

Introduction to Colossians

During the first portion of Ordinary Time 2023, Church of the Savior will be reading the Letters of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon. We're reading the two together because both letters have common recipients and a common setting; and the fact that Paul's circumstances in each letter are similar suggest that the two were also written in the same time frame.

Colossians

The City of Colossae and Its Significance

Colossae was a city in the southern part of the Roman province of Asia, in the southwest of what is now Turkey, located in the valley of the River Lycus, and relatively close to both Laodicea and Hierapolis, both cities where we know there were populations of Christians in the New Testament era. Colossae is mentioned as an important city in the writings of the fifth century B.C. Greek author Herodotus and his fourth century counterpart Xenophon, both for the commercial significance of its trade in wool and for its location along the route taken by Asian armies coming to attack the Greeks.

In the New Testament era, Colossae's population consisted of Phrygians (the indigenous population), Greek settlers, and Jews whose ancestors had been resettled there from Mesopotamia in the early second century B.C. The city appears to have been a cosmopolitan one, but it was also in decline. This was largely owing to commercial competition afforded by the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, where we know from the letter to the Colossians itself there were already Christian communities.

We further know that Colossae was severely damaged, if not completely destroyed, by an earthquake in A.D. 60 or 61, which would have been not long after the community received Paul's letter. Our knowledge about Colossae is further limited by the circumstance that it has never been excavated by archaeologists. The comment by nineteenth century scholar J.B. Lightfoot likely remains true, that Colossae was the least important church to which Paul ever wrote.

The Church in Colossae

Unlike the churches of Corinth or Ephesus, the church in Colossae was not planted by Paul himself. Indeed, Paul most likely had never even visited there as of the time the letter was written. The planter appears to have been Epaphras, a native of Colossae whom Paul mentions in the warmest terms as "our beloved fellow-servant" and "a faithful minister in Christ" (1:7). It is probable that Epaphras was one of the participants in the two-year Bible study that Paul conducted in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, during which Luke says that all the residents of Asia (the region, not the continent) heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10).

Although there were Jews in Colossae, the members of the church there appear to have been predominantly converts out of paganism. Commentators draw this conclusion from the circumstances that the letter contains few allusions to the Old Testament, that the vices mentioned are distinctively those of Gentiles, and that little mention is made of reconciliation

between Jews and Gentiles, a predominant theme in other Pauline writings. Perhaps most compelling is the language the letter uses to describe God's redemption: given in terms of the transfer of outsiders to insiders, it is striking in highlighting the contrast between being lost in spiritual darkness on the one hand and being absolutely and totally incorporated into the eternal Kingdom of God on the other.

Why Was This Letter Written?

Paul warmly praises the congregation at Colossae for their obedience to the Gospel and their love for Jesus and for one another. Yet at the same time, their Gospel tranquility was evidently endangered by false teaching. We don't know exactly what it was that Paul was opposing, nor is it clear from the text of the letter whether Paul's concerns were with something that was being presented in the congregation or simply with the prevailing mindset in the wider community.

In any event, Epaphras came to the place of Paul's imprisonment, which he appears to have shared for a time (Philemon 23), most likely to receive the apostle's counsel on how to address the concerns that are the subject of this letter. The subsequent imprisonment of Epaphras appears to have forced Paul to send his response by the hands of Tychicus (4:7) instead.

The key word that describes Paul's concern is "philosophy." (2:8) Evidently there were those, either in Colossae at large, or in the Church there, who were teaching that human traditions bore some kind of significance to relationship with God.

Most scholars seem to believe that the traditions being taught were significantly influenced by either Judaism or ideas that orthodox Judaism would consider to be heretical. Concepts that we will encounter as we study the letter will include the veneration and appeasement of angels, the importance of certain calendar events, sabbath regulations, food restrictions and asceticism, and an insistence on wisdom and knowledge. Some have attributed those qualities to supposed influence of the Essene communities that flourished at Qumran in the time of Christ – but on the whole, there are too many differences between Essenism and the practices seemingly indicated in Colossians to establish any certain Essene influence.

