

# Approaching and Hearing Colossians

## Thinking about the Writing of the Book

### The Church of Colossians

#### Its Place

Colossae was an ancient Phrygian city located on the Lycius River in Asia. The city had been an important trade center, but had recently declined. It was located about 100 miles from Ephesus and made up a cluster of three cities that included Laodicea and Hierapolis. In the book of Acts, Paul is never recorded as having visited this city. When Paul was at Ephesus and during his prolonged three-year stay teaching in the school of Tyrannaeus, this city and her two sister cities were evangelized. Important Christians from this city were: Epaphras, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the slave Onesimus.

#### Its People

*Epaphras.* Epaphras and Philemon, residents of Colossae were brought to Christ (Philemon 19). Epaphras apparently was instrumental in founding the church (Colossians 1:7) and had ministries in Hierapolis and Laodicea (Colossians 4:12-13). He was Colossian (Colossians 4:12), a servant of Christ, Paul's fellow-prisoner (Philemon 23) and a hard worker in the neighboring churches (Colossians 4:13).

Philemon, Apphia, & Archippus. These are respectively, father, mother and son. The church met in Philemon's home (Colossians 4:9; Philemon 10,16 with Philemon 2) and may have been pastored by Philemon's son, Archippus (Colossians 4:7) alongside of Epaphras. It was apparently around five years old and was largely made up of Gentile converts (Colossians 3:5-9; 1:25-29).<sup>1</sup>

Onesimus. The returned slave of Philemon who came to Christ while imprisoned with Paul as a run-away slave. His return is the occasion of the Book of Philemon.

#### Its Problem

Epaphras went to Rome (1:7), probably to collect Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave and used the occasion to talk to Paul. He wanted to express the support of their *fellowship* and to report on the dangers threatening the believers (2:8) and the crises facing the church. He stayed on to assist Paul in his house imprisonment while Tychicus and Onesimus, who had now come to Christ, returned with the letters to Ephesus and Colossae.

Reading this is rather like listening to one-side of a conversation. We hear the answers - we do not know what the questions or the problems were. It may well be that we are to see these answers to a set of errors in a church not matter in what culture or verbal form they take.

What then appear to be the problems in the church?

#### **There was a relapse in sinful living.**

They were failing to completely break away from their former lifestyles.

#### **They were vulnerable to being captured by deceptive heresy.**

This church faced a heresy that was threatening to destroy its spiritual vitality. This error taught that there were certain keys of knowledge only given to a few who were initiated into its secrets. It tried to impose certain Jewish regulations including

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, *The Biblical Exposition Commentary Vol II*, (Error! Reference source not found.), p.102.

circumcision, on the church. For those who wanted to experience the “fuller or deeper” life in God, a strict asceticism was the way. It promoted the worship of angels, direct revelation apart from Christ, and minimized the deity and mediatorship of Christ. It saw behind creation and history, demonic and astral forces against which Christians were largely helpless. This resulted in a pagan philosophy that undermined the centrality of Christ and thus the heart of the New Testament gospel. Its effect can be seen on the church at Ephesus and Laodicea in the Book of Revelation. [Adapted from Elwell].

### **They were in bondage to ceremonial legalism.**

To deal with both of these problems, some had introduced Judaism as the solution.

### **Its Peril**

Why were these errors so dangerous to the church?

They were a beguiling, seductive, attractive, and very appealing way of thinking (2:4).

They were philosophy, a way of thinking from the world, not the truth from the Scripture (2:8).

They were based on human tradition, on man-centered ideas (2:8).

They turned Christian victory away from the completed work of Christ to the rite of circumcision (2:11).

They turned Christian living into rules and regulations (2:20). It resulted in a legalistic approach to God and Pharisaical approach to life.

They turned Christian discipline and service into asceticism (2:23).

They turned from Christian worship to the worship of angels (2:18).

They turned from the Biblical view of God’s providence to a dependence on, or fear of astrological influence (2:8,20). [Barclay, p.31-45]

Now listen to me: this is the Biblical, evangelical church in Colossae in 40-60 AD. Paul was not concerned about what ministries the church was doing or not doing. He didn’t care much about what people thought they needed. He cared most about what people were thinking and believing. Error and heresy were deceitful, destructive, and deadly. Unbiblical thinking will lead to ungodly living. This is what the New Testament is about. It is about what we believe about Christ and His saving and transforming work from eternity past though eternity future. We need this correction today. There is a modern form of every one of these in evangelical churches today. And we are too often deeply exercised over the wrong things... The book of Colossians will help us with that.

