

Unit 1 Introduction

Introduction to Colossians

Initial Issues

Colossians is one of four “prison epistles” traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Based on perceived differences in vocabulary, style, and theological developments between Colossians and Ephesians and other Pauline writings, Paul’s direct authorship has been questioned, with more support for Colossians as coming from Paul himself. The designation of these four letters as prison epistles betrays their association with Paul while in captivity. The location for Paul’s imprisonment is variously argued as Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome, with a Roman location being prominent. If written from Rome, the date of Colossians’ composition is early AD 60s.

The destination for Colossians was the ancient city of Colossae located in the region of Phrygia in the Lycus Valley (western Asia Minor) near the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. While in previous centuries Colossae had been a thriving and important city, in part due to wool from sheep dyed dark red (often known as Colossian) used in the textile industry, by the time of Paul’s writing, this was not the case. While ministering in this area, the church in Colossae did not originate directly from Paul (2:1), but rather from Epaphras, a co-worker with Paul, who may have been imprisoned with him at the time. Epaphras, a native of Colossae, gives Paul welcomed information about the church, and Paul responds by sending two other colleagues, Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7), to take a letter of response to the positive and negative news being received. His letter follows the standard pattern of a Hellenistic letter involving an opening salutation (identifying sender, receiver, and greeting, 1:1-2), a thanksgiving (building relationship with the intended receivers, 1:3-23), body (discussion of key issues, 1:24—4:1), closing commands or instructions (matters of hoped-for response, 4:2-6), and conclusion (greetings and a final blessing, 4:7-18). While a sizeable Jewish population lived in this region, descriptions of the primary recipients for the letter indicates those having a Gentile background. They were once “alienated from God” and “enemies” in their minds because of their “evil behavior” (1:21). Their lives were once characterized by forms of idolatry such as “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed” (3:5, 7).

A Challenge to the Church

Epaphras’ disclosures to Paul concerning the church at Colossae were largely affirming. Paul has heard of their “faith in Christ Jesus” and their “love” for “all God’s people” (1:4; NIV). The gospel which has been “bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole

world” is being manifest (1:6). Paul has learned of their “love in the Spirit” (1:8). This gospel involves not just a present hope, but one for a future involving “hope stored up for you in heaven” (1:5; see also 1:12; 3:24).

In 1:15-20, Paul presents what may be an early Christian hymn which exhibits some of the most elevated Christology in the New Testament and lays the foundation for discussions which are to come. The hymn declares “The Son [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” using language somewhat reminiscent of Old Testament wisdom traditions (Proverbs 8:22-31) which depict personified wisdom as God’s agent in the creation of the world. Christ as creator of all “things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible” (1:16) is supreme over all other powers in the universe and is “head of the body, the church.” Paul declares: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (1:19). Through Christ’s death on the cross, all things on earth and in heaven have been reconciled with God (1:20). The aim is that those having faith in Christ and not abandoning the hope presented in the gospel (1:6, 23) will be presented “holy in his [God’s] sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (1:22).

While a strong community of faith, the church at Colossae was being presented with a challenge by certain teachers who threatened its understanding of Christ and the gospel itself. While Christ was foundational for entrance into the faith community, a focus on Him alone was not sufficient for continued growth and maturity. While the precise identity of these teachers is not known, their message may have been unique to Phrygia, having affinities with both Jewish and Hellenistic or Greek ideas. Such a synthesis of ideas would not be unique in the ancient Gentile world.

The gospel as proclaimed by Paul and other early Christians entered a world marked by the blending of various religious and philosophical systems and outlooks. Quite to the contrary, there was no expectation of sole adherence to any religious system and its associated deity or deities. Roman traditional religion largely resulted from modifications to classical Greek traditions. In this world, the gods and goddesses were important for the successful navigation of the many challenges of life. In Colossae and throughout the Hellenistic world, numerous forces were believed to influence human life, and proper deference was important. No single force or deity held the answer to all the life’s mysteries. The region of Phrygia was long known for the cult of the mother goddess Cybele associated with ecstatic religious experiences and later for development of the Montanists, an early Christian movement of the second century

which argued for new prophecies of a greater nature than those of the apostles or Christ himself.

Paul's Response

Paul warns the church in Colossae of teachers who are attempting to deceive them “by fine-sounding arguments” (2:4) and to take them “captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elementary spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (2:8; see also Galatians 4:3). He infers that the teachers are judging them by what they eat or drink and by the observance of “a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” (2:16). These teachers are taking delight in false humility and in the worship of (or with) angels (2:18). Paul infers that these teachers enjoy providing others with abundant detail about their personal religious experiences or visions and declares that “they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind” (2:18).

While presenting themselves as experiencing a higher level of Christian maturity through religious experiences and practices, these teachers have “lost connection with the head” of the church, namely Christ (2:19). They are advocates for ascetic rules associated with “the elemental forces of the world” such as “Do not handle,” “Do not taste,” and “Do not touch” which are “merely human commands and teachings.” These regulations only have the appearance of wisdom as exhibited through “their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body” and have no effect upon the restraint of “sensual indulgence” (2:23). In effect, these teachers were defining Christian perfection in terms of advancement in levels of spirituality manifest by practices such as observance of the law, sexual asceticism, and visionary experiences. Such items were identifying markers for judging (2:16) those in the church achieving and not achieving high levels of spiritual maturity.

The Life in Christ

Rejecting the distortions to the gospel by the teachers threatening Colossae, Paul provides a picture of a growing and maturing Christian life. This life is characterized by a lack of concern for or allegiance to any competing powers or forces in the world (2:20). Christ alone embodies all the mysteries of God and is all that is needed for life. In Him are “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). In 3:1—4:6, the life which is to result from complete reliance on Christ is portrayed beginning with the words, “Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things.” These things above do not include “anger, rage,

malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (3:8). These practices associated with the believers’ past have no place in the present which focuses “on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:10). The new life in Christ involves living as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” Such lives are characterized by “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (3:12). They evidence forgiveness and most of all love (3:13-14) which brings the community into “perfect unity” (3:14). Being called to peace, Christ’s followers are to let the “peace of Christ” rule in their hearts (3:15). New life in Christ involves worship of God evidenced in “word or deed” (3:17).

In 3:18—4:1, Paul illustrates this life by reference to rules going back to Aristotle used to govern relationships between differing groups within households of the Greco-Roman world. These groups included husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves (see also Ephesians 5:22—6:9 and 1 Peter 2:13-17). Adherence to these rules or codes has been considered a concession to the broader norms of the prevailing society in which Christians lived. Reference to these codes, presenting hierarchical and patriarchal structures, raises numerous questions in view of Paul’s declaration that “there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11; see also Galatians 3:28). Close examination of these codes, however, reveals not just their appropriation, but modification involving mutuality, reciprocity, and justice. In view of the new life in Christ, societal norms are relativized. Only those norms in accordance with service to Christ are to be deemed as demanding ultimate allegiance (3:23-24).

Paul concludes his instructions for Christian life focusing on prayer and the need to be watchful and thankful (4:2). Contrary to how followers of Christ were being treated by certain teachers among themselves, Paul counsels the community of faith at Colossae to be gracious in its relationships with those in the broader culture. His letter ends with final greetings (4:7-18) which reinforce relationships between Paul and those to whom he is writing. While providing words of praise and encouragement, Paul has laid the foundation for confronting those who would challenge and belittle the church through their stance that Christ was not enough to provide what was needed for true growth and maturity in the Christian faith. A focus on Christ is enough for now and for all the future.

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