Other writers see the influence of an early form of pagan Gnosticism – a mindset that would become more prevalent in the second century. The adherents of Gnosticism were taught to reject the physical body and its practices as evil. Others see a mixture of Gnostic practices with Jewish heresies – something that could perhaps happen more readily in Colossae where "the freethinking Judaism of the dispersion and the speculative ideas of Greek religion" could come into close contact (Martin, 1991, 96); but many of the practices asserted as significant were either later to develop, or are not documented as actually present in the Colossian church. Still others assert that what is at issue here is an attempt at syncretism, melding together aspects of the Christian teaching with certain Jewish practices (whether heretical to orthodox Judaism or otherwise).

We cannot conclusively know what exactly it was that prompted Paul's response. At certain points he seems to be quoting slogans or watchwords of his opponents, but there is no clear single statement of their beliefs. We must assume that Paul's first readers could and did know

what was being said; and it is evident that Paul is deeply concerned that the proponents of this teaching might succeed in leading Christians away from the truth.

In opposition to what he presents as merely human tradition, Paul presents instead the Gospel tradition of the glorified, cosmic Christ, which he here develops more fully than in perhaps any other of his letters. The magnificent description of the person and work of Christ that takes up much of chapter 1 lays the foundation for the contrast with the teaching that Paul opposes. At the same time, however, Paul's defense of the faith against the human-derived philosophies, whatever they may have been, also served as an apologetic statement of that faith to the unbelieving intellectual world of his day.

In particular, Paul is concerned to uphold the supremacy and magnificence of Christ against the stance of the false teachers, which would reduce Jesus to only one of a number of intermediaries between God and humanity, to maintain Christian liberty against the demands and rules of the false teachers attempting to gain favor with those intermediaries, and to expose the arrogant exclusivity of the "teachers" who were articulating these speculative but oppressive standards primarily to promote themselves.

Authorship and Date

Both in the early church and for most of subsequent history, Colossians has been assumed to be a genuine letter from the Apostle Paul. In the nineteenth century some scholars applying the tools of Enlightenment critical studies to the Bible began to challenge Pauline authorship.

The critics' principal assertions were (1) no other New Testament writing describes the particular imprisonment of Paul referred to in Colossians; (2) Colossians is dependent on Ephesians and is thus a redaction of that letter by another author; (3) the heresy at issue in Colossians is full-blown second century Gnosticism; hence the letter could not have been written by Paul a century earlier; and (4) the language of Colossians contains too many thoughts and expressions not typical of letters known to be by Paul.

(1) There are several places in the New Testament where Paul refers casually to multiple **imprisonments** concerning which we don't have further details (*e.g.*, 2 Corinthians 11:23 and possibly 2 Corinthians 1:8). That we lack details concerning most of those is meaningless: arguments from silence are notoriously suspect. Moreover, although we cannot do so with complete certainty, it is possible to associate the writing of Colossians (and of Philemon as well) with the early part of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, described in Acts 28.

(2) **The relationship between Colossians and Ephesians** can be disposed of quickly. There are numerous similarities between these two letters; but scholars have never been able to establish any definitive description of the relationship. Some argue that Colossians was based on Ephesians, some the reverse, others that the two letters were written at the same time and are mutually interdependent, and still others that there is no direct dependence at all.

(3) Similarly there are features vital to **second century Gnosticism** that one would expect to see addressed in any Christian writing opposing that system, and that were in fact addressed in the output of the major Christian writers of that century, that are simply not mentioned at all in Colossians.

(4) The **form and expressions** in Colossians bear considerable similarity overall to writings undisputedly by Paul. At the same time, there are some significant differences, with thirty-four Greek words appearing only in Colossians and twenty-eight words that appear elsewhere in the New Testament but not in other undisputed Pauline writings. But many of these supposedly unique words appear in passages in which the writer is evidently citing Christian hymns or writings by other authors. Moreover, vocabulary and form always evidence some difference from one New Testament writing to another; local distinctions or the particularities of subject matter being discussed can account for much of this.