As one writer aptly put it, "An understanding of the doctrines of Christ will answer all heresies confronting the church in all ages." [W. Grahm Scroggie]

### **Its Purpose**

Paul's letter writing ministry is easily divided into the two major periods of his ministry. Paul stands as an example to us of the mature Christian ministry. His period of tireless activity was followed by a period of fruitful captivity.

## The Christ of Colossians

Since the purpose of the book is to re-focus our attention on Christ. Then let us do an overview of how the book does that.

### It refocuses us on the riches of the Doctrine of Christ.

The *fullness* of Christ is the key to the book

#### The Fullness of Christ is Depicted in:

Prayer (1:9) - How we talk to God.

Theology (1:19) - How we think about God.

Church (1:24) - How we are one in God.

Philosophy (2:9) - How we are to think aligned with the Scriptures.

Ministry (4:17) - How we are to serve Christ together.

#### The Fullness of Christ is Developed in:

His intercession for us (1:9-14).

His exaltation as our Sovereign (1:15-29).

His incarnation as our Savior (2:1-23)

Our union and communion in Christ's Body (3:1-4).

Our lifestyle as worthy of Christ (3:5-4:6).

Our fellowship together in Christ (4:7-18).

### The Realities of the Doctrine of Christ

Christ is presented as: [Adapted from Hendriksen, p. 5]

He is the Architect and Sustainer of He is the Universe.

He is the Head over all things, especially to He is the church, His own Body.

He is the Image of He is the invisible God, He is the embodiment of divine fullness.

He is the Source of He is the Christian's life, peace, and joy.

He is the Rewarder of those who strive to be a blessing to others regardless of their life's station.

He is our Present "Hope of Glory".

### The Relevance of the Doctrine of Christ

In the face of **materialism**, it relates Christ to the age we live in.

In the face of **ecumenicism**, it demonstrates that belief about Christ is central to true Christianity.

In the face of **theological confusion**, it clarifies the unique relation of Christ in the Trinity.

In the face of **pragmatism**, it demands a Christian life based on belief and reflection, not just production.

In the face of **legalism**, it asserts that Christ's life is answer to the problem of evil.

In the face of **easy believism**, it teaches the absolute Lordship of Christ in all areas.

In the face of **individualism**, it embraces the whole Body of Christ.

In the face of **New Ageism**, it offers the hope of the soon coming Christ.

## The Book of Colossians

With all of that in mind, now listen to a reading of the whole book.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 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, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 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. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised 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, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, 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 is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

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, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Bondservants, obey in everything

those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 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.

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

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

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), 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. 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. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 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. And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

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

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## Reflect and Respond

A Summary of Colossians [Adapted from N. Geisler, Bible Knowledge Commentary]

The epistle may be summarized as follows: “Greetings, brothers (1:1-2). We thank God for your faith and love (1:3-8). And we ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will. We pray this so that you will be fruitful for Christ who has redeemed you (1:9-14). For Christ, our Creator and Head, is supreme in all things (1:15-20). And through Christ’s death God has reconciled you who were aliens and enemies (1:21-23). So, I rejoice that I can suffer for the church so that God’s fullness can be known by the Gentiles (1:24-27). To this end we labor that everyone may be perfect in Christ (1:28-29). For all true wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ (2:1-5). Therefore, brothers, just as you began with Christ, continue in Him (2:6-7).

“Now don’t be deceived: God’s fullness is in Christ alone and not in vain human philosophy (2:8-10). And since you have become a part of the new creation by being placed into Christ, you have no need to live under Jewish laws (2:11-17). And don’t let anyone rob you of your prize by forsaking Christ your Head (2:18-19). For you died with Christ, so you need not submit to worldly (legalistic) rules (2:20-23). And since you were raised with Christ, you should set your hearts on heavenly things above (3:1-4). So put to death your sinful worldly practices (3:5-11). And clothe yourself with Christ’s virtues (3:15-17).

“In view of your new exalted identity with Christ, I exhort wives to submit to their husbands; husbands to love their wives; children to obey their parents; fathers not to embitter their children; slaves to obey their masters; and masters to be fair with their slaves (3:18-4:1).

“Brothers, pray for me that I may preach this message effectively and clearly, and you live wisely toward outsiders (4:2-6). My coworkers in the gospel send greetings to you (4:7-15). Exchange letters with the Laodiceans and exhort Archippus to complete his ministry (4:16-18).”