

The Church and It's Secret Life

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[0 : 0 0] If you would take out your Bible and turn to Colossians chapter 3 on page 984. As you do that, my doctor has told me that I'm only allowed to speak for 10 to 12 minutes, but he doesn't come to St. John's.

So I thank you to the person at the 9 o'clock congregation who wrote me a note between the services to say I went longer than 10 to 12 minutes.

I've told this story before, but in my first church out of seminary, the time allotment at the early service was, I've forgotten, nine minutes or whatever, and I went over it on my first Sunday, and one of the men of the congregation, who happened to be a high court judge at the time, came out and said, if you don't hit oil after drilling for nine minutes, stop drilling.

I was very encouraged. Colossians chapter 3, verse 3. Can you believe these words?

That means that every single one of you has a hidden life.

[1 : 3 4] If you're a real Christian, you belong to a living church, you have a hidden life, a secret life, not a double life that Paul described in verses 5 to 9 of sexual misbehaviour and greed and anger and telling lies, a life that you hope no one sees, but a life that is hidden with Christ in God.

And before we start, I want us to see that Paul is addressing this group of Christians in Colossae as a church gathering, as an assembly. You flick your eyes over to chapter 4 for just a moment.

In verse 16, he says, When this letter has been read among you, take it to the church down the road at Laodicea, and the words among you literally mean in the face-to-face presence of you all.

This is a letter written to a church, which is meant to be read in other churches to address us as a church. So we are in week three of a series on the church Jesus builds.

That's what we're looking at in the fall. And we have produced this incredibly attractive series of studies which begin this week and pick up and go along with the sermons this week.

[2 : 5 5] And I do hope you, I think these are available to buy, and you're part of a small group that's able to study through the passages ahead. The studies, I can honestly say, are some of the best I've ever read and helped write.

So... LAUGHTER No, I just, no, I was editing them. I've wanted us together to think about what it means to be a church.

We've spent some time on vision, and that's in place, but we need to hear what God's vision of his church is. And we need to do that partly because we're in this strange space of having no physical home.

We are like hundreds of other congregations, particularly Anglican congregations around North America, who are spending time tabernacling in the wilderness. I spoke to a guy two days ago in Montreal who's the pastor of an Anglican church, and they've moved three times this year.

And it affects how you think about yourselves. But perhaps more important, we are deeply immersed and shaped by the individualism in our culture.

[4 : 07] Our identity is being marked, shaped by the marketplace. We think of ourselves as consumers. We define ourselves by making choices. I am the sovereign chooser. And relationships are becoming more and more a means to an end.

And in our first week, I looked at the distinction that's made in de Tocqueville between selfishness and individualism. Selfishness is an active thing, a passionate self-love. Whereas individualism is passive, a lethargic, languid, lazy thing.

He says, it's a peaceful, reflective sentiment that disposes you to retreat into your circle of family or friends. That is very helpful.

And the family and friends who God has given us, what individualism does, it just makes us retreat increasingly. And we're so immersed in individualism, I don't think we've thought through how it erodes our sense of community and what it means to us as a Christian church today.

And I'm deeply disappointed with most of the responses in evangelical church land in the last ten years. Most of the books make things worse, in my humble opinion.

[5 : 20] And individualism, the problem is that it has lots of children. And each week I'd like to talk a little bit about different children.

One of the children of individualism is moral individualism, where we as a culture have become increasingly convinced, we've convinced ourselves, that the greatest good is not as other cultures used to think, good order of society or duty or honour of those kinds of things.

The greatest good is self-fulfillment, being true to myself. And what's ultimately important is that government removes all barriers to my self-fulfillment.

It's most important for me to do what's good for me. And as I say, relationships are increasingly a means to an end. And the best way to do that is for me to create distance between me and you.

So that I can follow my heart and I can find my destiny. Have you heard these phrases? And if I can't, if I'm tied down, I'm going to get anxious. I'm going to get angry.

[6 : 29] And I'm even going to get depressed. That's why I think being the church is a totally... It's weird. It's different.

It's strange. It feels odd. And the reason is because our culture is odd. Because Jesus has created a completely different way of being me.

