

The Bible Knowledge Commentary—Colossians

INTRODUCTION Norman L. Geisler

The Book of Colossians was written by the Apostle Paul about a.d. 60–62, while he was imprisoned in Rome. One purpose was to correct the heresy that had sprung up in the Asian city of Colosse.

Author

The Pauline authorship of Colossians is supported by abundant evidence both in and out of the book. Colossians has three personal references to Paul in the first person (1:1; 1:23; 4:18) and numerous references to Paul's associates, such as Tychicus (4:7), Onesimus (4:9), Aristarchus (4:10), Mark (4:10), Justus (4:11), Epaphras (4:12), Luke (4:14), Demas (4:14), and Archippus (4:17). The style and content of Colossians is similar to Ephesians, written about the same time and probably alluded to as "the letter from Laodicea" (4:16).

While 34 Greek words are unique to Colossians, they are characteristic of the theme of the book and fit the thoughts of Paul. Words in this category include "visible" (1:16), "supremacy" (1:18), "fill up" (1:24), "philosophy" (2:8), and "Deity" (2:9).

The conclusion of Ephesians confirms that Tychicus was the carrier of both it and Colossians (Eph. 6:21; cf. Col. 4:7). This helps confirm Paul as the author of the Colossian epistle.

The external evidence for Paul's authorship is strong, despite the claim of some that the heresy combated in the book is second-century Gnosticism. But there is good reason to believe that the heresy addressed in Colossians (at least in its incipient form) had appeared already in Paul's lifetime. And in view of Paul's other encounters with heresies, in books which are unquestionably his, it seems clear that he authored Colossians (cf. 1 Cor. 15; Gal. 1–2; 2 Thes. 2).

Colossians includes some stylistic differences such as unusual genitival combinations: "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), "body of ... flesh" (2:11, nasb), "growth ... from God" (2:19, nasb), "reward of ... inheritance" (3:24, nasb). However, as Donald Guthrie correctly observed, "stylistic differences are generally attributable to changing circumstances or subject matter" (*New Testament Introduction*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p. 553).

One of the strongest lines of evidence that Colossians is a first-century work of the Apostle Paul is its close link to the Book of Philemon, the authenticity of which is virtually impeccable. (1) Both books include Timothy's name with Paul's in the opening greeting (Col. 1:1; Phile. 1). (2) Greetings are sent in both books from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (Col. 4:10–14; Phile. 23–24). (3) Archippus' ministry is referred to in both books (Col. 4:17; Phile. 2). (4) Onesimus the slave is mentioned in both books (Col. 4:9; Phile. 10).

Date and Place of Writing

Colossians was written from Rome during Paul's (first) imprisonment there, as recorded in Acts 28:30. At the same time Paul wrote Ephesians and Philemon (ca. a.d. 60–62). In Philemon 1:9 Paul referred to himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Ephesians also contains references to Paul being a "prisoner" (Eph. 3:1; 4:1). And Ephesians refers to Tychicus carrying the epistles from Paul to their destinations (Eph. 6:21; cf. Col. 4:7). Since the record of Acts ends around a.d. 60–62, Colossians was probably written during this two-year imprisonment. And since neither Colossians, Ephesians, nor Philemon mention the outcome of Paul's trial, anticipated in Philippians 1:19–21, it can be assumed that Colossians was written before Philippians.

Colosse was in the Lycus Valley, about 100 miles east of Ephesus in Asia Minor. Its name is possibly derived from *Colossus*, a large statue, which in turn may have been named for the unusual shape of stony deposits there. Colosse is about 12 miles from Hierapolis and Laodicea, the other two cities of that valley (see the location of these three on the map between Acts and Rom.). The area was rich in mineral deposits and was also subject to frequent earthquakes. Rich pasturelands were nearby. Several references in Colossians indicate that Paul had not visited the city (Col. 1:7; 2:1; 4:12).

