

**Preachers' Gathering 2017**

**Preaching  
Colossians**

**Background,  
Overview  
and  
Sermon Outlines**

**Derek Newton**

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## **Background, Overview and Sermon Outlines**

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# Introductory Sermon

## Colossians 1:24 – 2:5      Training in the Word

God's powerful and saving grace had impacted the Colossians. Out of deep darkness, a church had been born through their understanding of the gospel (1:6) and the work of the Spirit in changing lives (1:6). Faith, hope and love were being visibly displayed across this cluster of small house churches a hundred miles east of Ephesus in the Lycus river valley in the mid first century AD. And yet, despite the generally positive state of this church, there was a problem! Maybe we should say, sticking to the note of positivity, there was a *challenge*.

It may have been a specific heresy or heresies; it may have been pressure from, or syncretism with, other religious traditions; it may have been uncertainty about the teachings and practice of this new Christian faith. It could have been a mix of all three! Paul is concerned enough to write from prison to alert the church to the serious risk of deception (2:4) that could easily develop into deflection and ultimately an insidious decline, decay and destruction of the church. In 2:5 Paul seems to think of his spirit's real presence in a place far away from where his body was. After all, both he and the Colossians lived *with* Christ and were united *by* His One Spirit. Thus, although the apostle was basically happy with the state of this church, he nevertheless launches an extended, strong and very personal plea to a church, which as far as we know, he had never even met personally – he uses the pronoun 'I' nine times in this section. The challenge for the church and for Paul was how to deal with the *confusion/chaos* going on in thought and practice for many in this fellowship of believing Christians.

This passage of text is a bit like a sandwich filling between two slices of bread, whose bookends are 1:23 and 2:6. Here lies, in my view, one of the keys to Paul's intentions and it is encapsulated in just one word – ***Continue!*** Paul has agreed the reality of their conversion and its demonstration in and through changed lives (1:1-14, 21-22). And yet, the apostle Paul writes a letter that calls for the Colossians not to give up, not to get deeply discouraged, not to drift away from the faith, but rather to continue in the faith. I cannot recall a period in my own lifetime in which that message was more needed by the Church than now!

This letter is about *how the Colossians, and ourselves, are to **continue** in the Christian Faith?* The answer I believe is directly connected to the divine

commission that came to Paul. The apostle Paul's great longing for the Colossian believers reflected God's enormous desire for all humanity in this world and it was three-fold –

- i) 1:28 To present everyone perfect in Christ.
- ii) 2:2 To bring the Church into the full riches of complete understanding.
- iii) 2:2 To move the Church into personal knowledge of Christ.

Paul has three essential ingredients by which this commission will be achieved in the life and ministry of the Church –

***A) Through the Teaching Ministry of the Church*** – The root problem at Colossae was shared in common by the lives of Colossian believers in their former state and by Paul's own pre-conversion life, namely, they were all enemies of God in their minds (1:21)! They had all had a damaged disposition of mind, heart and will, but God in His grace and mercy had dealt with their rebellious minds and had thus changed their lives into conformity with His will. Paul knew that reality supremely in his own mind and new life. So what was it in this commission from God that was so central that it drove him to stop at nothing to serve the gospel (1:2) and the Church (1:25)?

Here's the heart of the matter – *to present the Word of God in its fullness* (1:9,25,28). Paul had received insight into God's cosmic plan and had been given the huge privilege of being a part of God's execution of that plan. His calling – and ours – is 'to complete the Word of God' – to preach the mystery of God which is Christ. To 'complete' can mean 'fill', 'make full', 'fulfil', 'complete', 'finish'. Likeliest meaning here is 'doing fully' or 'carry-ing to completion' God's commission, ie working under God towards the total fruit and transformation that the Word will produce globally in both word and deed. Presenting the whole word of God and training the Church in that Word is God's own appointed means for carrying out His work and will for this world. It's not simply a good idea conjured up by ministers, elders and deacons – it *is* a divine mandate, not optional or elective. God insists that we teach and train our people *to think theologically and to live theologically*.