And that is in relation to him and to one another and to his world. So we looked in first week at the church and its founder. Jesus promises in Matthew, you remember, I will build my church, my gathering.

And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Remember we saw that Jesus says, The reason I've come, the reason I die, the reason he has risen again, is to heal the scattering effects of sin by creating an assembly, a congregation, a gathering.

And we had a quick look at the shape of the whole Bible. It was a very big week. It was a very big week. And we saw that from God's point of view, salvation is not necessarily just about us as individuals.

[7 : 44] That God's plan is not to collect a whole bunch of individuals around himself in heaven, but to build us together into a living organism, to form us into an assembly, a gathering.

So the church, you see, it's not an idea Christians invented. It comes from God himself. And it's central to his purposes for the whole of creation. We saw that the church existed in the mind of God before creation.

And we saw the picture of the new heavens and the new earth in the last book of the Bible is a picture of the church. So the church is not a temporary institution to do a job for God before Jesus comes again.

Church is why God created the world. I will build my church, says Jesus. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. And last week, we began to look at the sort of church Jesus builds.

Philippians 2, the church on the cross. We heard those amazing words from the apostle where he says, How did it go this week?

[9 : 00] It's a different way of being, isn't it? It's just a different category. It does away with superiority. It does away with inferiority.

It does away with self-pity and the fantasy of believing in self-fulfillment. Treat others more significant than yourself. Very difficult in our achievement culture.

Instead of seeing you as a way in which I can achieve my goals, treating you as more significant is the goal. And today we come to the third one.

I've called it the church. It's hidden life. It's secret life. We're going to look at these four verses in Colossians. And I've got two points.

There are two things about our life as a church. Very simply, number one, our life is hidden. Verse three, I'll read it again.

[9 : 58] For you, plural, you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. The word hidden is crypto, from which we get crypt.

It means concealed, kept secret, covered, hidden from sight. It's the word used in Greek texts for treasures that are buried safely underground.

And deep under the streets of Rome are the ancient catacombs. They're originally burial places to put the dead because they were cheap, cheap property.

But in the early centuries, Christianity was an illegal religion and Christians were persecuted. And from time to time, they took refuge. They saved their own lives by taking refuge in the catacombs. Because no one would ever dream of looking for them among the dead.

Just so, when we place our faith in Jesus Christ, our life is hidden with Christ. Not below Rome, but hidden with Christ at the right hand of God the Father, present tense now.

[11 : 07] Now, why does Paul use this hidden language? Why would he speak about our life as hidden? Excuse me a minute.

That was very nice. Why should our lives be hidden? And I think there are a number of reasons. One of the key ones is that there's a new group of Christian teachers who've come to the people at Colossae, the church at Colossae.

And they say, look, Jesus is good, but he's not enough. You need to add some things. And you need to add two things, and we've got the way to do it, of course. The first thing you need to add is outwardly impressive worship.

They talked about visions and talking with angels and razzle-dazzle. It's not been our biggest temptation here at St. John's, but outwardly impressive worship.

And the other thing you need to add... Sorry, that was just an in-joke, and I apologise for it. The other thing they said you need to add is you need to have a life that is outwardly religious, following a set of ascetic rules.

[12 : 19] If you have your Bible open, you don't need to turn the page. Just cast your eyes to the left-hand column. In verse 21, the apostle quotes the false teachers.

You see the quote marks? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. And you can see the rules, verse 16 to 18. Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink with regard to festival, new moons or Sabbaths.

They're shadows of the things to come. The substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels going on in details about visions and stuff like that.

And the reason the apostle says that is that all the aesthetic practices in the world and all the outwardly impressive worship in the world has no power to change us.

It has no power to make us new. It has no power to grow us as a church and to change our behaviour. And the reason is all these things come from human source.

[13 : 25] Verse 23. These indeed have the appearance, the outward appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism, severity to the body.

But there is no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Now let me pause. This is very important to us today. See, if you ask the average Vancouverite what they think about the state of the church, if they have, and I know there's no such thing as the average Vancouverite, but if they have an opinion at all, it will likely be the church is irrelevant, pathetic, weak.