Other critics assert differences in the theology, ecclesiology and eschatology of Colossians from other Pauline letters. It is said that here the doctrine of Christ is more fully developed than in other letters by Paul. While this may be the case, the most such a statement could support would be a relatively later date for the epistle, when Paul had had an opportunity to reflect more on the identity and nature of Christ.

The ecclesiology (theology of the Church) is likewise said to be more universally than locally focused and therefore more consistent with a view that would have developed more fully only by the second century. Colossians nonetheless contains ample instances where it is clear the church being referred to is the local assembly, as is the case in Paul's other writings.

The writer is also described as holding to what is called a fully-realized eschatology – that is, an understanding that the fullness of existence in Christ is entirely realized now in this present life. Colossians makes no reference to the return of Christ, the coming judgment, or the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, believers are said not only to have been buried with Christ in baptism but to be already raised with him. As will be developed in the exegesis, the particular ideas being combated give the writer ample reasons to emphasize the present realities of fullness of life in Christ in confuting them.

Lastly, a number of the evident differences in the language and style of Colossians may be attributable to the writer's practice of citing and quoting hymns and poems originally written by others, or quoting his opponents. The two most significant illustrations of the former are the hymn to Jesus in 1:15-20 and perhaps also the passage from 2:10-15. Numerous of the technical terms unique in NT vocabulary to this letter may reflect Paul's quotations from the works of his opponents.

O'Brien (1982, xlix) best summarizes the historic and orthodox Christian assessment of the authorship of Colossians: "Differences of emphasis there are [from other Pauline writings], but these are best interpreted as being called forth by the circumstances at Colossae."

Determination of the date of Colossians is dependent on where Paul was imprisoned when the letter was written. From Scripture itself we know that Paul was imprisoned multiple times. Two most likely options have been proposed as the place where Paul wrote Colossians:

(1) Rome: This would have been during the imprisonment mentioned in Acts 28. Support for a Roman imprisonment comes from these features: Certain early NT manuscripts add a postscript to Colossians indicating it was written in Rome. The relative freedom accorded Paul in the Acts 28 imprisonment is consistent with his being able to write letters and to remain connected with the co-workers and friends mentioned in chapter 4. No other imprisonment in Acts really fits the details. The primary arguments against a Roman imprisonment are the 1,200-mile distance between Rome and Colossae, and the relative difficulties in communication and travel between the two places.

(2) Some writers follow the second century heretic Marcion in attributing Colossians to an imprisonment in Ephesus. No Biblical text specifically mentions such an imprisonment, but that does not make such an occurrence impossible. The chief feature supportive of an Ephesian imprisonment would be the same that is raised against an imprisonment in Rome – that Ephesus, only 100 miles distant from Colossae, was a more likely place for the kind of communication and travel referred to in the letter, as well as in Philemon, to take place.

Against an Ephesian captivity, Paul's ministry in Ephesus is described in the third person in Acts, an indication that Luke, the author was not with him at that time. By contrast, Acts 28, in which Paul's first Roman imprisonment is related, is written in the first person plural – clearly implying that Luke was with Paul during his Roman imprisonment (see especially Acts 28:16); and Colossians 4:14 indicates that Luke is present with Paul as the letter is being written.

The historic church has always affirmed Rome as the sending point for Colossians. On balance the evidence in favor of a Roman imprisonment may be slightly more favorable. Assuming the letter was sent from Rome it would most likely have been written early during Paul's imprisonment there, about A.D. 60-61, before the earthquake in Colossae, which is neither mentioned nor alluded to in the text.

