

An Introduction to Colossians

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An introduction to the book of Colossians
2. aim – To cause us to understand the context of this letter and its importance to us today
3. passage – Colossians 2:6-7; 3:1-2

b. outline

1. The Background of Colossians
2. The Purpose of Colossians
3. The Value of Colossians

c. opening

1. my **2005 visit** to Colossae in W Turkey

I. The Background of Colossians

Content

a. the author of the letter

1. there is *some* dispute about whether Paul actually wrote this letter
 - a. non-traditional scholars contend that the book is “unlike” Paul’s other works, and has a theology that is “too high” for a letter written at this point in church history (and “looks” different)
 1. namely, the *Christology* of the letter is considered too *advanced* – that the early church would not have fully embraced the nature of Christ as Paul speaks of him here
 2. or, that Paul embraces a *post-Chalcedonian* view of Christ *too early in the history of the church*
 - b. **LOW**: this letter is *traditionally* attributed to Pauline authorship, but there are some who argue that it was written by a *pseudonymous* (soo-don-a-mus) author – someone “posing” as Paul
2. reasons for the *traditional* assumption of this as a letter of Saul of Tarsus:
 - a. it claims to have been written by Paul, and even claims a *salutation* as such (**4:18**)
 - b. differences in style do not have to imply differences of authorship (**e.g.** email vs. voice)
 - c. a letter forcefully basing its exhortations on the nature of Christ *himself* implies a truthful author
 - d. the “high” Christology of Paul is *not* a “later” contrivance of the church – given that Paul *had met* the risen Christ *personally*, and that he was able to “incorporate” the *God-man* into his overall *monotheistic view of Yahweh*, it stands to reason that he (more than another other!) would certainly understand the nature of the *incarnation*, and the nature of Jesus *the man* as fully divine
3. Saul of Tarsus (later Paul after his conversion)
 - a. date of birth unknown, although a “*young man*” in **Acts 7:58** (c. 4BC-10AD?)
 - b. born in Tarsus (SE Asia Minor) of Cilicia – a city of great importance (rivaling Athens)
 - c. his father was a Pharisee (**Acts 23:6**), a Roman citizen, and (apparently) wealthy and influential
 1. Saul was a *natural-born* Roman citizen (**Acts 22:25-28**)
 - d. highly educated under the rabbi Gamaliel; fluent in Hebrew, Latin and Greek
 1. his *rhetorical* skills and *logic* are clearly evident in the letter
 - e. **ITC**: Timothy was probably Paul’s *amanuensis* (a-man-u-en-sis; a professional scribe)
 1. his greeting at the end (**4:18**) strongly suggests a secretary
 2. there is evidence that the letter was jointly composed with Ephesians (**e.g.** much repeated)

b. the dating of the letter

1. Colossians was written **c. 62AD** – as dated from:
 - a. Paul mentioning his suffering (**1:24**), which is understood as his Roman imprisonment of **Acts 28**
 1. he was three years in Ephesus (c. 52-56AD), through Greece and Asia, arrested in Jerusalem, two years in Caesarea, a year to Rome, and two years under house arrest in Rome (**6 years**)
 2. thus, Colossians (along with Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon) was written late from Rome
2. the letter was carried to Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus (**4:7-9 cf. Eph. 6:21**), along with Ephesians and Philemon (**i.e.** Onesimus returning to his master, Philemon)
 - a. Tychicus was a traveling-companion of Paul on his Third Missionary journey, and went with him to Rome – Paul now sends him back to Asia Minor with a report of his situation (he sends Onesimus back also, as is documented in **Philemon**)

c. the audience of the letter

1. written to those “*in Christ at Colossae*” (1:2)
 - a. Ephesians was *probably* written as an *encyclical* (i.e. some early manuscripts of Ephesians do not contain the phrase “*in Ephesus*” in Eph. 1:1), leading some to conclude that it was not intended *specifically* for Ephesus, but for the churches “around” Ephesus (see Rev. 2-3)
 - b. Colossians was (however) written *specifically* to that church (i.e. there is no manuscript evidence of it being an encyclical)
 - c. thus, it is *likely* that Tychicus and Onesimus delivered *both letters* to the church at Colossae
 1. in 4:16, Paul instructs the Colossians to read the letter “*from Laodicea*” = the church N of Ephesus mentioned as one the Seven Churches of Revelation (Rev. 1:11)
2. it is *possible* that Paul never visited the village of Colossae
 - a. although Paul was in Ephesus for three years, the village of Colossae was far enough away (~100 mi. E) that Paul may never have ventured there
 1. i.e. there is no mention of the city in Acts; the only mention of Colossae is 1:2 of this letter
 - b. however, the church in the city probably started *during* Paul’s time in Ephesus
 1. *probably*, a disciple of Paul took the gospel from there out to the “wider” circle of that city
 - a. Ephesus was a great and wealthy city on the W coast of Asia Minor – it was a center of learning, commerce, and religion (i.e. temple of Artemis)
 - b. Ephesus was the “hub” of Christian activity in the smaller towns and villages all around it
 - c. Colossae was *one* of those smaller towns – probably nothing more than a village
 1. **note:** even to today, it remains only as a small mound in Turkey, unexcavated
 2. the *most likely* evangelist to Colossae was Epaphras (1:7; 4:12)
 - a. he likely was converted under Paul’s teaching in Ephesus, and took the gospel back to Colossae (*maybe* his hometown?)
 - b. at the time of this writing, Epaphras is with Paul in Rome, and shares with the Apostle the issues facing that church, thus generating the need for this letter to be written (see below)
 - c. 4:12 suggests that Epaphras *remained* with Paul even after Tychicus and Onesimus went to Asia Minor with these letters

