three sections: commendations of the letter carriers (4:7–9), greetings from those with Paul (4:10–14), and Paul’s personal greetings (4:15–17).⁷ While Paul moves through three different groups of people, each group comprises those participating in gospel ministry. In each section, Paul points to the identity of faithful ministers of the gospel, the content of faithful gospel ministry, and the importance of faithful gospel partnership. These three themes will form the outline for the argument to follow. Before moving into a detailed analysis of the greetings, though, we must first consider the relationship between this closing passage and the main theme of Colossians.

Colossians 4:7–17 and the Message of the Letter

Space does not permit a full discussion of the historical background and purpose of Colossians. Though scholars disagree on the details, most believe that Paul (or an anonymous writer) wrote the letter to address a form of false teaching that was threatening the church.⁸ Weighing the evidence, Pao summarizes that the issue in Colossae was “a syncretism with Jewish elements providing the controlling framework.”⁹ Similarly, Beale defines the false teaching as

⁶ Issues of authorship will not be addressed in this essay. See the recent discussion in Garwood P. Anderson, *Paul’s New Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2016), 187–195, and the relevant sections in the recent major commentaries. I will refer to the author as “Paul” throughout this essay.

⁷ Thurston, “Paul’s Associates,” 46.

⁸ In addition to the introductions of the major commentaries, see Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Ian K. Smith, *Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul’s Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Richard E. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy: Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

⁹ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 31.

“a combination of pagan and distorted Jewish thought.”¹⁰ The precise nature of the syncretism remains debated, but for the purposes of this essay, suffice it to say that the church was threatened by some combination of local religious practice and Jewish mysticism placed alongside Christian teachings. Paul’s strategy to address the issue was to point to the supremacy of Christ and the identity of the Colossian Christians in union with him.¹¹

Throughout the letter, Paul places special attention on Christology, with 1:15-20 as the summit. While the so-called Christ hymn of that passage rightly receives much attention, the entire letter overflows with Christology. Moo categorizes the Christological teaching along two primary themes: Christ’s unique relationship to the Father and “Christ’s sufficiency for spiritual experience.”¹² For example, Christ is the “beloved son” (1:13), the one “in whom we have redemption” (1:14), “the mystery of God” (2:2), the one “in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden” (2:3), the one in whom “all the fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9), “the head of every ruler and authority” (2:10), and the one “seated at God’s right hand” (3:1). In short, the central theme of Christology in Colossians points to the exalted Christ’s divinity and supremacy, making him alone worthy of worship and able to provide all the Colossians need.

Related to the theme of Christ’s sufficiency, Paul also emphasizes the Colossians’ new identity in Christ as God’s new covenant people. The letter begins with Paul describing his addressees as those “in Colossae . . . in Christ.” While they are physically located in the city of Colossae, they are spiritually located in the realm of Christ, which forms their new, primary identity. The rest of the letter returns to this basic identifier (“in Christ”) while filling out the concept with

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 16.

¹¹ Of course, other theological themes are present, especially eschatology. For the purposes of this essay, I highlight Christology and Christian identity in Christ because these themes are central to the message of the letter and are prominent in the final greetings.

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 63.

theologically rich themes of being in Christ. The next section will briefly explore this identity further.

The final greetings evoke these same themes through Paul's commendation of his coworkers and last words of encouragement. Beale argues that the final section of Colossians focuses on pastoral matters: Paul commends his coworkers to the church as both servants of Christ and examples of faithfulness in Christ.¹³ Significantly, Paul says very little about his own condition and keeps the focus on his fellow ministers and his own words of encouragement to the Colossians.¹⁴ As the analysis below will demonstrate, Paul's commendation of his coworkers are not random words of flattery but are closely connected to the main themes of the letter and, therefore, intricate to Paul's purposes in writing. As McKnight notes, "Paul's highest value was faithful fellowship in Christ and mutual commitment to gospel ministry."¹⁵ Paul wants the Colossians to be unified in their union with Christ and in the common goal of spreading the gospel, and this closing section of the letter provides them with examples of Paul and his coworkers living out that vision.

Faithful Ministers in Christ

The final greetings of Colossians are unique in that they focus on those serving as leaders in the churches and participating in Paul's gospel mission. A further significant feature of these greetings is the detailed description of these ministers' gospel-shaped character. The greeting section opens with Paul's commendation of the letter carrier Tychicus with a threefold description of him as "a beloved brother and a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord."¹⁶ In short, Paul begins the commendation with a comment on the identity and character

¹³ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 349. The section also shows Paul's continued pastoral care for the Colossians, even during his own imprisonment.