Occasion

The circumstance which prompted the writing of Colossians seemed to be the special heresy that arose there. This false teaching seemed to be the beginning of what later (in the second century) developed into Gnosticism. It contained several characteristics. (1) It was Jewish, stressing the need for observing Old Testament laws and ceremonies. (2) It was philosophical, laying emphasis on some special or deeper knowledge (*gnōsis*). (3) It involved the worship of angels as mediators to God (2:18). (4) It was exclusivistic, stressing the special privilege and "perfection" of those select few who belonged to this philosophical elite. (5) It was also Christological. But this seminal Gnosticism denied the deity of Christ, thus calling forth one of the greatest declarations of Christ's deity found anywhere in Scripture (1:15–16; 2:9).

Purpose

Three purposes seem to have been in Paul's mind as he wrote Colossians. First, he sought to show the deity and supremacy of Christ in the face of the Colossian heresy (1:18; 2:9). Second, he wanted to lead believers into spiritual maturity (1:28; 2:6–7). Third, he wanted to inform them about his state of affairs and elicited their prayers on his behalf (4:2–8).

Contents

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 been identified with Christ in your baptism, 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)."

OUTLINE

- I. Doctrinal: Deeper Life in Christ (1:1–2:7)
 - A. Greetings (1:1–2)
 - B. Thanksgiving (1:3–8)
 - C. Petition (1:9–14)
 - D. Exaltation of Christ (1:15–20)
 - E. Reconciliation by Christ (1:21–23)
 - F. Revelation of the mystery of Christ (1:24–27)
 - G. Perfection in Christ (1:28–29)
 - H. Education (wisdom) in Christ (2:1–5)
 - I. Exhortation to live in Christ (2:6–7)
- II. Polemical: Higher Life in Christ (2:8–23)
 - A. "Gnosticism" is wrong: deity is in Christ (2:8–10)
 - B. Legalism is wrong: reality is in Christ (2:11–17)
 - C. Mysticism is wrong: headship is in Christ (2:18–19)
 - D. Asceticism is wrong: immunity is in Christ (2:20–23)
- III. Spiritual: Inner Life in Christ (3:1–17)
 - A. Seeking spiritual values (3:1–4)
 - B. Putting off the sins of the old life (3:5–11)
 - C. Putting on the virtues of the new life (3:12–17)
- IV. Practical: Outer Life in Christ (3:18–4:18)
 - A. Perfecting one's private life (3:18–4:1)
 - B. Perfecting one's prayer life (4:2–4)
 - C. Perfecting one's public life (4:5–6)
 - D. Perfecting one's personal life (4:7–17)
 - E. Salutation (4:18)

Life Application Bible Commentary—Introduction to Colossians

The human brain is amazing. God has created us with the ability to think, react, reason, consider, meditate, learn, imagine, understand, philosophize, know, perceive, evaluate, theorize, reflect, predict, and communicate. Enamored with the incredible power of our minds, however, we can become complacent in our wisdom, proud of our mental abilities, and reliant on ourselves.

To be complimented as “smart,” “a genius,” or “very intelligent” feels great. Beyond this, to have special knowledge feels even better. We like to be seen as experts and sought out, as though we have a secret formula or inside information.

The philosophical system of Gnosticism emphasized the mind and taught that salvation could be obtained through knowledge (*gnosis*) instead of faith. This “knowledge” was esoteric and could only be acquired by those who had been initiated into the mysteries of the Gnostic system, not by study or the normal process of learning. With a strong appeal to human pride (who wouldn’t want to be on the “inside,” the recipient and owner of secrets and mysteries?), Gnosticism distorted Christian theology and twisted biblical truths in order to support its concepts. Perhaps the most foundational of these false teachings was that matter is inherently evil and only the spiritual or nonmaterial is good. This led to denying the doctrines of Creation and the Incarnation (“How could God take on an ‘evil’ body?”), elevating the role of angels, and reducing Christianity to just one of many religions (Gnosticism sought to combine the “best” of all religions).