II. The Purpose of Colossians

Content

a. the purpose of the letter

1. written to a church that was struggling with some “unknown” issue
 - a. **some:** the church was struggling with a *proto-Gnosticism*, as John “seems” to in 1-3 John
 1. Gnosticism = the belief that the material world was created by a “demi-god”, inherently evil in and of itself, and that Christianity was about “obtaining” a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that would “free” the soul from that material bondage
 2. Gnosticism invaded the church strongly in the *second century*, and insisted that Jesus could *not* have been a “man” since flesh was inherently evil (i.e. the rise of docetism)
 3. thus, the *defense* by Paul of the *fullness of the incarnation* in Colossians (1:15-23) suggests that Paul was attempting to refute that heresy (read 1:21-22; **emphasize** “flesh”)
 4. however, although Paul does give a solid statement of the fullness of Christ as the God-man, he *does not* refute the Gnostic idea of material existence being evil
 5. and, we *now* know that Gnosticism does not really begin until much later, more than 100 years after this letter is written
 - b. **more likely:** the church was struggling with some sort of “Jewish mysticism” (read 2:16-19)
 1. a mysticism, teaching the idea of Christians engaging in ascetic practices in preparation for a visionary ascent to heaven where they would join the angels in worship
 - a. note the highly **Jewish** nature of the rites of 1:16
 2. or, a “shaman-like” rabbi, advising the Colossians to practice certain “rituals” as a means of protection from evil spirits (a common issue amongst Jewish/pagan folk beliefs at the time)
 - a. in 2:18, Paul uses the *personal* pronoun “*his sensuous mind*”, suggesting an actual person
 - b. i.e. one *devaluing* Christ Jesus as the center of the church, placing *his* teachings above the true gospel and making these “rituals” a part of the “fabric” of Christianity
 - c. the letter (then) acts as a *warning* about such demonic powers, but with an emphasis on the supremacy of Christ over all such forces (read 1:13-14; 21-23)
2. **a letter in which Paul confronts another “invasionary” force (like the Judaizers of Galatians)**

III. The Value of Colossians

Content

a. the value of this letter in general

1. Colossians bears the typical *indicative-imperative* structure of Paul's letters
 - a. in **chaps. 1-2**, Paul lays out his *indicatives* (truths; **see below**) – in **chaps. 3-4**, he *applies* those truths with some very specific *imperatives* (commands), many *similar* to **Ephesians 4-6**
 - b. **e.g.** he *reiterates* the commands re: husbands/wives, parents/children, masters/slaves (**3:18-22 cf. Eph. 5:22-6:9**)
2. Colossians is a letter about the **preeminence of Christ (the indicatives of the letter):**
 - a. **preeminent** = surpassing all others; the greatest; of higher degree or significance than all others
 - b. **e.g.** Christ is *preeminent* over all creation (**1:15-20; 2:9-10; 3:1**)
 - c. **e.g.** Christ is *preeminent* over the kingdoms of this world (**1:13-14; 2:15**)
 - d. **e.g.** Christ is *preeminent* over the forces of evil throughout the world (**2:10; 2:8, 15, 20**)
 - e. **e.g.** Christ is *preeminent* over all means of salvation offered by others (**1:21-23; 2:9-14**)
 - f. **e.g.** Christ is *preeminent* over all other sources of authority in our lives (**1:3-8; 2:2; 2:6-10**)
 - g. **i.e.** Jesus Christ, the *God-man*, has been established by the Father as greater over all others, **and we would do well to keep our eyes fixed upon him, and to follow him and his ways only**

b. the value of this letter for the Christian man

1. Colossians is a letter *rich in Christology* – it is *unique* in this sense: it addresses “life issues” *by establishing everything under the nature of Jesus as the God-man (as above)*
2. it *asserts* that all of life is to be *Christ-centered (i.e. not just “God”-centered)*
 - a. the Christian man is to be “*rooted and built up in Christ*” (**2:6**) – that the nature of Christ Jesus, as the *incarnate* Son of God is to be at the center of how we live in this world
 - b. **i.e.** not taken “*captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition*” (**2:7**)
 - c. **IOW:** it is Christ Jesus himself, the incarnate Son of God, who is our **goal**
 1. we are not “men” when we seek the things “*that are on the earth*” (**e.g.** riches, glory, power, fame, happiness; **3:2**)
 2. we are *truly* men when we “*set our minds on things that are above*” (**3:2; i.e.** Christ “*at the right hand of God*”; **3:1**)