Let's dig a bit deeper. This is rooted in a continual proclamation of Christ who is at the heart of Paul's message. Nurturing, instructing and training all of our people *in* the faith, *from* the Word. This mystery has been, and is now being, revealed to Gentiles as well as Jews, in the effective preaching and teaching of the Word. As members of Christ's

Body, the Colossians had *his life* within them – a sure hope of sharing the fullness of Christ's glory yet to be fully displayed. 1:28 contains three Present Tense, continuous sense, verbs – Proclaiming Christ as sum and substance of the apostolic message; Admonishing, involving not a shallow gospel message, but rather warning, through intense and detailed teaching, by addressing, critiquing and correcting the mind; Teaching, to reveal divine, rather than false, wisdom for all, univers-ally – 'every man' and 'every woman' – not for any particular exclus-ive group. The goal of this training is the full Christian maturity of every believer on that final day.

A huge hurdle to be overcome will be contemporary biblical ignorance in society. Eg 10 years ago on Who Wants to be a Millionaire – the opening 'speed test' to put facts in their correct order in the quickest possible time. Usually 6 out of 8 contestants got the correct answer in 2-4 seconds. Put the following words in their correct order in the Lord's Prayer: '*hallowed*', '*name*', '*kingdom*' '*heaven*'. Only one person completed the task and it took at least 15 seconds! There is huge biblical ignorance in society. It is the Word of God that lay at the heart of Paul's Commission and teaching/training in the Word became his passion for the whole Church. He worked tirelessly for it!

**B) *Through the spiritual condition of the Church*** – What on earth is the connection between 'training in the Word' and 'the unity of the Body'? Apparently there *is* a link. Let's follow the chain of the argument – Paul reveals the mystery that Christ indwells His Body, the Church. That indwelling Spirit of Christ bears transforming fruit in the corporate life of the Church, as well as individually. At first sight, Paul seems to have got Col 2:2 wrong, or at least the wrong way round! I always thought that once we had got understanding and knowledge of God (Christian Doctrine, if you like), then that would lead to acts of love, unity and encouragement (Christian Practice). That's true, but there's also a reverse dynamic at work here. A fellowship needs to manifest and exercise encouragement, unity and love by the Spirit's enabling *if it is to be empowered and legitimized to promote under-standing and knowledge of Christ*. Meanwhile, deep love in the fellowship binds believers together and that creates a strong basis for people to grow towards understanding, knowledge and maturity. It is the combination of knowledge, insight and wisdom which equips the Church to identify and deal with false teaching.

Another way to view this is that disunity, disagreement and distrust in a group of believers actually will damage and delay its growth to maturity

via knowledge, understanding and relationship. It will also damage its witness to the unbelieving world! The world needs to see unity, love and encouragement in the Church *before* it will be willing to explore understanding and knowledge of Christ. ‘Training in the Word’ apparently does require encouragement in heart and unity in love as a pre-requisite and pre-condition for people to reach complete understanding and personal knowledge of Christ. Again our challenge is to enthuse our churches to resist the temptation towards postmodern cynicism about words, meanings, authoritative metanarratives and the knowledge of a unique God. For example, a later edition of the Millionaire quiz asked the question: Select a NT Gospel from the following list – *Luke, John, Genesis and Matthew*. The contestant had already won £64,000 and was going for £125,000. His answer – ‘Genesis’!! As he left the TV set, he mumbled to the MC, Chris Tarrant, ‘I should have followed the advice of my grandmother who constantly tried to persuade me to attend Sunday School. I would have been a richer man today!’

C) ***Through pain, struggle and suffering*** – We said that this passage was a very personal part of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians and the apostle makes no attempt to hide the cost of this Commission to train the Church in the Word. For Paul this task entailed hardship, and he paid a high personal price. That was actually no surprise. In Acts 9:16 the Lord had explained through Ananias that Paul *would* suffer in bringing the Word to Jews and Gentiles – ‘I will show Paul how much he must suffer for my name’. The text uses the word *dei* to show the divine necessity of this suffering! There *is* pain and struggle for all who are serious about Scripture and about living a transformed life in a hostile world.

This work of ‘training in the Word’ is not easy. It will be strongly opposed by human and demonic forces. Paul opens up his heart here and admits it is tough-going. The apostle lets down his guard and recognizes that this business of working for the perfection of believers is indeed very costly. See his honesty in these verses – in 1:24 Paul is taking his share of the pain that will be experienced by the Church as it awaits the final completion of all things at the consummation of God’s work of cosmic renewal. His suffering – and ours – is part and parcel of Christ’s suffering. Paul suffered as a servant of the gospel and for the Colossians. We suffer as part of the sufferings of Christ. That sounds stark and brutal but it carries with it great consolation for the Church. The pain we endure because of our relationship with Christ, our living out of Christ’s resurrection life and our love for the Word of Christ is *not* by chance or

by accident. For Paul, suffering was part of his commission from God and had come in the course of God's grace and guidance in his life.