¹⁴ He is sending Tychicus and Onesimus to tell the Colossians more about his own situation.

¹⁵ McKnight, *Colossians*, 655.

¹⁶ Moo, *Colossians and to Philemon*, 335.

of Tychicus. As mentioned above, Christian identity has been an important theme throughout the letter. Note the following identity descriptors:

- 1:2 – faithful brothers in Christ
- 1:12 – qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints
- 1:13 – delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom... in Christ
- 1:21-22 – once alienated... now reconciled
- 2:7 – rooted and built up in Christ
- 2:10 – filled in Christ
- 2:11 – circumcised with the circumcision of Christ
- 2:12 – buried and raised with Christ
- 2:13 – made alive in Christ
- 3:1-4 – dead and raised with Christ; life hidden with Christ
- 3:12 – God's chosen ones, holy and beloved

Clearly Paul wanted the Colossians to grasp their new identity in Christ and live faithfully from that identity.

Returning to the commendation of Tychicus, the threefold description found in 4:7 paints the picture of a model disciple and minister of the gospel. First, Tychicus is “a beloved brother,” echoing themes Paul has used for the Colossian church throughout the letter. The letter opens with family language as Timothy is “brother Timothy” and the Colossians are “faithful brothers” since God is “our Father” (1:1-2). The Father has also “delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). That Christ is the firstborn of creation (1:15) and resurrection (1:18) implies that believers are siblings in union with the firstborn.

In addition to the explicit family language, Colossians is filled with covenantal themes that establish the church’s identity as the new covenant family of God. For example, the imagery of deliverance from darkness and transferal into the kingdom of his beloved Son in 1:13-14 has clear Exodus overtones and therefore connects the Colossians’ experience of salvation to the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt.¹⁷

¹⁷ Christopher A. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 81-95.

Accordingly, the Colossians, having experienced the new spiritual exodus, are the new covenant people of God in solidarity with Christ.¹⁸ As those united to the beloved son, this new covenant family is marked by love. Thus, Tychicus is an example of a beloved brother, one Paul loves and trusts, and is to be emulated in the church. Tychicus lives and serves faithfully, and the Colossians should look to him as they seek to love Christ and one another.

Second, Tychicus is a “faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (*πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ*). “Faithful” modifies both Tychicus’s status as a minister and servant.¹⁹ Paul addressed the Colossians as “faithful” (1:2) and described the founder of the church, Epaphras, as a “faithful minister” (1:7). In each case, “faithful” refers to proven character, one who has remained committed to the gospel and the ministry. As a minister and fellow servant, “Tychicus believed not only in the gospel but also in Paul’s apostolic calling to preach the gospel to Gentiles, and so served alongside Paul faithfully.”²⁰ Tychicus is an example of one who displays Col. 1:23 – “remain in the faith, established and steadfast, and not shifting away from the hope of the gospel.”

Finally, Paul qualifies these characteristics as “in the Lord,” placing Tychicus in close family relationship with the Colossians, who are also “in Christ” (1:2). Foster explains: “the phrase ‘in the Lord’ functions to signal that Tychicus is one of those who shares a new status as a result of the existence that believers now enjoy because of the transformative work of Christ. In this way, such service occurs in a different realm, one created and sustained by Christ himself.”²¹ In

¹⁸ G. K. Beale, *Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 166-67. Other covenantal themes are found throughout the Christ hymn of 1:15-20. See Grant Macaskill, “Union(s) with Christ: Colossians 1:15-20, *Ex Auditu* 33 (2017): 92-107. Moreover, the circumcision imagery of 2:11-15 links salvation in Christ to the Abrahamic covenant and the identification of the Colossians as “chosen ones” in 3:12 points to the covenant status of the Colossian church.

¹⁹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 309.

²⁰ McKnight, *Colossians*, 660.

²¹ Paul Foster, *Colossians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 414.

