

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

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I. THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

A. The City of Colossae

1. Colossae was situated in Phrygia on the southern bank of the Lycus River (See Map on page 11).
2. Because the Lycus Valley was particularly fertile, the region produced large crops of figs and olives.
3. However, the city was better known for its wool. The wool was dyed dark red and was simply known throughout the region as “Colossian” wool.
4. Unfortunately, by the time Paul wrote his letter to the church at Colossae, the city had rapidly declined and lost its significance as a major Roman province. While Colossae was in decline, both Laodicea (10 miles to the west) and Hierapolis (12 miles to the northwest) were experiencing population growth and expansion. Laodicea became the judicial seat for the Roman Empire and Hierapolis was growing because of its well known healing springs.
5. However, all three cities were devastated by a series of earthquakes in A.D. 60-61. Laodicea and Hierapolis were rebuilt without the help of Rome, but Colossae was never rebuilt. Although the cities continued well into the Christian era, they never regained their prominence. The present-day site of Colossae is uninhabitable and was discovered by archeologists in 1835.
6. When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colossae, the city had all but lost its economical and social status in the province.



B. The People of Colossae, Laodicea & Hierapolis

1. The cities of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis belonged to the proconsul province of Asia.
2. The three cities were inhabited by native Phrygians and Greek colonist who moved into the area to trade.
3. According to Josephus, an ancient historian, Antiochus III brought 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia to settle in Lydia and Phrygia. However, some scholars believe that by the time Paul wrote Colossians, the Jewish population had increased to around 50,000. Grave inscriptions found at nearby Hierapolis seem to support this claim.
4. It is clear the cities were culturally and religiously diverse. This diversity made the work of spreading the gospel extremely difficult for the Colossian Church. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, the gospel spread throughout the district.



II. AUTHORSHIP, DATE AND LOCATION OF WRITING

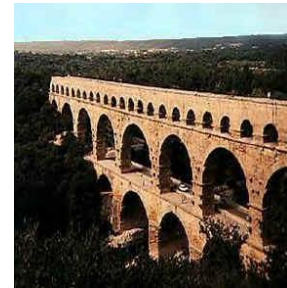
A. Authorship: The Apostle Paul

1. Scholars who are critical of Pauline authorship are very few in number. However, those who reject Paul as the author do so around three major arguments.
 - a. Language and Style – Pauline words such as “sin” (singular), “righteousness,” “believe” and “justify” do not appear in Colossians. Furthermore, thirty four words found in Colossians are found nowhere else in the New Testament. The words used only once argument is known by scholars know as “*Hapax Logomena*” (Translation: words use only once).
 - b. Theology – The first major challenge to Pauline authority came in 1838 from E.T. Mayerhoff. He argued that the theology found in Colossians

differs from the normal theological concepts found in Paul's other writings. Absent from the letter are the common Pauline themes such as Law, Salvation, Justification and Righteousness.

- c. Christology – According to this argument, Paul presents a cosmological Christ which is absent from his other writings. For example we read, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17).
- d. The above objections are not the only arguments against Pauline authorship. I have simply tried to point out the basic points of opposition.

2. However, the vast majority of theologians believe that Paul is the author of Colossians. The above arguments can easily be countered. First, the lack of familiar words (e.g. sin, righteousness, justify, ect.) or the use of words only once in the New Testament is not a strong argument against the authorship of Paul. For example the letter to Philemon, written by the Apostle Paul, omits all the common themes listed above. Second, each letter of the New Testament is written to a different audience and situation. Again, the lack of theological terms is not sufficient evidence for rejecting Pauline authorship. Third, the cosmological Christ is not foreign in Paul's thought (1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:4 and Phil. 2:6-11).



3. Furthermore, there are numerous arguments in support of Pauline authorship.
 - a. Scriptural Support – Paul identifies himself in Colossians 1:1, 1:23, and 4:18 as the author.
 - b. Ancient Church Fathers – Eusebuis, Origen, Clement of Alexandria,

Tertullian and Irenaeus all acknowledged Paul as the author of the epistle.