Introduction to Philemon

Philemon is one of four letters by Paul addressed to an individual (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are the other three). Of the four, it is the shortest, and it also is the most closely related to a typical personal and private communication of the time. In style and form it is comparable to both letters of mediation and letters of recommendation from the ancient world.

Who Was Philemon?

Paul describes Philemon as his "beloved fellow-worker" (v. 1). From the context, we can also infer that Philemon was wealthy, owner of a house large enough to accommodate a church meeting and featuring at least one guest room; that he had perhaps made his wealth through business success, and that he had met Paul and been converted somewhere on one of his business travels (again, Paul had never been in Colossae).

The introduction also addresses Apphia, presumably Philemon's wife, and Archippus, who is also named as a colleague of Paul in Colossians. Onesimus, the escaped slave of Philemon and the subject of the letter, is also named in Colossians, and from these circumstances, we assume

that Philemon, too, lived in Colossae and was a member of its church. Some scholars have suggested that Philemon exercised an oversight role over churches in the general region around Colossae, but the letter does not really contain any evidence supporting the proposition.

Why Was This Letter Written?

The presenting issue for this letter concerns the slave Onesimus. Evidently he had at some point fled from the home of Philemon, perhaps having first stolen some money. (Paul's statement "if he has wronged you or owes you anything" could be taken to suggest outright theft, or simply to recognize that by fleeing Onesimus had deprived Philemon of the value of the work that he should have done.)

Like many escaped slaves in that era, Onesimus may have come to a big city – Rome, if the assumption that Colossians was written from there is correct – in hopes of blending undetected into the large urban population. Somehow he met Paul – perhaps he had heard of him in Philemon's home and sought Paul out because he was in trouble. Dunn (1996, 304-05) raises the intriguing possibility that Onesimus was not fleeing from Philemon, but had sought Paul out knowing of his master's confidential relationship as Paul's Christian disciple, in an effort to get Paul to intercede for Onesimus in regard to some matter in which Onesimus had wronged Philemon.

In any event, Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ. But as a new believer, Onesimus needed to address the breach in his relationship with Philemon, and Paul persuaded him that he needed to return to his master. Yet in this letter Paul makes a tactful and sensitively-crafted appeal to Philemon not only to accept Onesimus back, but perhaps even to manumit him and give him his total freedom (the construct was not at all unknown in the ancient world).

Yet the appeal is just that. Although Paul is an apostle, and is clearly writing as an apostle, with the authority to command Philemon to take action, he will not do so. He is confident that Philemon will listen to God for himself, and do what the Holy Spirit tells him. At the same time, Paul writes that perhaps God will lead Philemon to do "even more than I say." (v. 21) Most scholars believe that these words represent a veiled request by Paul that Onesimus be allowed to return to him to help him in the work for which he has already proven useful to Paul, and on account of which he has endeared himself to Paul.

Efforts to interpret Philemon as an anti-slavery treatise are overstated: Paul at most hints, and certainly doesn't demand, that Philemon should free Onesimus; and it is evident that he is addressing individual circumstances and not articulating a general rule. Nonetheless as Pauline scholar F.F. Bruce points out, the letter nonetheless "bring[s] us into an atmosphere in which the institution could only wilt and die." (quoted in O'Brien, 1982, 270) Perhaps even more to the point, the letter to Philemon offers us telling insight "into the way in which influence was brought to bear within the earliest churches between parties of differing social status," (Dunn, 1996, 299), with ongoing pertinence for the twenty-first century Church as well. As Christian brothers, Philemon and Onesimus share a bond that ultimately transcends any broken human relationship or institution.

Authorship and Date

Paul's authorship of this letter has been questioned only by the most speculative New Testament scholars of the "Enlightenment" era. Because of the many persons named in both letters, it is virtually certain that Philemon is written in the same time frame, in relatively close proximity to Colossians. As discussed above, the most likely place for the writing of Colossians, and therefore of Philemon as well, was Rome, early in Paul's first imprisonment there, perhaps in A.D. 60-61.

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