A kind of proto-Gnosticism was gaining popularity in Colosse; it was a combination of Gnostic concepts and Judaism. Full-fledged Gnosticism did not appear until the second century. In any event, Paul wrote to refute the error and to get the believers back on track. To do so, Paul highlighted the preeminence of Christ and the importance of godly living.

As you read Paul’s letter to the Colossian believers, use your God-given mind to evaluate your own belief system. Is it based on God’s Word and centered on Christ? Or do you rely on human philosophy and your ability to think?

AUTHOR

Paul (See the introduction to this volume.)

Colossians begins: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father” (1:1–2 niv), thus identifying both the sender and receiver of this letter. This opening line also mentions Timothy, but in the rest of the epistle Paul often uses the first person (“I”—1:24–25, 29; “me”—4:7; etc.). As with Philippians, Paul’s authorship was affirmed by the early church fathers and has not been seriously disputed through the centuries.

One of the strongest arguments for Paul as the author of Colossians is this letter’s relation to Philemon. Both letters, sent to the same city, probably by the same messenger, contain many of the same names: Paul, Timothy, Onesimus, Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

The similarity of Colossians to Ephesians has caused some to propose that Colossians may have been written by someone else (copying Ephesians and using Paul’s name on Colossians or vice versa). But similarities should be expected when two letters are written at the same time but sent to different churches in different locations.

Consider the following comparison of Colossians and Ephesians. Some similarities include:

- Both were to be read aloud in the churches (Colossians 4:16). Ephesians may be the letter from Laodicea (4:16).
- The letters are very similar in style.
- Both letters were delivered by the same messenger—Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21–22; Colossians 4:7–8).
- The letters contain some of the same expressions: “your faith in Jesus Christ and your love for all the saints” (Ephesians 1:15 and Colossians 1:4 niv); “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:14 niv).
- The letters have similar features: the prayers (Ephesians 1:15–23 and Colossians 1:9–14); references to unity in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1–16 and Colossians 3:12–17); instructions for households (Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1).

Differences include:

- Ephesians is substantially longer than Colossians (six chapters to four).
- The central theme of Ephesians is the church (body) of Christ, while the theme of Colossians is Christ as head of the church.
- Ephesians has no hint of the controversy (proto-Gnostic heresy) that is dominant in Colossians.

SETTING

Written from a Roman prison in approximately a.d. 60. (See the introduction to Philipians.)

Colossians was written in the same year as Ephesians and Philemon. According to the reference in 4:3 to being in chains, in 4:10 to fellow prisoner Aristarchus, and in 4:18 to his chains, clearly Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Evidently Epaphras, who was visiting Paul or was imprisoned with him (Philemon 23), told him of the problems in Colosse (1:7).

AUDIENCE

The believers in Colosse

Colosse lay about one hundred miles east of Ephesus, in the Lycus River valley in Phrygia, a district of Asia Minor (Turkey) that had been incorporated into the Roman province of Asia in the second century b.c. Located on the great east-west trade route linking the Aegean Sea and the Euphrates River, Colosse thrived as a center of commerce. At one point the city also may have been a military base. Colosse was known for the distinctive, glossy, deep purple wool from the sheep that grazed in the surrounding hills. By the time of Paul's missionary journeys, the trade route had changed, placing Colosse off the beaten path. Thus Colosse had been surpassed in power and importance by Laodicea and Hierapolis (see 4:13), neighboring towns in the Lycus Valley. Colosse was further reduced by an earthquake at about the same time this letter was written.

The population of Colosse was diverse, including native Phrygians, Greek settlers, and Jews descended from Jewish families who had fled to the area during the persecutions of Antiochus the Great (223–187 b.c.).

Although Paul had traveled through Phrygia on his second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:6; 18:23) and had lived for three years in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–20:1), it seems that he had never visited Colosse (see 1:9; 2:1–5). Yet Paul considered Colosse, as well as Laodicea and Hierapolis, to be in his area of responsibility, probably because the churches in these cities had been indirectly founded by him during his powerful ministry in Ephesus (see Acts 19:10, 26). Quite possibly both Epaphras and Philemon had been converted to Christ during that time (see Philemon 19, 23).