- c. Philemon – The connection with Philemon is often overlooked. However, the names of fellow workers are the similar in both books – Paul, Timothy, Onesimus, Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. This argues for a single author of both epistles (Col. 4:7-17, Philm. 1:1, 1:23-25).
- d. Conclusion: Based on the above arguments, I believe the Apostle Paul is the author Colossians.

B. Location and Date of Writing: There are three basic views concerning the location and date of writing.

1. Written from Caesarea (AD 57-59) – The Caesarean theory is improbable for two reasons.
 - a. Onesimus, the runaway slave, would not have fled to Caesarea to escape detection and would not have had access to Paul.
 - b. Paul clearly expects to be released in the near future since he asks Philemon to prepare lodging for him (Philm.22). A situation not compatible with his Caesarean imprisonment where Paul's only hope of release was an appeal to Caesar (Acts 26:32).
2. Written from Ephesus (AD 52-57) – The claim that Paul wrote Colossians from Ephesus has more supporting evidence.
 - a. Ephesus and Colossae were no more than 100 miles apart from each other. This would have made movements described in the letter much more possible.
 - b. Paul's request that a room be prepared for him makes sense because he was only 100 miles away (Philemon 1:22).
 - c. The major problem with the Ephesians theory is that the Book of Acts does not record Paul ever being in prison Ephesus.

3. Written from Rome (AD 60-62) – The Roman theory is the most plausible place of writing for several reasons.
 - a. Paul wrote the letter from prison and Aristarchus was with him (Col. 4:10).
 - b. Paul was under house arrest, but enjoyed a great deal of freedom and was able to entertain numerous visitors (Acts 28:23-31).
 - c. It is more likely that Onesimus, the runaway slave, would have fled to a large city like Rome to escape detection.
 - d. No other imprisonment recorded in Acts seems a real alternative. Paul was in jail at Philippi (Acts 16:23-40) for only one night. Although Paul was held for two years in Caesura, he made an appeal to Caesar and was sent to Rome (Acts 26:32-27:1).



III. THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

A. The Founding of the Church at Colossae

1. The church at Colossae was established during Paul's Ephesian ministry which is recorded in Acts 19.
2. However, the Apostle Paul didn't establish the church because he never visited Colossae.
3. The vast majority of theologians believe that the church was founded on the ministry efforts of Epaphras. I hold to this position based on the scriptural references to Epaphras found in Colossians. Paul writes, "You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful ministry of Christ on *our behalf* and who also told us of your love in the Spirit" (Col. 1:7-8).
4. Two things are obvious in this verse. First, Paul sent Epaphras to Colossians to establish the spiritual foundations for the church. Second, Paul received follow up reports from Epaphras on the spiritual growth of the congregation.



5. Epaphras had an emotional connection to the church at Colossae. Paul says, “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends his greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.” (Col. 4:12-13) We need to make three brief observations at this point. (1) Who better to do the work of ministry than one of their own people? (2) Epaphras had close ties to the church which is revealed in his fervent prayer life for them. (3) Epaphras’ ministry extended beyond Colossae to include both Laodicea and Hierapolis. This overwhelming evidence points to Epaphras and not Paul as the founder of the church.

B. The Heresy at Colossae

1. Ever since J.B. Lightfoot wrote his commentary on Colossians in 1875, the exact nature of “Colossian Heresy” has been fiercely debated. J.J. Gunther, in his commentary, identifies forty-four different views of the Colossian heresy. These numerous views reveal the complexity in trying to understand the exact nature of the Colossian heresy.
2. Was there a “Colossian Heresy” at all? While a small number of theologians denies the existence of heretical teaching in the Colossian church, the Holy Scriptures point to a different conclusion. I will attempt to reveal some of the leading characteristics/components of the heretical teachings which threatened the believers at Colossae.
 - a. Philosophical Element – Paul warned the congregation, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human traditions and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8). Four points of observation here.
 - (1) Paul uses the articular noun “philosophy” which occurs nowhere



**Ancient remains
in Colossae**

else in the New Testament. This reveals a specific philosophy which was common in Greek thought. (2) This philosophy had no substance because it was “hollow and deceptive.” (3) It was rooted in the oral “traditions” of men which sought to arrive at truth. (4) It was based on the “basic principles of this world.” The term “basic principles” (stoichea/στοιχεῖον) originally referred to the basic elements of the world: earth, fire, wind and water. Later it referred to the alphabet from which our words were formed.