Fine for them to do what they want. But it's got no real significance to the West Coaster who's come to the end of a nice long summer. If anything, the church is an annoying reminder of those barriers to me pursuing my self-fulfillment.

I think if you asked an insider, let's ask a bishop who has visited hundreds of churches, perhaps a hundred in their area and then a couple of hundred in other places around the country.

I think if they tell the truth, they will also say the church looks weak, worldly, divided, diminishing in numbers and effect. Ask the Apostle Paul, he'll give you a very different answer.

[14 : 48] He says, our life is hidden with Christ in God. The true life of the church is not visible to the human eye. It's a hidden life.

It can't be measured, can't be examined or tampered with. And the reason is because it's hidden with Christ.

See, in chapter 1, if you read through Colossians, if you do it this afternoon, Colossians is all about Christ, has a massive picture of Christ. Chapter 1, just one of the little things Paul says is that the whole fullness of God dwelt bodily in Jesus Christ.

Everything God is, all the goodness and godness of God dwells bodily in Jesus. Was that apparent to the human eye? Nope. Jesus was received with hostility and hatred and violence, even though the whole fullness of God dwelt in him bodily.

In fact, Paul says, in chapter 2, verse 3, that in Christ, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

[16 : 04] There it is. All the goodness and treasure at the storehouse of God's knowledge and being and grace and power and holiness, it's hidden, stored safely hidden in the person of Jesus Christ.

That's why it's futile to try and add things to Jesus. You want to connect with God? We go to Jesus Christ. Do you want true spiritual life? Do you want to grow?

Do you want to grow to fullness in God? It's in Jesus Christ. And by faith, we are united with him in whom are all the treasures of God hidden, hidden from the human eye.

And just as it was possible in those days to look at Jesus and not see the wisdom of God, it's possible to look at the church and see nothing impressive and nothing important. Since our lives are hidden with Christ in God, our true life is secure at the right hand of God and it's invisible to the sight of the world now.

I have struggled to find a way of describing this. It's almost indescribable, isn't it? This is a treasure. That the visible church, every visible church, struggles with what's mundane and weak and having no influence.

[17 : 26] It doesn't matter. We have a hidden life of communion with Jesus Christ and that hidden life strengthens us constantly, saves us for heaven and satisfies us in the short term.

And I think the temptation for Christians all throughout the ages is to look at the externals and to think that's where the action is. But just as we cannot see how the whole fullness of God dwelt bodily in Jesus, it doesn't matter how hard Vancouver looks at a church, it will never see the true life of the church.

And I think that's particularly wonderful for those of us who are suffering. Because your true life, our true life is hidden from the sight of the world, but I think it's also partially hidden from us as well.

That is, the world doesn't recognise or know Christ, it doesn't recognise or know Christians, and I think not even Christians, we ourselves fully recognise or know ourselves. Isn't that amazing? And when everything seems so hard and God seems not to answer prayers and you don't know what to expect, know this, your life, your true life is hidden with Christ in God.

There it is. And this is what it means to be a church. We have a hidden life, point one. Point two, very simply, the hidden life is with Christ.

[18 : 46] With Christ. Just look back at three, verse three again, please. For you, plural, you all have died and your, plural life is hidden with Christ in God.

These are two words that are very precious to us. With Christ. With Christ. I want to show you them through the book, just a couple of verses.

Go back to the left-hand column and look at verse 12 in chapter two, please. Having been buried with him, with Christ, in baptism, past tense, in which you were also raised, past tense, with him, through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead, and you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him.

Drop down to verse 20. Since with Christ you died, past tense, chapter three, verse one, since then, past tense, you have been raised with Christ.

Seek the things that are above, where Christ is now, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life now is hidden with Christ.

[20 : 24] See it again? In God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory. Isn't that astounding? So what makes someone a Christian, what makes us a church, is that we are united with Jesus in four of the five saving events of his life.

We're united with Jesus in his death. We're united with Jesus in his resurrection. We are united with Jesus in his ascension. We are now seated at the right hand of the Father with Jesus.

That's what the New Testament says. And we will come with him. We're never united with him in his incarnation. That's another sermon. That's a whole different topic.