Tychicus, the Colossians have a brother in Christ who serves faithfully as an example to follow.²²

Following the commendation of Tychicus, Paul mentions other coworkers with similar character traits. Paul is sending Onesimus to accompany Tychicus in delivering the letter and updating the believers on Paul's circumstances. Onesimus, described in 4:9 as "the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you," is the slave returning to Philemon. Significantly, Onesimus is not labeled a "slave," but his new spiritual identity is highlighted, especially as a "beloved brother."²³

Having recommended Tychicus and Onesimus as his spokesmen, Paul turns his attention to other coworkers present with him who send greetings to the Colossians. While much more abbreviated, the descriptions of these fellow ministers of the gospel are consistent with that of Tychicus in focusing on their connection to Christ and their godly character. Aristarchus, who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys (Acts 19-20), is Paul's fellow prisoner for the gospel. Paul uses the term *συναιχμάλωτός* here, meaning "prisoner of war," likely drawing attention to Aristarchus's faithfulness in ministry, even in suffering.²⁴ Mark, the cousin of Barnabas is commended as one to be welcomed, along with Jesus (Justus). Epaphras, already prominent in chapter 1, is mentioned again as the hardworking servant of Christ and his church, together with Luke and Demas, other beloved brothers.

Paul's commendations of his fellow servants focus on two important themes. First, the minister's identity in Christ is central. These coworkers are beloved brothers in Christ. For Paul, one's *doing* of ministry must flow from one's *being* in Christ. As such, each of the commendations begin with the familial language of brotherhood in Christ. Second, faithfulness is valued above all. Paul never mentions

²² Similarly, Archippus's ministry is received "in the Lord" (ἐν κυρίῳ).

²³ As Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 311, points out, this emphasis on this family status in Christ "may reflect the wider argument Paul will make in his letter to Philemon."

²⁴ Sumney, *Colossians*, 270-71.

these ministers' performance or gifting, intelligence, or appearance. The focus is on their faithfulness to Christ and to the ministry of the gospel, even as they may face suffering. Thus, these faithful brothers are "living examples who embody his [Paul's] teaching."²⁵ Paul himself embodies this pastoral character as he cares for the church from a distance through coworkers, showing his dependence on others to serve Jesus. Those serving the church must likewise embody the new covenant identity in Christ, bound to other believers as family, serving faithfully together.

Faithful Ministry in Christ

Having seen Paul's emphasis on faithfulness as the primary character trait of those serving Christ, we now turn our attention to Paul's implied description of faithful ministry. Like the description of the faithful minister's identity, Paul's focus in ministry is faithfulness in a few key tasks. First, faithful ministers are called to proclaim the gospel. Paul sent Tychicus to the Colossians to inform them about Paul's situation and, thereby, "encourage" (*παρακαλέσῃ*) their hearts (4:8). But this raises an important question: how would learning about Paul's situation in prison encourage their hearts?

Earlier in the letter, Paul expressed his desire that the hearts of the Colossians and the Laodiceans would be encouraged (*παρακληθῶσιν*) through understanding the fullness of Christ (2:2). In other words, encouragement would come through understanding the gospel. Moreover, Paul identified his sufferings (imprisonment) as resulting from his work for the gospel and his service to the church (1:24). Thus, the encouragement comes through the gospel, specifically the Colossians learning that Paul's imprisonment has not halted the spread of the gospel but served to expand Paul's gospel ministry.²⁶

²⁵ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 323.

²⁶ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 353.

In describing his own calling in 1:25, Paul, the servant (διάκονος) of the church, is sent to “fulfill the word of God” (πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ). Within this context, Paul has in mind his apostolic office to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.²⁷ Thus, for Paul, the proclamation of the gospel is central to ministry, and his suffering was a part of that calling to proclamation. Accordingly, Tychicus is sent to the Colossians with the task of encouraging them with the report of the spread of the gospel through Paul and that of proclaiming the riches of the gospel to the church through the letter he delivers.

Related to the task given to Tychicus, which mirrors Paul’s calling, Paul also sends his exhortation to Archippus: “Pay attention to the ministry which you received in the Lord, that you might fulfill it” (Βλέπε τὴν διακονίαν ἣν παρέλαβες ἐν κυρίῳ, ἵνα αὐτὴν πληροῖς). Here, Paul uses terms related to those he used to denote his calling and that of Tychicus: servant/ministry (διάκονος/διακονία) and fulfill (πληρόω). As such, Paul encourages Archippus to fulfill the ministry of preaching the gospel.

Second, Paul exhorts faithful ministers to concentrate their efforts on prayer. His exhortation is announced indirectly through his commendation of Epaphras as one who is “always struggling for you in prayer” (4:12).²⁸ Epaphras, like Paul and Timothy in 1:3, is constantly working on behalf of the Colossians in prayer. Paul describes Epaphras’s work in prayer as ἀγωνιζόμενος, which McKnight suggests translating as “wrestling.”²⁹ Foster argues that the term “denotes an active and strenuous struggle.”³⁰ Thus, Paul wants to emphasize Epaphras’s continuous, attentive effort in his prayers for the church.