Grace and guidance comes to us even in the midst of pain and anguish: eg stretchered back from Indonesia due to back injury in 1989 but all part of God's ongoing grace and guidance into the next stage of life and ministry for our lives, with further studies and ministry in Theological Education. The consolation is that – pain is a necessary pre-requisite to being glorified with Christ (Rm 8:17); none of the sufferings can separate us from Christ (Rm 8:38-9); God fixes the limits on the affliction that churches will experience in this age (Mk 13:19-24); Paul's pain reduces the sum total of pain to be suffered by the Colossians and ourselves; present struggles are not worth comparing with the glory to come (Rm 8:18).

***Paul has more to encourage us in our struggles*** – Regarding this 'Training in the Word' ministry that aims at perfection in Christ, Paul says 'I labour' (1:29), the strong word *kopos*, meaning working tirelessly and with huge effort, to the point of extreme weariness, induced by unceasing efforts for the growth of the church in Colossae and elsewhere. How does he labour? Paul uses an even stronger word – 'struggling and wrestling', with a sense of facing opposition. Inner stress and tension, plus conflicts with powers that were opposing church growth. *The process* – As the Apostle works, the *energeia* comes – supernatural power to work effectively; divine energy flowing in and through our lives. Probably a passive verb here, stressing that this power 'is being effected' (Phil 4:13).

*The Lord does not fail us in this task* – He does not leave us in a state of struggle that is beyond our capacity to endure and to work effectively. *God gifts us* –

- a) He gives us knowledge of His character. God's perfect love *for* us combines with His perfect knowledge *of* us in such a way that He acts in perfect wisdom. In our bewilderment about our circumstances, we lean on Him and are sustained. Eg 'The Lord Knows' – first words of our OMF Director at Manchester Airport after arrival on stretcher with back injury.
- b) He gives us the Spirit to draw close to us and lift our spirits in the midst of trouble and struggle. He knows exactly *when* to lift us.

**He gives the power that God used when he raised the Christ from the dead. We work; the Spirit energizes. Our effort; His energy (1:11). We are called to perseverance. The divine resources are enough!!**



# BACKGROUND

## Place and Date of Writing

On the assumption that Colossians is Pauline, it is one of a group of Prison or Captivity Epistles, the others being Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians. Philemon clearly has similarities to Colossians. It is also the case that there are 32 identical Greek words between Colossians and Ephesians where Paul is showing that Tychicus is carrying the letters (Col. 4:7-8; Eph. 6:21-22).

Paul wrote in Philippians of his sense of uncertainty about the future (1:19-26; 2:17,24) and that letter had no personal references, except Timothy. These two facts place Philippians apart from the other three Prison Epistles.

We do know for certain that Colossians was written from prison (4:3,10,18) but where and when? This is a very difficult question to answer. According to Dunn (p.39), the theology of Colossians seems to be at the margin of the transition from 'Pauline' to 'post-Pauline' theology which would suggest a late date near Paul's death and this would favour a Roman imprisonment. However there is a counter argument, namely that Colossians seems to be closely tied to Philemon and would thus fit an earlier, Ephesian imprisonment. That would mean a date in the mid-50's, probably prior to 2 Corinthians and Romans.

There are basically *three* options –

### **Caesarea...**

Paul was here for two years in enforced confinement (Acts 24:23,27), about May AD 57-September AD 59.

### **Ephesus...**

Three to three and a half years here (Acts 19:10,22; 20:31) from about Autumn AD 52 until Summer 55 or Spring 56. An Ephesian origin would help to explain the local movements of Onesimus suggested in Philemon, as well as Paul's hope of seeing Philemon on release (Phlm. 22). It would also allow a trip of Onesimus to Colossae (with the letter to Philemon), back to Paul and then back again to Colossae (with Tychicus and Colossians). If the letter was early, however, why would Paul then abandon his developed theology to return to earlier themes in Romans and then change to a more developed theology in Ephesians?