The church may have been started by Epaphras who had been sent by Paul to preach to the Colossians (1:7). Epaphras probably began the work in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well (see 4:12–13).

The church in Colosse was comprised mainly of Gentiles (including Apphia—Philemon 2). Archippus may have been the church's pastor (4:17). Philemon and his slave Onesimus lived there. In fact, the church met in Philemon's home (Philemon 2). Another group met in Nympha's house (4:15).

OCCASION FOR WRITING

Word had come to Paul of false teaching in Colosse.

Although Paul was a Roman prisoner, his prison was a rented house (Acts 28:16, 30–31). He was allowed to entertain many visitors and to preach and teach. One of Paul's visitors was Epaphras (although he may have been a prisoner as well—Philemon 23). Epaphras reported on the situation in Colosse, including word of false teaching that was threatening the church (1:8; 4:12). Paul wrote quickly to warn the believers of the dangers of this heresy.

Paul also wanted to send a letter to Philemon, along with his runaway slave, Onesimus. He was able to send both letters with Tychicus (4:7–9).

PURPOSE

To encourage the believers in Colosse and to combat errors in the church

Paul had learned from Epaphras that the church at Colosse was threatened by false teaching, partly pagan and partly Jewish (2:8, 16, 18, 20). In fact, it seems to have been a mixture of Jewish and pagan religions.

The Jewish element asserted that true believers had to observe certain days, deny themselves certain foods, and follow certain rituals. The pagan element emphasized self-denial, the worship of angels, and a mystical "wisdom." This probably was an early form of Gnosticism, a complex belief system that would become very prevalent in the second century. Gnosticism emphasized the supremacy of knowledge and that salvation came through knowledge, not by faith. This knowledge was attained through astrology and magic and was available only to those who had been initiated into the Gnostic system. Another Gnostic belief, that all matter is inherently evil and only the spiritual and nonmaterial is of itself good, led to the idea that God could not have created the world and would have no contact with it. Therefore, they taught that God, in Christ, never could have become a human person. If matter is evil, how could God ever be united with a human body? Thus they denied either the humanity or the divinity of Christ (in their view, he couldn't have been both).

The heretical poison in Colosse was a deadly Judaic-Gnostic combination. So Paul wrote to warn the Colossian Christians of these errors of doctrine and practice:

- He warned against ritualism that had strict rules about permissible food and drink, religious festivals (2:16–17), and circumcision (2:11; 3:11).
- He warned against asceticism—the idea that the body is evil and that through self-torture or self-denial a person can attain exalted spirituality (1:22; 2:20–23).
- He warned against relying on human philosophy, knowledge, and tradition (2:4, 8).
- He warned against trying to obtain secret knowledge (2:18; see also 2:2–3).
- He warned against the worship of angels (2:18–19).
- He warned against making Christ any less than the divine Son of God, Lord of the universe, and Head of the church (1:13–20; 2:2–3, 9–10, 17).

Paul recognized that the most dangerous element of this heresy was the deprecation of Christ, so he focused much of his attention on Christ's supremacy. In fact, Colossians is the most Christ-centered book in the Bible.

Today we don't hear much about Gnosticism, but this heresy's false doctrines still abound: secret knowledge, mysticism, human philosophy, and syncretism. In fact, Jesus is seen as just one of many great historical religious leaders, not the unique Son of God and the only way to heaven (John 14:6).

Don't be deceived. These ideas may be popular, but they are wrong. Keep Christ, God's only Son and your Savior, at the center of your life. Follow only him, the God-man, your crucified and risen Lord.

MESSAGE

Christ's Divinity, Christ As Head of the Church, Union with Christ, Man-Made Religion

Christ's Divinity (1:15–20; 2:2, 9–12). Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, Lord of all creation, and Lord of the new creation. He is the expressed reflection of the invisible God. He is eternal, preexistent, omnipotent, and equal with the Father. He is supreme and complete. In fact, "He is the image of the invisible God" (1:15 niv), and "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9 niv). Jesus is God!

