

## **A Gospel-Driven Church**

### Colossians 1:3-14

When the first European settlers arrived in Massachusetts, settling in what is now Plymouth, they brought with them clothing, armor, household goods, tools, bedding, some furniture—whatever they thought they would need to start their new life, as long as it fit on the Mayflower. And among their goods were seeds from England to grow food in their new land.

But not only were the Pilgrims new to farming, they were in new territory. They didn't understand the seasonal cycles; they didn't really know what tools would be necessary for the job; and they didn't know the land. "Unlike the soil of southern England, which is deep, nutrient-rich, loamy and easy to hand till, the soil in coastal Massachusetts is shallow, sandy and stony, making it hard to work by hand."<sup>1</sup>

And so it wasn't their imported seeds that produced the first harvest we now commemorate with Thanksgiving; it was the native crops that the Native Americans showed them how to plant and cultivate—corn, beans, and squash. Not because crops like wheat don't grow here. The problem wasn't with the seeds. During the nineteenth century, New England was known as the "breadbasket of America."<sup>2</sup> They just didn't understand their new environment, and the unique challenges of growing wheat in New England.

For instance, it takes a lot more work to find the field. You have clear trees and remove stones first. All those beautiful stone walls that line roads and property lines throughout New England—those came from clearing fields for farming. Then you have to learn the unique seasonal patterns for the area—when to plant, when to cultivate, when to harvest, and what to do in stormy weather. The problem is not with the seeds. You can grow wheat on every continent on earth (save Antarctica). But how you grow it will look a little different from place to place.

The same can be said of gospel ministry in New England. The gospel will grow on every continent on earth, including Antarctica! Wherever there are people, the gospel of Jesus is powerful to change lives. As Paul describes in Colossians 1, "the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing" (1:5-6).

But what gospel growth looks like will differ from place to place. If an area is already saturated with the witness of the church, such that when you say the name of Jesus, even non-believers know who you're talking about and what he did, just by nature of Christianity's influence on a culture—that looks different than when you're ministering in an area that has never heard the name of Christ, or maybe doesn't even have the Bible in their language. In one area you can

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Amelinckx, "[The Pilgrims Had No Idea How to Farm Here. Luckily, They Had the Native Americans](#)," *Modern Farmer*, Nov. 23, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Christie Matheson, "[New England Wheat Growers | Shops and Recipes](#)," *Yankee Magazine*, Sept.-Oct. 2009.

scatter seed freely in relatively open fields; in the other you're chopping down trees and clearing stones, or maybe starting with one small corner garden.

The problem is not with the gospel. It's not with the seed. Paul writes in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The problem is not with the message.

But gospel growth will look different in one place compared to another, based on the conditions around us—who we are, where we are, and what time it is. And so it can be helpful for us to understand those factors as we seek to be faithful to gospel ministry in our time and place. Back in 2011, we adopted our vision to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ. But we've come to realize recently that this vision, while true to the gospel, doesn't account for the precise mission field God has placed us in. It's not very specific to who we are, where we are, or what time it is.

It's for that reason that the elders are inviting the congregation into *a season of prayer, discernment, and planning* in order to refocus our vision with greater clarity and specificity for the months and years ahead—what we're calling RE:FOCUS. You all should have received a letter about this via email a couple weeks ago; there are also copies in the foyer if you missed it.

The goal is not to start from scratch, but to build on our current vision by taking it and discerning how to apply it with greater focus and specificity. What does it look like lived out practically, for this particular people, in this precise time, in this specific place?

This is something we want to discern together. To ask God, as a congregation:

- Are there any specific goals God wants us to trust him to accomplish in the months or years ahead?
- What pathways should be in place for that to happen?
- How do our various ministries contribute to those pathways and fit together into a coherent strategy?
- What are the staffing implications for applying our vision moving forward?
- How do we nurture the vitality we see in our church?

We'll be praying and talking together about these things in the weeks ahead—at home groups, Bible studies, with our staff, and through a couple congregational meetings, including the potluck next Sunday after church.

But what I want to do this morning, as we start this short series through Colossians which I hope will be a guide for this conversation, is think out loud a little bit about the unique conditions for gospel ministry, not just in New England but in the Metrowest specifically—factors about our context that might impact how we refocus our ministry. And then I want to convince you of what Paul sought to convince the Colossians—that regardless of how we answer those questions, it is the gospel of Jesus itself that bears fruit and grows his church in any environment, by the grace of God in the power of the Spirit.

## A Unique Context

There are three questions I want us to consider as we think about ministering the gospel in our unique context: who are we? Where are we? And what time is it? To come back to the farming analogy, in asking who we are, we're looking at our experience and our resources. In asking where we are, we're seeking to understand the contours of the field we're in, the opportunities and challenges of this area. And in asking what time it is, we want to know the season and the weather—what's happening around us that affects the way we plant, cultivate, and harvest.

