

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "To The Saints and Faithful Brethren"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/7/09

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Chapter Theme: Christ is the Way – His Preeminence Declared

Outline Main Point: 1 — Christ is Preeminent in the Gospel

Outline Sub-point: B – True believers have grace and peace because of Christ

Message Text: Colossians 1:1-2

Today, the Lord willing, we'll finish our consideration of Colossians chapter 1, verses 1 and 2. As we begin today let me read them again for you:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to begin today by considering this question: What was Paul's relationship with the believers at Colosse? In answering that question, we need to consider several facts that we find in the pages of Scripture.

Some commentators say that Paul never visited Colosse before he wrote this letter. They point to Colossians chapter 2 verse 1, where Paul says this: "For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." On the surface, and by itself, this verse would seem to be saying that Paul had never visited Colosse.

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However, we do know that Paul had met some individual members of the Colossian church. He had met Philemon, as we find in Paul's short letter to Philemon himself. In fact it appears from Philemon verse 19 that Philemon himself came to faith in Christ under Paul's own ministry. Paul had also met Epaphras, who was a fellow laborer with Paul in the Gospel ministry. We're going to look more at Epaphras when we get to verse 7 of Colossians chapter 1.

But we also find in Acts chapter 16 and verse 6 that during an earlier part of his ministry, Paul had gone throughout the region of Phrygia, preaching the Gospel. Now you may remember from our last message that Phrygia was the region where the town of Colosse was located. If Paul went throughout Phrygia, it's hard to imagine that Colosse would not have been among the places where he preached.

But it's likely that the Gospel message may not have born most of its fruit until after Paul had moved on, and that would explain why he had never met most of the members of the Colossian church face to face.

But even though Paul doesn't know the vast majority of the members of the Colossian church personally, he writes to them personally, and with authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Christ Himself, Christ who is declared in the Gospel, is the link or the bond between Paul and the people of the church at Colosse. Christ is preeminent in their

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relationship because their relationship is rooted in the Gospel, and Christ is preeminent in the Gospel.

And you know, I think of that as I speak to you on this broadcast today. I have never met or had direct contact with the vast majority of you folks who are in the listening audience today. Many of you live in cities and towns that I have never visited. But if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ today, we share a bond and a fellowship in the Gospel that is stronger and more durable than any earthly family relationship. It is my privilege to have you as my brothers and sisters in Christ, and it is my deep privilege to minister the Word of God to you on these broadcasts.

Well, we've covered Paul's relationship with the church at Colosse, and that brings us to our second question today, which has to do with Timothy. Who was Timothy, and what was his role?

We first read about Timothy at the beginning of Acts chapter 16. We find there that in the course of his evangelistic ministry, Paul came to the cities of Derbe and Lystra. And there Paul found Timothy, who was already a believer. And we learn from 2nd Timothy chapter 3 that Timothy had come to faith in Christ through the witness of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. And we also learn from Acts chapter 16 that Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. And so Paul wanted to have Timothy join him in the ministry. Paul became Timothy's mentor in the ministry.

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And so Paul took Timothy with him, and they ministered together throughout the cities of that region. And through their joint ministry the churches were strengthened in the faith, and the number of believers increased daily. And as I mentioned a few moments ago, we read in Acts chapter 16 and verse 6 that Paul and Timothy ministered throughout the region of Phrygia, which is where Colosse was located.

So the letter to the Colossians is addressed to the church there, from "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." Paul is the apostle of Jesus Christ. He is the man who speaks by direct revelation of Jesus Christ, as we saw last time. But Timothy is a partner with Paul in the ministry. And I tend to think that because Timothy is mentioned by name here at the very beginning of the epistle, Timothy himself may have participated in the inspired writing of the book of Colossians.

So, we've learned about Paul and we've learned about Timothy, and about their relationship to the Colossian church. That brings us to our next question: How did the Colossian church come into existence? And once again, we turn to Scripture to find the answer.