Importance for Today. Because Christ is divine and the Lord of all creation, our lives must be centered around him. We must honor him as our God and our Lord; we must not accept any substitutes, tolerate any additions, or entertain any thoughts of a diminished role. This means regarding our relationship with him as most vital and making his interests our top priority.

Is Christ the number one priority, the Commander in chief, the Lord of your life? Do you honor and worship him as God?

Christ As Head of the Church (1:15–20; 3:15–17, 23–24). Because Christ is God, he is the head of the church. Christ is the founder, leader, and highest authority on earth. As such, he expects his followers to listen to him carefully and obey him completely. Christ requires first place in all of their thoughts and activities.

Importance for Today. To acknowledge Christ Jesus as our head, our Lord, we must welcome his leadership in all we do or think. No Christian individual, group, or church should regard any loyalty (to family, friends, country, employer, church, or denomination) more important than loyalty to Christ. Many voices vie for our attention and loyalty. We can feel pressure from peers and even from loved ones to think or act contrary to God's Word. But only Christ should have our total allegiance. We should obey him regardless of what anyone else thinks or says. He is our head.

In what ways are your loyalties divided? What can you do to better acknowledge Christ as your leader?

Union with Christ (1:13, 21–23; 2:6–15, 20; 3:1–4, 11, 15–17). Because believers' sins have been forgiven and they have been reconciled to God, they are united with Christ. That union can never be broken. Being united with Christ means being identified with his death, burial (2:20), and resurrection (3:1).

Importance for Today. Because we have been united with Christ, we can have assurance of our salvation. Because we have been united with Christ, we should focus on "things above, not on earthly things" (3:2 niv). And we should live as those who have been raised with Christ, ridding ourselves of all sinful habits related to life before Christ (3:8–11) and committing ourselves to good works (3:12–17).

Man-Made Religion (2:8, 16–23). False teachers were promoting a heresy that stressed keeping rituals and rules (legalism). They also taught that spiritual growth was attained by discipline of the body (asceticism) and visions (mysticism). Emphasizing human knowledge, they missed God's wisdom; focusing on human philosophy, they didn't understand God; attempting to combine a variety of religious viewpoints, they lost sight of Christ.

Importance for Today. We must not hold on to our own theories and ideas and try to blend them into Christianity. Nor should we allow our hunger for a more fulfilling Christian experience to cause us to trust in a teacher, group, or system of thought more than in Christ and in God's Word.

Don't be swayed or moved away from Christ by smooth-talking teachers, and don't be confused by attractive arguments and sophisticated philosophies. Keep your focus on Christ, and live by God's Word.

Vital Statistics

Purpose: To combat errors in the church and to show that believers have everything they need in Christ

Author: Paul

To whom written: The church at Colosse, a city in Asia Minor, and believers everywhere

Date written: About a.d. 60, during Paul's imprisonment in Rome

Setting: Paul had never visited Colosse—evidently the church had been founded by Epaphras and other converts from Paul's missionary travels. The church, however, had been infiltrated by religious relativism, with some believers attempting to combine elements of Gnostic paganism and secular philosophy with Christian doctrine. Paul confronts these false teachings and affirms the sufficiency of Christ.

Key verses: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (2:9–10 niv).

Key people: Paul, Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras

Key places: Colosse, Laodicea (4:15–16)

Special features: Christ is presented as having absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency. Colossians has similarities to Ephesians, probably because it was written at about the same time, but Colossians has a different emphasis.

Outline of Colossians

1. What Christ has done (1:1–2:23)
2. What Christians should do (3:1–4:18)



LOCATION OF COLOSSE

Paul had no doubt been through Laodicea on his third missionary journey, as it lay on the main route to Ephesus, but he had never been to Colosse. Though a large city with a significant population, Colosse was smaller and less important than the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Barton, B. B., & Comfort, P. W. (1995). *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (pp. 132–142). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.