

Text: Colossians 1:1-2

Title: Trouble in Colosse

Truth: Paul writes to combat some serious doctrinal error in the church.

Date/Location: Sunday June 21, 2015at FBC

Text

- 1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
- 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ in Colosse.

Author

The author of the book of Colossians claims to be Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ (1:1, 23; 4:18). This is textually unchallenged, but nonetheless his authorship has been questioned by some liberal scholars. They advance unconvincing arguments such as differences in vocabulary, the absence of some concepts found in unquestioned Pauline letters, and the seeming similarities with Ephesians.¹

In fact, the similarities of the Colossian letter to that of the Ephesians support Pauline authorship. Even more convincing are the similarities of Colossians and Philemon, outlined by Harris.² These include the imprisonment of the author which is mentioned in both letters; the writer's associates in both cases include Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas; Timothy is ascribed as a co-author in both cases, Archippus is mentioned in both letters; and Paul's letter to Philemon mentions the return of Onesimus to the letter's recipient. Furthermore, in light of the inerrancy of Scripture authorship is not an arguable point in this case: on the face of it, it claims to be authored by Paul, so we understand that it is.

Recipients and Location

Paul is not known personally to his audience, as indicated by the text of the letter (1:4, 8, 9; 2:1), though he hoped to see them soon (Phm 22). Paul was not directly involved in starting a church in Colossae or its surrounding cities. This work was apparently done by a "church planter" named Epaphras (1:7, 8). Epaphras may have been a student of Paul's during his two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). Even so, Paul saw a real connection between himself and the church (1:24).

¹ Moo, et al. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 331-334.

² Harris, Murray J. *Colossians and Philemon*.

The church at Colossae was composed mainly of Gentiles (1:27, 2:13). Little else is indicated about their social or economic background, but it is safe to assume they came out of a pagan background and may have to deal with baggage—some of which we can speculate was intertwined with the doctrinal errors that they were susceptible to.

The city of Colossae was located 100 miles east of Ephesus, about 10 miles south of Laodicea and 13 miles south of Herapolis in Asia Minor on the Lycus River. By the first century A.D., it was on the decline after having been a city of some importance several hundred years earlier. The decline was caused by the re-routing of a major road through Laodicea.

Date and Location of Writing

The date of the letter is mainly dependent on the location of its writing. Some scholars advance Caesarea and Ephesus as possibilities; however, Rome is most likely because of Paul's more strict confinement for the two years in Caesarea, and the fact that the Bible does not indicate any jail time for Paul in Ephesus. Rome provided both the jail time and the freedom (Acts 28:30-31) that would be required for Paul to author this letter along with the other prison epistles, Ephesians, Philemon, and Philippians.

Since Paul was in Rome in the early 60s, a date for the Colossian letter is most likely. The year 61 A.D. seems to be somewhat of a consensus.

Occasion

Paul is prompted to write the letter by a confluence of circumstances. **First**, Onesimus is to return to Philemon, so he is going back to Colossae, his former residence (4:9); this was a convenient time for Paul to send along another letter with him. **Second**, Paul had already written or planned to write to Ephesus and send the letter by Tychicus. **Third**, Epaphras recently returned from ministry in the Colossian region (1:7-8) and his report indicates some good progress has been made, but there are significant problems in the community with what some commentators have called the "Colossian heresy." He came to Paul probably for this very reason—to get some help for the church. But somehow he got involved in Paul's imprisonment (Phm 23).

A careful reading makes it clear that Paul was very concerned: "if indeed you continue...not moved away from the hope of the gospel" (1:23); lest anyone deceive you" (2:4); "beware" (2:8); "let no one judge you" (2:16); "let no one cheat you of your reward" (2:18); "why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations?" (2:20). We get the

feeling that the Colossians' attention is being captured by false doctrine because it has "an appearance of wisdom." Earthly things and the flesh are also attention-grabbers (3:1-2, 5). Paul is redirecting their attention to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Coupled with these factors is that Paul is under compulsion by God to preach the gospel because of the weight of the stewardship that he has been given as an apostle, having received the revelation of the church and the salvation of the Gentiles (1:25-27). He desires to labor so that he can present before God everyone under his direct or indirect ministry perfected in Christ (1:28-29). This motivation drives him to seize the opportunity to minister to the Colossians.

Commentators are divided as to the exact nature of the Colossian errors, but the errors are likely from several sources. Some seem to be from the local Gentile pagan culture. Historical records indicate some attachment of the city to Michael the angel.³ Besides angel worship, other pagan practices no doubt were common. Combs lists six ideas involved in the heresy.⁴ The text indicates several:

1. Worldly philosophy and traditions (2:8), including persuasive rhetoric to sway the Colossians from their position (2:4).
2. A denigration of the **person** of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is indicated throughout the letter as Paul lifts up the Lord to the high place that he deserves (1:16-19, 2:9, among other verses).
3. A reduction of the **work** of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul emphasizes that "you are complete in him" (2:10), that he has made the believers "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (1:22), among other similar statements. This seems to be a refutation of some kind of errant idea that took the Colossians' trust from Christ's finished work to other things that they could accomplish through asceticism or other means, probably having to do with their progressive sanctification (2:6).
4. Food observances (2:16).
5. Observances of holy days, moons, Sabbaths (2:16).
6. Angel worship (2:18).
7. False humility (2:18).
8. Other rules and regulations of a worldly sort; like the Jewish law (2:20-22).