But here's the important thing for us this morning. We are not just spectators outside those events. By faith we participate in them.

When Jesus died, we died with him. When he rose, we rose with him. When he ascended and sat at the right hand of God the Father, and is now seated there, ruling all things, we are with him.

[21 : 40] Our life is hidden with Christ in God. And when he appears on the last day, we too will appear with him. Isn't that amazing?

So a church, you see, the church is the assembly of those who've experienced the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the present seating and ascension of Jesus, and will experience the coming of Jesus together with him.

My wife became a Christian when she was a teenager. She went to a meeting, heard someone explain the gospel, prayed a prayer, began to lead a new life. We could all probably describe something like that.

Do you know what really happened? She died with Christ. She was raised with Christ. She is now seated with Christ. This is what God, this is God's view of the church.

We cannot even conceive of the church apart from Jesus Christ. The church is not going to a building, or it's not following a liturgy, or turning over a new leaf.

[22 : 48] What it means to be a church is to be with Christ, to be bound to him by faith. We are those who've joined him in his death and resurrection, ascension, and will in his coming.

This is the true life of the church. It's participating with Jesus Christ now in his resurrection life. Now, we still live in this world, and we still live in these old, very frail bodies, these bodies that decay and get pneumonia.

And we slide, and we sin, and we struggle with old desires. But we've received the new resurrection life of Jesus Christ spiritually, not physically yet. Spiritually, we have been raised from the dead and are seated with Christ.

When he comes again, it will become physical. When he appears, we will receive our resurrection bodies. But now, my brothers and sisters, now in the present, our life is hidden with Christ in God.

And I wonder if you know the reality of that. But for me, the most surprising thing in verse 3, and I've struggled with this all week, is that the word life is singular.

[24 : 08] Have you noticed that? He says, your plural life is hidden with Christ in God. Not your lives are hidden with Christ.

It's one single life that we share together that binds us together. Everything else in the Colossians is plural. Set your minds plural on things that are above.

But our true life that is hidden with Jesus Christ in God is one life. Don't mishear me. I'm not saying we lose our individuality when we become Christians or that we're, you know, we'll be gradually absorbed into a God like a drop of water in the ocean.

I mean, even the next verse, Paul says, when Christ appears, you, plural, will appear with him as individuals together. Now, we don't lose our individuality when we come to Christ in anything.

We grow in it, I think, and we become more ourselves. See if I can say it this way. The one life that we share together is Christ himself.

[25 : 19] That's what he says in verse 4. Christ who is your life. The same person who came to earth, who lived and taught and healed and raised the dead, who was then executed and then rose again and has gone into heaven, he is our life.

That is the life we share together. It means you and I, we are bound together at a level that's almost beyond comprehension. And this is the basis of all Christian living and all Christian lifestyle.

See verse 1. Since you've been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above, not on things below. Things on earth are not physical things, it's just the normal, ordinary way of selfishness, self-promotion and self-defence.

Set your mind and set your heart. It's the apostle speaking about what we love. He's speaking about our ambitions and our affections and aspirations. He's talking about how we make decisions, where to live, what we desire for our children, how we think about using our time in retirement.

I heard a remarkable story this week about an English couple who went from England to become missionaries in Southeast Asia. They had six children on the mission field and they retired. They didn't go back to England, they went to Australia.

[26 : 41] A friend of mine asked this woman in her retirement with those six children why they had retired to Australia when all their family and friends were in England. She said, for all our lives we have prayed for and worked for the work of the gospel in Southeast Asia and we've prayed that our children would serve God as missionaries in Southeast Asia.

She said, if we went back to England, England's such a long way from Southeast Asia, we thought it would be easier, there'd be more chance if we retired in Australia. I think that's amazing.

What is seeking things on earth? Well, there's a kind of a deadly picture of it in verses five to eight. Earthly, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, which is idolatry.

Verse eight, anger, malice, wrath, slander, obscene talk. Verse nine, do not lie. That's the basic description of someone who lives for themselves. That's what it is to set your mind on things on earth.

We're too polite to think about ourselves in these categories. We like to talk about self-determination, not self-worship, but Paul says that's the mindset on things on earth.