Remember that we said that Colosse was located in a region of the Roman Empire that was called Phrygia. And we find that on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit came upon the 120 believers and they preached the

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Gospel in various tongues, that some of the people who heard the Gospel message in their own language on that day were Jews from Phrygia. We read this in Acts chapter 2 and verse 10. And when Peter stood up and preached the Gospel that day, about 3,000 people received Christ. We don't know it for certain, but it's quite possible that some of those early Christian converts were from Phrygia, and perhaps even from Colosse itself, and they would have gone back there after Pentecost.

But then as we move on in the historical record of the early church in the book of Acts we find, as I mentioned a few moments ago, that in Acts chapter 16 Paul takes Timothy with him, and they go throughout the region of Phrygia, preaching the Gospel.

We also find in the book of Acts chapter 19 that during his third missionary journey, Paul spent about three years in the city of Ephesus. This was in A.D. 52, about 10 years before the letter to the Colossians was written. And Timothy was with Paul at Ephesus. Now Ephesus was a major city about 125 miles west of Colosse. We don't have a direct record of this in the Scriptures, but it seems quite possible that Paul may have sent out missionaries from Ephesus during his time there, and one or more of those men may have been the instruments that God used to develop and grow the church at Colosse.

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But by whatever combination of means the Holy Spirit may have used, by the time Paul writes his letter in about 60 A.D., there is a body of believers in the town of Colosse.

At this point I'd like to introduce something else that becomes really important as we move along in the book of Colossians, and it's something that we need to understand here at the very beginning. The Colossian believers were facing some really serious challenges to their faith in Christ and their unity as a church.

To better understand the reasons why Paul wrote this letter, we need to understand three things about the environment in Colosse – three particular challenges that this church was facing.

First of all, Colosse was located in a region where the people practiced a particularly fanatical form of paganism. They worshipped a goddess called Cybele, also known as the "earth-mother" or simply "mother earth." Cybele was also known as "the mother of the gods, the one who hears our prayers." In Greek paganism, Cybele had a son named Attis, who, the pagans claimed, died and was resurrected from the dead by his mother. There is considerable evidence, by the way, that the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary as the mother of God, and the practice of praying to Mary that developed in Roman Catholicism's perversion of Biblical Christianity, and the Roman Catholic view of Mary as a co-redemptrix with Christ, are in fact transferrals of elements of the pagan worship of Cybele into the church.

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And Cybele is, by the way, the same pagan deity that many radical environmentalists in our time refer to as Gaia, or “mother earth.” The worship of Cybele in New Testament times centered on rituals that involved the worst kinds of sexual promiscuity and perversion, and especially the feminization of men. And so this fanatical pagan influence was prevalent in the region where Colosse was situated. And the worship of Cybele as the “earth mother” was diametrically opposed to the worship of Jesus Christ as the creator and sustainer of the universe. And Paul will deal with that here in his letter to the Colossians.

Secondly, in the region where Galatia and Colosse were located, there were Jewish legalizers who professed to believe in Jesus Christ, but they said that you had to add the keeping of the Jewish law to the Gospel in order to be saved. Paul deals with this in much more detail in the book of Galatians, but he also deals with it here in Colossians. These people were saying that you had to keep the Jewish feasts, and you had to keep the Jewish dietary regulations, and you had to be circumcised if you were a male, in order to be saved. And Paul will answer these Jewish legalizers here in Colossians in the strongest terms. He will condemn what they are teaching as heresy. He will tell the Colossians to beware of being cheated out of the riches that are theirs by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

Thirdly, there were the influences of various kinds of worldly philosophies in this part of the Roman world. And we’re going to talk about some of them in more detail as we move into chapter two. The problem was that some of these philosophies

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were very attractive. The people who promoted them were well-spoken and clever in their words. Today we have the same kinds of problems in the church. The church embraces elements of the wisdom of this world, instead of remaining loyal to Christ and His Word. And Paul will address this with the Colossian believers. In Christ you have "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," he says in chapter 2 and verse 3. Why do you want to go after something less – something that is really nothing? Beware, he says, lest anyone cheat you out of the genuine truth, the real thing, which is what you have in the preeminent Christ.

