

Notes on the Epistle to the Colossians

Human Author

Colossians 1:1 attributes authorship of this epistle to the apostle Paul. There is no historical evidence that Pauline authorship of Colossians was ever suspect in the early church. Marcion (c. A.D. 150) recognized the epistle as Pauline as did Irenaeus (c. A.D. 190). The chief argument against Pauline authorship is that the error outlined in the letter is too advanced to have been present in the first century.

Date and Place of Writing

Paul wrote this epistle in A.D. 61-62 during his two-year period of house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30). During this time, he also wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Together these four letters are often called “The Prison Epistles.” Paul sent Colossians and the epistle to Philemon in the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus (Col 4:7-9). At the same time, he also sent his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 6:21-22). Ephesians is probably the encyclical letter that would soon come to Colossae from Laodicea (Col 4:16).

The City of Colosse

The word Colosse is taken from the word *Colossus* which means large or huge. This is ironic because Colosse is the least important city and church to which any of Paul’s epistles were addressed. It had been a great city of Phrygia, but its heyday was over (Herodotus *History* 7.30.1; Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.2.6).

Two generations before Paul, Strabo described it as a “small town” (Strabo *Geography* 12.8.13). The city is located at the base of Mt. Cadmus (8,300') in the Lycus River valley, not far from where it flows into the Meander River. Colosse, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis are referred to as the tri-cities of the Lycus valley. Colosse’s primary commerce was wool dyed a dark red color.

The Origin of the Colossian Church

The church at Colosse was not founded by Paul. He had never personally visited the city at the time he wrote this epistle (Col 1:4, 9; 2:1). The church was most likely founded by Epaphras during Paul’s three-year Ephesian ministry on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10; Col 1:7; 4:12-13). Epaphras, who was from Colosse (Col 4:12), traveled to Ephesus at some point, heard Paul preach, believed the gospel, and then became a missionary and pastor to his own hometown and probably Hierapolis and Laodicea. As a result of his efforts, a church was

born in Colosse that met in the homes of Nympha (Col 4:15) and Philemon (Philemon 1-2).

The Occasion of the Epistle

The occasion for this epistle can probably be traced to the arrival of Epaphras in Rome with news of a new teaching in the Lycus River valley that had infiltrated the churches in Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (2:1; 4:12-13, 16). The essence of the false teaching seems to be rooted in Judaism. All the features of this teaching that Paul addresses can be explained in the context of Judaism.¹ Several factors support this notion: references to circumcision (2:11; 3:11), dietary regulations (2:16), Sabbath and Jewish festivals (2:16), and angel worship (2:18). As in many of Paul's other epistles Judaism was the key opponent (see, Galatians). Judaizers dogged Paul's footsteps throughout Asia Minor seeking to get pagan converts to Christianity to keep the Jewish law to become truly "mature." It appears that Jewish teachers had made their way to the Lycus valley in an attempt to persuade pagan converts to Christ that their position in Christ was incomplete without submitting to Jewish regulations.²

Message

Spiritual maturity comes through understanding and appropriating the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, not through laws, ceremonies, or mystical experiences.

Outline

- I. Salutation (1:1-2)
- II. Doctrinal: The Person and Work of Christ (1:3-2:3)
- III. Polemical: The Position of the Body in Christ (2:4-3:4)
- IV. Practical: The Practice of the Life of Christ (3:5-4:6)
- V. Personal: The Personal Affairs of Paul and Greetings from His Companions (4:7-18)

¹ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 24-5; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: 1982), xxxii-xxxiii. Some maintain that the Colossian heresy was a form of incipient Gnosticism, but the letter is probably too early for this. There was some strain of mystical philosophy as seen in 2:8 ("philosophy"), 2:18 ("visions"), and 2:23 ("severe treatment of the body"). But all this can be explained in relation to Judaism.

² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 24-25. There was a large Jewish population in the district of Laodicea (O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxvii).

Exposition

I. Salutation (1:1-2)

As was his custom, Paul begins this letter by identifying himself and his audience and issuing a spiritual greeting.

II. Doctrinal: The Person and Work of Christ (1:3–2:3) *THE HEAD*

This introductory section lays the foundation for the main section of the letter that begins at 2:6. The lengthy introduction begins with the customary Pauline thanksgiving for the believers. After an initial statement that he prays for them always (1:3), Paul gives the content of his intercession (1:4-5), and how it was he came to know about them and pray for them (1:6-8).

A. The Introduction (1:3-14)

1:3-8 is a long, complicated sentence in Greek.

