

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

Background to the Letter

The cosmopolitan city of Colossae in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, was about 100 miles inland (east) from the port of Ephesus. Though once a large and prosperous city, changes in road structure led to its decline until the time of Paul when it was only a "small town."

The church in Colossae was not founded by Paul but came into existence during his Ephesian ministry through the Colossian collaborator of Paul, Epaphras. Paul himself had not visited this Church so Epaphras informed Paul of the state of the church in Colossae, especially in the light of misleading teaching developing within it (1:8).

The Colossian Church and the Purpose of the Letter

Problems had arisen because some teachers emphasized Christ's relation to the universe (cosmos). Their teachings stressed angels (Col 2:18; "principalities and powers," Col 2:15), which were connected with astral powers and cultic practices and rules about food and drink and ascetical disciplines (Col 2:16, 18).

These teachers were sustaining that Christians should worship celestial beings and cosmic powers because they were mediators between God and human beings. Besides these, they maintained that belief in Christ was only an introduction to the faith, the fullness of which was attained by the practises they advocated.

To find help in dealing with these problems, Epaphras sought out Paul, who was then imprisoned (Col 4:10, 18).

Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians while in prison, but his several imprisonments leave the specific place and date of composition uncertain. Traditionally the house arrest at Rome, in which Paul enjoyed a certain restricted freedom in preaching (see Acts 28:16-28). Others suggest a still earlier imprisonment at Caesarea (see Acts 23:12-27:1) or in Ephesus (see Act 19).

Colossians follows the outline of a typical Pauline letter. It is distinguished by the Christological hymn in Col 1:15-20 which underlines who Christ is and what Christ means in creation and redemption. It was apparently a familiar liturgical material to the author, to the audience, and the false teachers.

Main Structure of the Letter

- 1. Address (Col 1:1-14)**
- 2. The Preeminence of Christ (Col 1:15-2:3)**
- 3. Warnings against False Teachings and Practices (Col 2:4-23)**
- 4. The Ideal Christian Life (Col 3:1-4:6)**
- 5. Personal News and Greetings Col 4:7-18)**

Themes of the Letter

Greeting, thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-23)

Paul gives thanks to God for the faith of the community as a whole; this seems to indicate that, though the Colossians have been under pressure because of the false doctrines, they are still faithful to Christ. The apostle expresses his prayerful concern for them. The thanksgiving and the prayers prepare the way to introducing the Christological hymn which presents the role of Christ in creation and affirms that all things, including angels, were created in Christ who is pre-existent.

Paul's Ministry

Paul presents the nature, content and the difficulties of the ministry of the gospel. His preaching has cost him persecution, suffering, and imprisonment, but he regards these as reflective of the sufferings of Christ, a required discipline for the sake of the gospel.

Paul is convinced that his own sufferings are nothing. He is merely a servant of God, filling up the cup of what is left of our Lord's sufferings in behalf of his body, the church. His particular function as an apostle is to reveal to the nations, by his preaching and teaching and admonition, the secret of God's

great, long-concealed mystery. That secret is nothing less than “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In the same way, Paul is sure that, as he goes about his work, Christ works powerfully in him.

Christ Unites Everything (2:6-3:4)

In response to the false teachings Paul he presents the superiority of Christ, that is, his person, his fullness of redemptive power, and his complete sovereignty over the “emanations” (i.e., the so-called principalities and powers). It is through the death and resurrection of Christ—who is the “final reality” to which the OT points, the sole mediator between God and man, and the One in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells—that we, by faith, are joined to all the fullness of God and his blessing. It is through Christ alone that we overcome sin (2:11-13; 3:1-4:6), are released from the condemnation of the law (2:14), gain victory over the power of demonic forces (2:15) and come to realize the bankruptcy of mere religious hype.

Further, this is a message rooted in spiritual joy and is available to every man; there is no stoicism, mere asceticism, legalism, or libertinism in the Pauline conception of Christ’s ongoing work in his church. “If you have Christ, you have everything” is Paul’s response. “Don’t add anything else,” the apostle warns, “lest you distort, diminish, or denigrate the superiority of Christ, his gospel, or the Christian life.”

It is unnecessary for the Christian to be concerned about placating spirits or avoiding imagined defilement through ascetical practices in regard to food and drink. True Christian asceticism consists in avoiding sins and cultivate love of neighbour in accordance with the standard set by Christ. When Christ circumcises you, he cuts off not your skin but your sin! You are buried with him in baptism, and the same God who raised Jesus from the dead has raised you. You were once dead in your sins, but he brought you to life and forgave you and us. The regulations of the law were nailed to the cross and triumphantly destroyed with his death.

Exhortations (3:5-4:6)

In this section we read a list of vices, a list of virtues, codes of conduct and instructions on prayer and daily conduct.

You are complete in Christ 2:8-10

Look out for the man who tries to captivate you with an empty "philosophy" and useless speculation, or by appealing to the elemental instincts of men. You don't need their "line"; you are complete in Christ, for he is the fullness of God.

Fix Your Mind on Godly Things 3:1-11

Since you were raised with Christ, and your life is now hid with him in God, set your mind on godly things — on the glory of Christ . . . our life. Kill the earthy instincts, that old behaviour (anger, foul language, pretentious speech). You have now stripped off the old man and have put on the new, who knows no distinctions of status or culture or race, but for whom Christ is all in all.

Set Your Hearts to Virtues 3:12-17

Clothe yourselves with kindness, humility, mutual forbearance, love; even as Christ forgave you, so you do likewise. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, putting spiritual songs into your hearts, so that whatever you do is done thankfully and in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Paul in his own words

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col 3:12-17)