So first, who are we?

### *Who Are We? Our Experience and Resources*

God has called this particular people, who gather as Westgate Church, to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ. So who are we? How has he gifted us? What are our strengths and weaknesses?

We can answer this question theologically—we are a church—a local expression of Christ's one, universal church. In the language of Colossians 1, we are a people who have been qualified by the Father, on the basis of what Christ has done for us, “to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (1:12). A people who have been “delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:12-14). And that's the most important thing about us. Not where we live, or what we've done, but who we are in Christ.

But we also want to answer this question demographically. Because gospel ministry for Westgate will look different than it will for Park Street Church downtown, or Trinitarian in Wayland, or Milestone in Natick, or First Baptist in Sudbury.

So first, we are a *multi-generational congregation*. There is no one age group or season of life that dominates the makeup of Westgate Church. Sometimes a church will skew really young, or really old. We are made up of college students, young adults, middle-aged, and seniors, among whom some are married, some single, some divorced or widowed. We represent multiple stages of life. And among the throng of children in our congregation, we have public school, private school, and home school. So how should that generational diversity affect the way we do ministry as a church? We want to ask that kind of question. For instance, as a multi-generational church, we probably aren't going to lean into trying to reach a single life-stage. Being a multi-generational church is going to affect the way we approach ministry.

Second, we're very much a *regional congregation*. We don't all live in the same town; far from it. Of the roughly 120 family units who call Westgate home, we live in 28 different towns around the Metrowest. That's unique. It's both a unique challenge, and an opportunity. It can be a challenge when it comes to spending time together outside of Sunday morning, or in identifying precisely who we're seeking to reach with the gospel. That's one of the reasons we've been continuing to work on forming regional identities among us (west, central, and east). But being spread out is also an opportunity to take the gospel into more towns and communities. Some of the towns we live in don't have a single gospel-preaching church in the community.

Understanding who we are also means taking inventory of our relative *strengths and weaknesses*, and asking how those shape our ministry moving forward. For instance, among our strengths I would include our music ministry (we have some gifted and talented people, not least Drew, our director); our youth ministry, which is growing under Travis's leadership, in partnership with Doran and Christina. We're a very generous church, in terms of both time and money. Many of you spend a lot of time serving this body, and serving others through it. We have gifted and godly elders, deacons, and missions boards. We have a gifted staff; Pastor Bruce brings so much wisdom, skill, and compassion to so many of our ministries. We value God's Word; we are committed to a high view of Scripture, to teaching the Bible at every level of ministry, to exposition in the pulpit—the kinds of sermons where the main point of the sermon is the main point of the passage being preached. We value reconciled relationships here, something God taught us the hard way. And you know what, we actually like each other. That's a gift and a strength! So how do all of those things affect the shape of our ministries moving forward in terms of seeing vitality and nurturing it? We want to explore those questions together in the weeks ahead.

And we want to take an honest inventory of our weaknesses. We're busy; we don't always have time to invest in the kingdom. We're scattered throughout the region, which we already mentioned is a challenge. We lack clear pathways for life and ministry in the church; it's not always easy to know how to get involved, how to serve, how to grow. We have some shoring up to do. Not to mention the fact that we're all still sinners in need of grace. And that list of weaknesses could be a lot longer.

But that's who we are. And understanding that will affect how we seek God moving forward. Something we want to be aware of as we refocus our vision.

Second, where are we? What are the contours of the field God has placed us in, the unique features of our context here in the Metrowest?

### ***Where Are We? The Contours of the Field***

In understanding the field before us, I think it's helpful to think about it in terms of both obstacles and opportunities. What obstacles do we have to be mindful of, or even deal directly with, as we seek to make disciples for Christ? What trees need to be cleared? What rocks need to be removed? And then what opportunities lie beyond that?

In terms of obstacles, New England is full of them. There are so many things that compete for our identity and affection for God. In the Metrowest suburbs, we celebrate education. Affluence—money and possessions. We celebrate power, influence. Accomplishment and achievement, whether in terms of business or education or scientific ingenuity or artistic expression. So much that we have then overload our lives, and often lives of our kids, in pursuit of these identity-shaping dreams. Busyness is our badge of honor; the more hours you spend at work or volunteering, the more activities you enroll your kids in, the more important you must be.

These are trees, rocks, some of them boulders, that get in the way of seeing and savoring Jesus. They are alternative gods, false idols, demanding our allegiance and worship, along the sacrifice of our time, money, and family. So how do we bring the gospel to bear of those obstacles as part of our mission here in the Metrowest? We want to wrestle with that question.