- b. Gnostic Element – Paul declared, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (2:9). That Paul is pointing to Gnostic teaching is a high probability. Gnosticism taught that all matter was evil. Therefore, it would be impossible for God, who knows no evil, to inhabit a human body which is composed of matter. The logical conclusion to this is Christ could not have been God in the flesh. Gnosticism believed salvation was gained only through special knowledge.
- c. Jewish Element – The heretical teaching had focused on four aspects of the Jewish faith. (1) The Rite of Circumcision. Paul wrote, “In him you



were circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ” (Col. 2:11). (2) The Jewish law. Paul asserts that, “He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us” (Col. 2:13b-14). (3) The Dietary Regulations of the Law. Paul commands, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink” (Col. 2:16a). (4) Jewish Festivals. Paul continues, “Or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” (Col. 2:16b).

- d. Pagan Element – Paul cautions the believers to “not let anyone who

delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize” (Col. 2:18). The Greeks worshipped numerous gods. Isis, Serapis, Helios, Demeter and Artemis were all worshipped in Colossae during the Roman era. This has much in common with modern day Catholicism. (The elevation of Mary to co-redeemer status and the worship of so called “saints” is the modern equivalent of ancient pagan worship.)

3. This brief sketch reveals the major tenants of the false teaching at Colossae. The teaching exposes the religious diversity of the community in which these Christians lived.

IV. THE OCCASION AND PURPOSES FOR WRITING

A. The Occasion for Writing

1. Epaphras has told Paul of a serious heresy disturbing the church in Colossae.
2. In light of Epaphras’ report, Paul felt compelled to write a letter explaining the supremacy of Christ and to encourage the believers to stand firm in their faith.

B. The Purposes for Writing

1. To express his prayerful interest in the spiritual development of the Colossian believers (1:1-12).
2. To set forth the sovereign headship of Christ over creation and the Church (1:13-29).
3. To warn them against the moral and doctrinal errors of the heresy (2:1-23).
4. To urge them to live a life of holiness (3:1-4:6).
5. To explain the mission of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9).
6. To send greetings from all his associates (4:10-15).
7. To command the exchange of correspondence with the Laodicea church (4:16-18).

AN OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION (1:1-14)

- A. The Greeting (1:1-2)
- B. A prayer of thanksgiving (1:3-14)
 - 1. Paul's thanksgiving is directed toward God (1:3)
 - 2. The basis of the thanksgiving (1:4-8)
 - a. The spiritual condition of the Colossians (1:4-5a)
 - b. The progress of the gospel (1:5b-6)
 - c. The ministry of Epaphras (1:7-8)
 - 3. A prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14)
 - a. The request of the prayer (1:9)
 - b. The purpose of the prayer (1:10-14)

I. THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST (1:15-23)

- A. The scope of His supremacy (1:15-18)
 - 1. He is Lord over creation (1:15-17)
 - 2. He is Lord over the church (1:18)
- B. The basis of His supremacy (1:19-23)
 - 1. The fullness of God dwells in Christ (1:19)
 - 2. The reconciling work of Christ (1:20-23)

II. THE MINISTRY OF PAUL (1:24-2:7)

- A. A ministry of suffering (1:24)
- B. A ministry of preaching (1:25-29)
- C. A ministry of intercession (2:1-5)
- D. A ministry of exhortation (2:6-7)

III. THE DANGER OF HERESY (2:8-23)

- A. A warning against false philosophy (2:8-15)
- B. A warning against legalism (2:9-15)
- C. A warning against worship of angels (2:16-17)
- D. A warning against asceticism (2:20-23)

IV. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (3:1-4:6)

- A. The root principal of Christ living [union with Christ] (3:1-4)
- B. The principal applied (3:5-17)
 - 1. The sins of the old life (3:5-11)
 - 2. The virtues of the new life (3:12-17)
- C. Family relationships (3:18-4:1)
- D. Spiritual disciplines (4:2-6)
 - 1. Prayer (4:2-4)
 - 2. Witnessing (4:5-6)
- E. Final Greetings (4:7-18)

ASIA MINOR AT THE TIME OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