1:4-5 faith, love, and hope

1:6 “the whole world”

1:8 The only mention of the Holy Spirit in Colossians (contrast with Ephesians which is Paul’s “Trinitarian” epistle).

1:9-14 The Prayer for the Colossians.

1:9 “for this reason” (because of faith, love, and hope)

1:9-12 Prays that God will give them knowledge of His will

1:10-12a Outworking of God’s will (4 present participles)

1:12b-13 Three reasons for thanksgiving

Lessons for 1:1-14:

B. The Person of Christ (1:15-20)

This section contains one of the most exalted pictures of the person and work of Christ in the New Testament. The Christology focuses on five key points:

Jesus is God (15)

“image” (*eikon*)

“first-born (*prototokos*) of all creation”

Jesus is Creator (16)

“were created”

“have been created”

Jesus is Sustainer (17) Heb 1:3; 2 Pet 3:5-7

Jesus is Head of the Body (18)

*The purpose of this section is to provide the Colossians with theological reasons to be truly thankful and also to show the Colossians that in Jesus they possess all they need. There is no need for them to add the law or anything else to Him and His work.

Lessons for 1:15-19:

C. The Work of Christ (1:20–2:3)

1:20-23 Paul applies the truth of Christ’s person and work to the Colossians. He highlights their former condition (21), the means of their rescue (22), and their resultant hope (23).

1:20 “reconcile all things”

1:23 Endurance in faith is a mark of election (1 John 2:19)

1:24 “filling up what is lacking”

1:27 What is the “mystery”?

Lessons for 1:20–2:3:

III. Polemical: The Path to Christian Maturity (2:4–3:4) *THE BODY*

2:6-7 Main theme and purpose for this letter—that the Colossians might continue to mature in Christ in the same way they received Him. The way to maturity for believers is not in becoming Jews, but rather in understanding and appropriating the work of Christ to their personal and communal life.

2:8-15 They are already complete in Christ. Jesus is God in human flesh (2:8-10). In Him they have already been circumcised in Christ (2:11-12) and are already free from the law (2:13-15). Therefore, it is totally unnecessary for them to submit to Jewish traditions and regulations (2:16-23).

2:8 What is “philosophy”?

2:11-14

2:15

2:16-17 Separation from Legalism

2:18-19 Separation from Mysticism

2:20-23 Separation from Asceticism

3:1-4 Seeking Heavenly Things

“keep seeking”

“set your mind”

Lessons:

III. Practical: The Life of Christian Maturity (3:5–4:6) THE PRACTICE

This section of the letter brings out the practical implications of understanding and appropriating the person and work of Christ to one's life. It covers all the key areas of life: the inward life, the home life, and the community life. In the inward (personal) life the Colossians are to put off the old, immoral, evil life and put on the new life of righteousness and thankfulness in Christ (3:5-15).

A. In Personal Life (3:5-17)

3:6 “the wrath of God”

3:9-11 Explains Ephesians 4:20-24

3:14 “bond of unity” uniting bond of maturity

3:15

3:16

Lessons:

B. In home life (3:18–4:1)

1. Wives and husbands
2. Children and parents
3. Servants and masters

C. In community life (4:2-6)

Pray for open doors of ministry and make sure that their lives and lips reflect the beautiful mystery of God's wisdom.

V. Personal: The Personal Affairs of Paul and Greetings from His Companions (4:7-18)

The final section of the letter is very personal in nature. Paul begins by introducing the couriers of this letter and telling the Colossians that these men will bring them up-to-date on his situation (4:7-9).

4:9 The mention of Onesimus relates this letter closely with Paul's epistle to Philemon, who was a resident of Colossae.

4:10-17 Closes the letter with customary greetings both to and from his close friends and associates.

4:18 Benediction contains the identifying signature of the apostle (cf. 2 Thess. 3:17). The letter closes as it began in grateful prayer for the believers at Colossae.

Bibliography

- Gromacki, Robert. *Philippians & Colossians: Joy and Completeness in Christ*. Twenty-first Century Biblical Commentary Series, ed. Mal Couch and Ed Hindson. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989.
- Kent, Homer A. Jr. *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978.
- MacArthur, John. *Colossians & Philemon*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992.
- O'Brien, Peter T. *Colossians, Philemon*. WBC, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 44. Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1982.
- Pao, David W. *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012.
- Tidball, Derek J. *The Reality is Christ: The Message of Colossians for Today*. Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999.
- Wright, N. T. *Colossians and Philemon*. TNTC, gen. ed. Leon Morris. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.