So these are some of the major influences that were threatening to draw some of the members of the Colossian church away from Christ – paganism that embodied an early form of what we call today radical environmentalism, accompanied by the feminization of men; legalism as a subversion of the one true Gospel; and man-made philosophies that were opposed to Christ. We have these same kinds of influences in the church today. Who says the Bible is not an up-to-date book? And that is one of the reasons our study of the book of Colossians is so important. We need to be equipped to deal with these anti-Christian influences in our world and in the church today.

And so Paul addresses his epistle, in verse 2, "to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colosse." Now some commentators have tried to say that these are two different classes of people – that there were the saints (the full membership of the church), and that there were the "faithful brethren" (a sub-set of people within

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the full membership of the church, who were remaining faithful to the things they had been taught). But as we look carefully at the text, and as we consider this passage in the broader context of the whole book of Colossians and the rest of the Word of God, I believe we have to reject this kind of approach.

The words "faithful brethren" here in verse 2 would be more accurately translated "believing brethren." And this is reinforced by the fact that he attaches the words "in Christ" – and also by the fact that in the very next verses, it is their belief in Christ for which Paul expresses thanksgiving. It is the saints who are the believing brethren, and the believing brethren who are the saints – the holy ones, those who have been justified by faith in Christ and set apart as His own. No other person can make that claim, and Scripture never makes that claim for any other person.

There is no Christian brotherhood apart from faith in Christ. Our fellowship cannot be based on a church building. Our fellowship is not based on geography, the neighborhood or community where we live. Our fellowship is not based on other shared interests. It is not even based on church membership. This is not to put down the idea of membership in the local, visible church. But the membership that really matters at the Last Day is membership not in the visible church, but in the invisible church – the true body of Christ, those who are in Christ, those who are "saints and faithful brethren" – that is, true believers.

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And it is for that reason that Paul finishes his greeting to the Colossian believers with the words, "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is the way in which true salvation comes about – the unmerited favor of God. And peace is the result. Paul writes in Romans 5:1, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace *with* God." The warfare is over. The conflict is done. We have been reconciled to God, declared "not guilty" before Him. And therefore, Paul says in Colossians chapter 3 verse 15, "let the peace *of* God rule in your hearts." Let it control you. Because you are saved, let the peace of God have control of your heart.

Today, perhaps there is someone within the sound of my voice who has never received grace and peace from God. You have never admitted to God that you are a sinner who cannot save yourself from eternal damnation. You have never been reconciled to God by receiving the free and gracious gift of salvation through that God has made available as the only way to heaven, through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If God is speaking to you through this message today, and you understand that you need to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin, and walk in newness of life in Him, I encourage you to stop where you are right now, and call upon the Lord and ask Him to save you. And if you are taking that step today, we would love to hear from you, and we would be happy to provide you with free resources that will help you grow in your new-found faith.

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I want to mention one other thing before I close today. If you are following along in your Bible, you may find that the translation you are using is missing the last 5 words of Colossians chapter 1 verse 2: "Grace and peace...from God the Father *and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The last phrase – "and the Lord Jesus Christ" – is not in some Greek manuscripts, and it is not in some Bibles such as the New American Standard, the NIV, and the English Standard Version that are based on those manuscripts.

But this phrase does appear in the most reliable of the Greek manuscripts, which is called the Received Text. And that is the Greek text that is used in the King James Version and the New King James Version. One thing that is very disturbing about the Greek text that is used as the basis for many other Bible translations today, is to notice how many times those translations omit references to the Lord Jesus Christ, and in many subtle and even not-so-subtle ways they diminish the deity and authority of Christ. That isn't the only problem with them, but it's a major one.

For that reason, I encourage you to use a Bible such as the King James or the New King James. Those translations have a New Testament that is based on the most reliable Greek text. Nothing is left out. Christ is not diminished. These translations truly recognize and proclaim the message that we find here in the book of Colossians – and that is the preeminence of Christ, "Christ above all."