³ ISBE, vol. 2, s.v. "Colossae."

⁴ William W. Combs, *Acts and Pauline Epistles*, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary Course Notes, 2002.

9. General ascetic practices—"neglect of the body" (2:23).
10. Secret knowledge (2:18).

In general, these errors have at least three main flavors: Gentile or Greek philosophy, forming an incipient Gnosticism;⁵ Jewish food and holy day observances and the emphasis on the law; and the mixture of Christian practices with these two.

Purpose

Paul's purpose has several facets. **First**, he exhorts the Colossian believers to hearken back to the gospel as they heard it preached initially, i.e. to avoid changing their stance with regard to the gospel brought to them by Epaphras. For example, 2:5 speaks of the gospel they heard "before" (cf. 1:23, 2:7). Even more notable, Paul nearly gives an explicit purpose statement to his letter when he says, "I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument" (2:4). He is trying to make sure they do not move from their original faith in Christ.

Second, he desires to refute the doctrinal error outlined above. This takes a lot of the text in the letter. One major way that he does this is to confirm their faith and assurance in the completeness of Christ's work, and exhorts them to grow in knowledge and in their Christian walk (1:9; 2:2; 4:12; 2:10). He refutes the error directly in several texts, by, among other things, emphasizing the deity and preeminence of Christ.

Third, Paul also desires to instruct them in proper Christian behavior, to ensure their walk does not look like the pagan one from which they were saved.

Other People

Several other people or groups of people are mentioned in the letter. These help place the letter in its historical context by tying the letter to Ephesians, Philemon, and the book of Acts. Timothy is mentioned in 1:1 as "our brother," similar to other Pauline letters. This strengthens the argument for Pauline authorship, as noted above.

Epaphras is a main character as shown in 1:7-8 and 4:12-13. He is said to be a minister, and apparently sent to do the work of evangelist. He returned with news of the church at Colossae (1:8). While with Paul, he agonized in prayer for the believers that they would grow and have a stable faith. Paul refers to Epaphras as a fellow prisoner in Phm 23, perhaps indicating

⁵ Full-blown Gnosticism did not appear until the second century.

that Epaphras was brought under similar accusations as Paul and held in Rome.

Tychicus is mentioned as Paul's messenger, fulfilling the same role he does for the Ephesian letter (Eph 6:21-22; see also Acts 20:4, Col. 4:7, 2 Tim. 4:12, Titus 3:12). He is accompanied by Onesimus, apparently to deliver the letters and to return Onesimus to his former master Philemon. By reading the letter to Philemon, we learn that it is likely that Philemon's wife was Apphia, that the Colossian church met in their home, and that Archippus was a fellow minister of the gospel.

Archippus is singled out as one who is to fulfill the ministry that the Lord has given him (4:17); he may be the Colossian pastor during the absence of Epaphras, or the pastor of a Laodicean house church. It is interesting that Paul wrote to all the Christians in Colosse, not just the pastor!

Aristarchus is also listed as a fellow prisoner (4:10). Paul names him along with Marcus and Jesus Justus as the only Jews who are Paul's helpers in his work (4:11).

Luke and Demas are mentioned in passing as well. The mention of the beloved physician is another reason that an Ephesian prison term is unlikely, there being no reference to Luke in the Acts narrative at this point (the pronoun "we" is not used there).

Nymphas and the church in his home is mentioned in 4:15. This small church is apparently located in Laodicea, maybe as one of several house churches in that region, or nearby.

Laodicea figures prominently in the letter (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). Apparently Epaphras not only evangelized in Colosse, but also in Laodicea and Hierapolis (witness his concern for believers in all three cities in 4:13). The latter city is only mentioned in the Bible in this verse.

Conclusion

The Colossian letter offers rich body of truth centered around Jesus Christ, for a church that is ailing in its doctrine and needs reinforcement of proper conduct. Besides these matters of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, the letter encourages orthopathy—right feelings about Christ as we combine thinking, practice, and feeling into proper worship of Christ.

MAP

Outline

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1. To Be Filled with the Proper Christian Knowledge	1:9
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2. In All Things.....	3:17
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⁶ Fleshing out I.C.1

⁷ Paul wants them to have a "true knowledge of God's mystery" (2:2)

⁸ 2:8 and 2:20 speak of the "elementary principles of the world."

⁹ Fleshing out I.C.2

6. In Conduct Toward Unbelievers	4:5
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3. Instructions to Exchange Letters with Laodiceans	4:16
4. Instructions to Archippus	4:17
5. Final Greetings to the Colossians	4:18

The following map is adapted from BibleWorks 9's map module.