### **or Rome**

House-arrest for two full years (Acts 28:30-31) about Feb. AD 60 till late 61 or early 62. A later date of the letter in Rome would fit the more developed theology but an initial movement of Onesimus to Rome is hard to imagine,

as is Paul's hope to see Philemon on his release. The latter would be a little strange if Paul was in Rome but with his eyes on Spain (Rom.15:22-29).

In general the weight of scholarly opinion falls in favour of Rome during Paul's (first) imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31), which would date the letter around AD 60-61. NT Wright (p.35) however points out the difficulty of frequent travel between Rome and Colossae and he favours Ephesus as the place of writing of the Colossian letter. He points out that not every imprisonment of Paul is necessarily recorded in Acts. If Ephesus is correct, the date could be AD 52-53, or perhaps AD 53-56, while Paul was working in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). This would make the Colossian Church very young. Wright points out that 2 Corinthians was written by Paul en route from Ephesus to Corinth and that 2 Cor. has great similarities with Colossians, especially regarding Paul's sufferings in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8). This, says Wright, strengthens the case for an Ephesian origin for the Colossian letter.

## Authorship

Some scholars hold the view that a number of Paul's letters are authentic products of Paul's pen, but that other letters should be considered as 'Deutero-Pauline'. The latter category for some scholars includes the Pastoral Epistles, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians and Colossians. Such scholars argue that the 'Deutero-Paulines', on grounds of theology, language and style, were written later in the first century AD by a disciple of Paul who was familiar with Paul's theology and thought.

The following arguments have been put forward by adherents of the 'Deutero-Pauline' authorship position on Colossians:

### Gnostic Heresy

Fully-blown systematic Gnostic thought is generally believed to have been a second century AD phenomenon. If Colossians reflects a deep-seated Gnostic problem, then the letter must have been written well after Paul's death. So runs one strand of the argument against authentic Pauline authorship. However, evidence exists of incipient early Gnostic views in the first century, especially in areas where Diaspora Judaism was in contact with Greek and Oriental thinking. If we take account of this, then a Pauline date and authorship for Colossians becomes entirely possible.

### Relationship with Ephesians

Some scholars such as Mayerhoff in 1838 and Synge in 1951 claimed that Ephesians was genuinely from Paul but that Colossians was a watered-down version of Ephesians by a later writer. Baur and Mayerhoff argued that Colossians failed to reflect the mid-first century conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity and that its Christology was from a later period when Gnosticism was in its ascendancy. Clearly there *are* similarities between Ephesians and Colossians but passages like Col. 2:16-20 are more easily explained as Paul's effort to use the heretics' own language to bolster his arguments against them.

FF Bruce believes that the most likely scenario is that Paul wrote to the Colossians and then expanded it with further reflection and vision into a longer letter to the Ephesians. The latter was then sent in the hands of the same people who carried letters to the Colossians and to Philemon.

Clearly there are close similarities between Colossians and Ephesians both in argument and wording. This is in spite of the absence in Ephesians of the Christ hymn and the assault on false teaching. NT Wright (p.37) expresses

the view that ‘the two letters can be regarded as, in some senses, a rough draft and a fair copy of similar material’.

There are four main theories in scholarship –

- a) Paul wrote Colossians first and then, perhaps shortly afterwards, wrote Ephesians.
- b) Paul wrote Ephesians first and then selected some of that material for a different context to write Colossians.
- c) Paul wrote Colossians and then someone else used it to compose Ephesians, as if it were written by Paul.
- d) Paul wrote neither Ephesians nor Colossians, the latter being by someone imitating Paul and the former by an imitator of Colossians.

Theory (d) is unlikely. Colossians does come within Paul’s theological thinking.

Theory (c) is possible in terms of literary style and content, but if the writer knew Paul, this does not automatically guarantee ability to write that quality of material. Regarding Theories (a) and (b), it may not be a case of Paul writing a ‘rough draft’ eg. Colossians, followed by a ‘final draft’ eg. Ephesians. He was simply writing letters, not dissertations or theological treatises. Paul may have incorporated earlier material into a later letter, following further reflection.

In some early manuscripts, the Ephesian letter may not have carried an actual address. It may have been a circular, incorporating parts of his other writings, including Colossians. If Colossians was written during Paul’s imprisonment in Ephesus, then it might be that Ephesians was a circular written about the same time to the Ephesian church, as it waited for Paul’s release, and to other surrounding churches. It might be that Colossians was written before Ephesians. Paul did not present his total theology in any single letter. He wrote according to the specific occasion. Rather than measuring one letter against another, it is the complementary blending of letters that helps our understanding of Paul.