And beyond these obstacles, there is also a unique gospel opportunity. In recent years, New England has often been described as America's new mission frontier. And it's still true today. It's hard to estimate precisely, but by my own count, of the 28 towns we live in across the Metrowest, four of them have no gospel-preaching churches (churches that believe the Bible and preach that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ)—four have zero gospel-preaching churches for the 32,000 people who live there; five towns have only one (serving a collective population of 85,000); another nine towns have three or less gospel-preaching churches each (serving a total 230,000 people). Of the 730,000 people who live in these 28 Metrowest towns, there are only 71 gospel-preaching churches—one per 10,000 people. That's unacceptable. That's not an opportunity; that is a *mandate*. How does that affect the precise application of our vision moving forward? How does that affect the way we staff our ministries, our how we allocate our budget? These are questions to ponder and pray.

### ***What Time Is It? The Season and the Weather***

The third question concerning our unique context is, what time is it? What season are we in, and what's the weather doing?

By season, I mean where are we at in salvation history? What time is it in the grand scheme of God's great saving work? This is a theological question, but it's critical for understanding our emphasis in ministry. We're no longer under the Law of Moses, waiting for the Messiah; Jesus has come. But he has not yet returned. We live between the first and second comings of Christ, between the cross and the new creation. Which means that we still live in a fallen world, stained by sin, that things don't always work the way they're supposed to. But that the hope of the gospel has already broken through the surface, and that Jesus sends us into the world with that message of hope.

In other words, it's farming season. It's time to get into the fields, to sow the seed of God's Word; to water it with prayer and nurture it with love in anticipation of the Lord's harvest. Or to change the metaphor, this is wartime, not peace time. You live differently during wartime. When America was at war with the Axis forces in World War II, people lived differently. They made sacrifices for cause—rationed food, took on manufacturing jobs, purchased war bonds. In peace time, you don't think about those things; you think more about yourself. A lot of Christians live as though this is peace time. As though the hard work of the harvest is over and we can settle in for a quiet winter. But Jesus sends us into the fields. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38).

And yet while we labor together for the Lord, we want to be mindful of the weather around us, particularly here in New England and the Metrowest. For instance, we are dealing with a season of historic *spiritual drought*. In the land founded by the Puritans, known for the first and second Great Awakenings, the legacy of people like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, for the last 150 years New England has suffered a deep spiritual drought, turning its back on God and Christ, to the point that we have some of the least religious states in the country.

But in recent years we've seen some *refreshing showers*, bringing signs of life in the world around us. What has been described as a "quiet revival," especially among immigrant churches,

but also among English speaking ones.<sup>3</sup> In the last decade, there are over 40 new gospel-preaching churches in the Boston Metro area. God is at work. How can we be a part of that?

Moreover there are encouraging signs in the culture. For instance, there is a spirit of activism, compassion, and justice that has captured the heart of young people today. That's a good thing. People want to see change in the world. Advocating on behalf of the other. It's not always a healthy change they're after, but it illustrates a common longing for what's wrong in this world to be made right—a longing that's ultimately fulfilled by the gospel. So how does *that* shape our ministry today? How do we affirm and come alongside some of those passions and efforts, and show how the gospel tells an even better story?

But there are also some *brooding horizons*, challenges that loom over us that pose potential new threats. The erosion of religious liberty, for instance. And some of those have already broken into *raging storms*. Spikes in racism, the refugee crisis, the culture of death gaining ground, not only with respect to abortion, but euthanasia and assisted suicide. The sexual and gender-identity revolution, political chaos. And then there are blights that have long been around and show little sign of going away. Poverty, human trafficking, and others. These are some of the storms that fill our newsfeeds today; this is what's going on right now in the world God has sent us into. So how might some of those things shape our specific vision for gospel ministry moving forward?

Lots of questions. Lots of questions for us to prayerfully discuss in the weeks ahead. How does our unique context inform our specific call? What are the specific pathways that need to be put into place for that ministry to happen? That's what we want God to show us.

But while the challenges are significant, hope is strong. The harvest is white. Because the gospel is sufficient. It is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes. And if we are to be faithful and effective in our call, whatever shape that begins to take, we must be convinced of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ in God's reconciling work.

## **A Sufficient Gospel**

That's why we're spending time in Colossians for a few weeks. Because that's the main thing Paul wants to convince us of.

Paul's aim in this book is to see fruit. He wants to see the gospel bear fruit in more and more people coming to know Christ. The gospel has borne fruit in Colossae, just as it is doing in the whole world (1:6)—people have come to know Christ. And he wants to see still others come to know their King and Savior; ch. 4:3: “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—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak” (4:3-4).