²⁷ Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 260–261. Paul uses similar language in Rom. 15:19 in describing his calling to the gentile world.

²⁸ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 316.

²⁹ McKnight, *Colossians*, 665. The participle is probably adjectival, describing Epaphras as one who strives in prayer.

³⁰ Foster, *Colossians*, 430.

Significantly, Paul details the content of Epaphras's prayers: "that you may stand mature and fully assured of all the will of God." For Paul, maturity is "in Christ" and is achieved through understanding, believing, and obeying the word of the gospel (1:28). Epaphras diligently prays for the Colossians to grow in the gospel and clearly know the will of God in Christ. Crucially for our purposes, Epaphras (and Paul) are praying for the growth of the Colossian believers, not simply admonishing growth. As such, their prayers model dependence on God to do this work.³¹ Paul likewise asked the Colossians to pray for him so that the work of the gospel could move forward (4:3-4).

While this understanding of pastoral prayer is universal in application, it is especially important in the historical context of Colossians. As noted above, the church in Colossae was facing syncretistic teaching that may have caused some in the church to struggle with rightly understanding the gospel or perhaps doubt their identity in Christ.³² Thus, Epaphras's prayers that they would stand mature in the gospel are wholly appropriate and display his concern for the spiritual welfare of the church he planted.

Epaphras's prayers for the Colossians echo those of Paul and Timothy. In 1:9ff, they pray that the Colossians would be "filled with the knowledge of his will . . . so that you may walk worthy of the Lord." In the first chapter of the letter, Paul's prayer is that the Colossians understand and apply the gospel, leading to lives that produce fruit. Like Epaphras, Paul and Timothy understood the deepest need of the church to rightly understand the gospel and live in light of their faith in Christ.

Given Paul's encouragement for ministers of the church to focus their efforts on proclamation and prayer, we should note well the close relationship between these two fundamental ministry activities. Proclamation is gospel-centered with the goal of God's people growing in maturity. Likewise, the ministry of prayer is focused on God's

³¹ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 483-84.

³² Sumney, *Colossians*, 274.

people reaching maturity in Christ as they grasp the depths of God's will. Each of these activities model faithfulness to the Lord for the church: proclaiming the gospel demonstrates trust in the power of the message and praying for growth indicates a reliance on God to complete the work he started in the Colossians.

Faithful Partnership in Christ

Having examined Paul's description of the character and activity of faithful ministers, we now turn our attention to the diversity among Paul's coworkers in Colossians 4. The list of names is significant since, as McKnight points out, "One suspects Paul's multi-ethnic vision for the church is taking root already in Colossae, for in this last chapter we have a Jew writing to a Gentile-dominant church where there is a slave (4:9) and a doctor (4:14), all meeting in the home of a woman householder (4:15)."³³ I argued above that the fundamental identity of gospel ministers is faithfulness in Christ. Yet, it is worth noting that these faithful ministers come from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this section, we briefly note the various groups of coworkers Paul commends and greets.

Tychicus is mentioned in Acts 20 as being from Asia. He probably joined Paul as he traveled from Asia through Greece and Macedonia and was most likely a Gentile from the same region as the Colossians. Paul's letter to Philemon informs us that Onesimus was a slave of Philemon who had run away and become a follower of Jesus through Paul's ministry. In the two letter carriers, Paul sends two Gentiles from differing socioeconomic backgrounds.

After commending the letter carriers, Paul then sends greetings from three Jewish and three Gentile coworkers. Acts 19 notes that Aristarchus, a Macedonian traveling companion of Paul was seized by the crowds in Ephesus during the riot. Mark, Barnabas's cousin, is listed next. His inclusion here and in the letter to Philemon is significant as Paul's mention of him displays the gospel's

³³ McKnight, *Colossians*, 656.

reconciling power. As Acts 15 narrates, Paul and Barnabas parted ways because of Mark, whom Paul didn't trust. As Paul writes Colossians, he and Mark are serving together again, and Paul specifically sends his greetings along with an exhortation to receive him. The third Jewish coworker is Jesus, called Justus, about whom we know very little. The three Gentile coworkers are Epaphras, the local Colossian who planted the church, Luke, the doctor, and Demas. Luke's name is especially prominent as he is believed to be a frequent travel companion of Paul.³⁴ Demas is also mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:9-12, where Paul says that Demas loved the world and deserted Paul. As McKnight notes, the inclusion of Mark and the later desertion of Demas is perhaps a reason why Paul places heavy emphasis on faithfulness throughout this section of the letter.³⁵