[28 : 01] But to set our minds on things that are above are going to change all our relationships. It's going to change our relationships with our neighbours. You can read the letter to the end. It's going to change our relationships with those whom we work.

It's going to change our relationships behind our front door with our family. But most prominently, and this is what's given the most space, it will change our relationships with one another in the body.

And I just want to finish with this to show this is what it looks like to seek these things that are above. Verse 12, Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another.

And if one has a complaint against another, leave the church. Sorry, that's not what it says. If you have a complaint against the other, complain.

No, it doesn't say that either. Forgiving each other. Forgive, he says. As the Lord has forgiven you, you must forgive. And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in harmony.

[29 : 14] As he's seeking the things above, have to do about how we serve one another. There's no such thing as being a living Christian and disconnecting yourself from a local church. It's how we treat one another.

This is, it's treating one another as more significant, as more important. There's a lovely realism in this. I love it that Paul says, put on compassion.

It means you can't say, well, I'm not a compassionate person. I'm going to be better at these other things in the Christian life. None of us are compassionate. Compassion doesn't come naturally to us. It comes from the life that we have in Jesus Christ.

And that's why Jesus puts us in a body, in a church, together. We have to be in relationships that are close enough that where we need to forgive each other, where we need patience and compassion and kindness.

We're far too polite about this, aren't we? I mean, I think a lot of us bear grudges and we're not honest with ourselves that actually we need to forgive. We must forgive.

[30 : 17] We must allow that resurrection life of Jesus to flow through us. We're always doing things to each other which need forgiveness. and we have to put on love because every one of us is different.

We're like a group of thorny, prickly sticks which need to be bound together in love. You see, love binds all these things together in perfect harmony and it hurts.

It's much easier being off on your own. Well, it's not really. Love binds things together in harmony and harmony only comes from different voices singing in different tunes together.

Verse 16, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Now he's talking about the gathering, teaching and admonishing one another. Oh dear, in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts.

The one life that is hidden with Christ in God shows itself as we allow the word of Christ to dwell in us richly.

[31 : 23] When we gather together, that is what we're doing. We allow the word because worship is basically a response to God. Do you know, I discovered this year in the old prayer books our gatherings are called divine service.

Does anyone remember that? Divine service. That comes out of the Reformation. It wasn't our service of God. It was God's service of us where God brings his word and serves us first and then we respond in worship and part of our response, Paul says here, is teaching and warning one another.

I know, that's terrible. That's not just my job, it's your job. How's it going? Did you... Probably better to get to know someone first before you warn them.

Why have you come to church? It's to teach and admonish one another and one of the best ways we do that is through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and nobody knows the difference but it doesn't really matter because it is as we sing these words which are God's words and our responses to them we are drawn in praise to God.

One of the early Christian fathers Athanasius in the 4th century said that congregational singing is not a means of expression where we express our feelings out of the depths of our heart it's a means of impression where together we take the truth of God into the depths of who we are.

[33 : 01] In verse 17 whatever you do in word or deed do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks giving thanks giving thanks three times here in the name of God the Father which is the perfect antidote to individualism.

This week Bronnie and I were watching a television show and there were two people on the show who were in love and decided to live together marriage never mentioned and she got a job on the other side of the country and as she was struggling to figure out how to make the decision she said this and I quote I've got to decide what is good for me before I factor in anything or anyone else.

I thought that was a wonderful illustration of the opposite of Colossians 3. See she's the sovereign chooser. She wants all barriers to her self-fulfillment removed particularly the impediment of other relationships.

Here is the thing I am not who I am in a vacuum. I'm not who I am truly as the sovereign chooser. I am who I am in and through relationships and that is most true for us as a church.

So St. John's Vancouver 11 o'clock congregation since you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

[34 : 29] St. John's Vancouver 11 o'clock congregation you have died with Christ and your life your one corporate life that resurrection life is now hidden with Christ in God and though it is hidden and cannot be examined by human eyes one day it will be when Christ comes in glory and on that day faith will be turned into sight and our transformation into the image of Jesus will be complete and it will be visible to all and until then put on love that binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Amen.