But Paul also wants to see the gospel bear fruit in changed lives among those who know Christ. He summarizes this in his prayer in 1:10-12—that the people of God in Christ would walk in steadfast maturity, that their lives would bring honor and pleasure to God, specifically in terms of fruitful works, a growing knowledge of God, joyful and persistent dependence on his divine

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<sup>3</sup> See Ruth Graham, “[Re-evangelizing New England](#),” *Slate Magazine*, Nov. 27, 2012.

strength, and consistent thankfulness. Paul's aim for God's people is that they walk in *steadfast maturity*.

But the singular source of this steadfast maturity is the gospel. Look at how he grounds the prayer of vv. 10-12 in a specific request in v. 9: that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding—*so that* they may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. What enables their faithful walk in vv. 10-12 is their *knowledge of God's will* in v. 9.

Now when we think of the phrase “God's will,” we usually think in individualistic terms—God's specific plan for my life. But that's not how Paul is using the term here; the book has almost nothing to say about that kind of individualistic question. Paul is talking about knowing God's overarching will, his grand design and plan for history, “the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11), which centers on the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

This will be Paul's main point in the book—that Jesus is supreme, and Jesus is sufficient. Because of who he is and what he has done, he is uniquely able to fulfill God's redemptive purposes. Paul wants us to know that. So he preaches Christ. And he wants us to be convinced of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ in God's great plan of salvation in order to bear fruit for God. As he says in 1:23-2:3:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone *mature in Christ*. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, *to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 1:28-2:3)

We cannot replace or revise the gospel; we need not help the gospel; Jesus is supreme and sufficient. The message of his life, death, and resurrection has a comprehensive reach in addressing fallen humanity. If you look at the graphic on the banners or on the front of your worship folders, that's what we're trying to represent. It's the cross that changes hearts and sends us forward on mission, bearing fruit for Christ.

Yes, we have a role to play, and a context in which to play it—a people, place, and time in which we are called to serve. But the power belongs to God. As Paul describes his ministry to the Corinthians, he says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

Paul wants us to be utterly convinced of this. We need to know, with full assurance, that whatever God is calling us to, Christ is enough. The gospel is enough. We must be a *gospel-driven church*.

And so next week we'll look at the heart of a gospel-driven church, ch. 1:15-23—the message of Christ's unique supremacy and sufficiency. Then we'll consider threats to a gospel-driven church in 2:6-23 (there are many things competing for our allegiance). Then we'll look at the character,

and then finally the witness of a gospel-driven church. And along the way hear some stories of how God has been at work changing lives.

I am genuinely excited to see what God’s going to do. I love this church, and I am eager to listen to God, trust him, and follow him together. But whatever shape our ministry takes in the months and years ahead, we must be convinced of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ in God’s reconciling work. That’s the note Paul opens his letter on; it’s the note he closes on, by reminding the Colossians how Epaphras, who first shared the gospel with them, is also praying for this—4:12: he is “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand *mature* and *fully assured* in all the *will* of God.” That will which centers on Jesus.

May it be so among us.

Gracious Heavenly Father,

Would you fill us, your church, with the knowledge of your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, that we might walk in a manner worthy of you, Lord, fully pleasing to you, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in our knowledge of you. May we be strengthened with all power, according to your glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to you, Father, who has qualified us through Jesus to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. Amen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Opening Question

1. In one word, how would you summarize the impact the good news of Jesus has had on your life?

### Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What words or ideas are repeated in this passage that might help us understand what the author is emphasizing?
2. Paul opens his letter to the Colossians by thanking God for them. What motivates his thanksgiving?
3. How did the gospel come to the Colossians?
4. What does Paul ask God to do in the lives of the Colossians?
5. How would you summarize the impact of the gospel according to these verses?

### Questions for Reflection and Application

The gospel of Jesus is completely sufficient for the growth of the church, both outward (in more followers of Christ) and inward (in greater spiritual maturity). Yet God has sent us (a particular

people, Westgate) into the Metrowest (a particular place) right now (at a particular time), and this affects how we minister the gospel as a congregation. During the potluck and meeting this Sunday (March 12), we'll be discussing how our unique context should impact our vision. In preparation for that, discuss the following questions:

6. *Who are we?* What unique characteristics, resources, or experiences mark us as a local church?
7. How might our unique identity affect the way we do gospel ministry as a church?
8. *Where are we?* What is the spiritual condition of our area? What do people in our area celebrate? Struggle with? Idolize? Fear?
9. How might our specific location shape the way we do gospel ministry?
10. *What time is it?* What is going on in the world around us right now? Cultural movements? Cultural crises?
11. How might the current cultural moment shape the way we engage others with the gospel?