Having expressed greetings from his coworkers, Paul sends greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, particularly Nympha. Little is known about Nympha, except that she hosted a church in her home. Most likely one of the Laodicean house churches met in her residence. Interestingly, Paul wants the Colossians to greet the churches in Laodicea, probably because he wanted to encourage mutual care and partnership between the churches.³⁶ Further supporting this possibility is the fact that Paul wants the Colossians and Laodiceans to exchange letters. Finally, Archippus is specifically named and exhorted in ministry.

In sum, Paul displays wide-ranging partnerships in his gospel ministry. He works with Jews and Gentiles, socially prominent individuals, as well as slaves. Paul's vision that in Christ "there is no Greek or Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all" (3:11). That vision is illustrated in real life through this list of coworkers. As Pao argues, "In a letter

³⁴ Many view the "we" sections of Acts as indicating Luke's presence in the stories. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 2350-74.

³⁵ McKnight, *Colossians*, 667.

³⁶ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 360.

that emphasizes the full sufficiency and final authority of Christ the Lord of all, this lengthy greeting section points to the mutual dependence of believers as they ultimately rest on their dependence on Christ.”³⁷ As such, Paul’s greetings are a model of partnership for mutual edification and the advancement of the gospel.

Conclusion for the Church Today

How does the closing section of Colossians apply to the church today? As noted above, the uniqueness of the final greetings in Colossians is the attention given to those who serve the church. Paul’s message to ministers of the gospel is clear: Serve from your identity in Christ, be faithful as a servant of Christ and his church in the work of proclamation and prayer, and partner with other leaders for the glory of God.

Paul’s gospel is identity-creating as people move out of the darkness and into the kingdom of Christ. Understanding and living within this identity is essential for all followers of Christ but is particularly important for those serving in ministry. One must be confident in their status in Christ such that identity is not shaped by performance or a worldly definition of success. Moreover, ministers are called to live faithfully and walk worthy of the gospel. Thus, calling is not a summons to performance or production but is the simple command to follow Jesus and lead others to do the same. A rich understanding of the new covenant identity in Christ is foundational for this calling.

As those called to faithfulness, ministers today must give full attention and effort to the right interpretation and faithful proclamation of the gospel. Reflecting on the need of the church in early 20th century Europe, Herman Bavinck wrote, “Therefore, in our day as never before, the holy calling not to neglect the gifts entrusted to them rests upon ministers of the word, given to them for the declaration of the

³⁷ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 324.

gospel.³⁸ This truth is perhaps even more applicable in our day, but the holy calling of ministers to preach the gospel is an ancient calling that will remain the heart of faithful ministry until our Lord returns.

The prominence of prayer throughout Colossians should not be minimized, especially considering Paul's vision for gospel ministry. Paul writes his prayers for the church, especially highlighting Epaphras as one who battles in prayer. There is no substitution for faithful prayer in gospel ministry. John Calvin beautifully expounds on the importance of prayer:

It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father. For there is a communion of men with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to him in person concerning his promises . . . Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon. Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable . . . By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us.³⁹

³⁸ Herman Bavinck, *On Preaching and Preachers*, trans. and ed. By James P. Eglinton (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2017), 19.

³⁹ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), III.20.2.

Finally, partnership with other ministers of the gospel is beneficial, not only for expediency in the work but also because it displays the power of the gospel. Only the gospel can unite people of such diverse backgrounds and shape them into family. When ministry leaders display unity in the gospel, they are examples of mutual service and dependence for believers. Such partnership helps servants of Christ avoid comparison, envy, and competition as they humbly pursue the kingdom of God together.

Reflecting on Paul's repeated designation of church leaders as servants and slaves, Michael Bird writes,

Are we religious professionals on par with corporate professionals? Or are we ministers of the new covenant, called to service not greatness, full of humility not boasting, inspired by heaven not earthly recognition, and filling our flesh with afflictions not filling our pockets with cash? Servants and slaves seek not honor for themselves, but honor and glory for their master.⁴⁰

Ministers of the gospel, let us be faithful to our master!

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⁴⁰ Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 128.

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