## **Relationship with ‘Authentic’ Letters**

Some have claimed that if Paul wrote Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, then he could not have changed his approach to deal with the Colossian heresy situation. Bruce (p.170) objects strongly to this, arguing that such a claim puts invalid limits on ‘Paul’s intelligence, versatility and originality.’ Paul was actually tackling pagans on their own territory and was

even ready to employ pagan language and concepts to do this. He sought to show how the Gospel of Christ was totally adequate to deal with any heresy or deviation from truth. Scholars have claimed that the terminology of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians differs from that of Colossians. For example, it is argued that in Romans and 1 Cor. 'body of Christ' is figurative of the Church, whereas in Colossians, it refers not only to the Church, of which Christ is Head (1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15) but also to the body as cosmic reality. Martin (p.34), however, responds to this by arguing that the 'Church theme' is dominant in Colossians, and that there are foreshadowings of Paul's Colossian teaching in his second Adam type. In Col. 1:18 Paul seems to have used the Hellenistic idea of a universal lord and given Christ this title in the context of Headship over the Church, founded on Christ's work of redemption and His defeat of cosmic powers (2:10).

It could well be the case that Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the relation between the different parts of one body and then developed this idea into the Col./Eph. concept of the Church as the body of which Christ is the Head. This latter teaching would underline the need for total dependence of body members on Christ and the overall control of Christ. It is true that in 1 Corinthians, the correlation is between body and spirit, whereas in Col./Eph. it is between body and head, but this is not a strong argument against the view that Paul wrote all of these letters.

According to RP Martin (p.34), the portrayal of baptism is held to be different in Romans 6:1-4 (moral and eschatological) compared to Colossians (lacking eschatological tension and assuming a fully realized and past salvation). Such a position, however, fails to take on board the significance of Col. 3:1-4.

Marxsen, Kasemann and Lohse believe Colossians is post-Pauline on *three* grounds –

### **a) Hope**

The idea that 'hope' has shifted from an anticipation into a realized possession. G. Bornkamm has put forward his view that 'hope' is portrayed as 'prepared for you' in heaven (1:3-8) and as such is a present possession (1:23-27). This makes it different, claims Bornkamm, from the idea of hoping for something, as in Rom. 4:18; 5:5; 8:24f. Romans speaks of the 'already...not yet' but Bornkamm contends that such a tension is lacking in Colossians. Surely Colossians stresses the certainty of hope to indicate that the gospel's security and trustworthiness is fixed 'in heaven', regardless of what the heretics might say. In addition, of course, the hope in the future *parousia* IS present in Col. 3:1-4, in 4:5 and in 3:24-4:1.

## **b) Baptism**

Kasemann contends that Col. 1:15-20 uses a pre-Christian hymn and that Paul links it to baptismal motifs in 1:13-14 within a 'confession of faith' which is post-Pauline. The hymn itself however contains no idea of any attack on heresy. Certainly there is evidence of a likely baptismal liturgy in Colossians –

- i) Terms like 'beloved', 'sonship' (1:13) and God's approval (1:19) relate to Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism.
- ii) The ideas of 'deliver' and 'transfer' (1:13) suggest freeing from evil powers. This is a likely baptismal context concerning forgiveness of sins.
- iii) 'Light', 'share' and 'inheritance' (1:12) suggest baptism in the sense of a new sphere of ownership/Lordship.
- iv) If we compare 1:12-20 with 2:9-15, there are parallels in the realms of new obedience and new clothing (3:8-11).

It may well be that Paul has used a familiar liturgical pattern but that he has redacted a hymn to emphasize Christ's saving work for the Colossian believers. Thus Paul links salvation with ethics, just as he does in Phil. 2:5-11. Thus it seems perfectly reasonable to conclude that Paul has used a piece of liturgy but has fitted it into a pastoral situation at Colossae in a church where there were threats from heresy.

## **c) Apostolic Succession**

W. Marxsen argued that Epaphras as Paul's fellow-servant (1:7) was working in the church 'in place of Paul', based on the statement 'on *our* behalf'. This is not however the same as an argument for apostolic succession. Martin (p.38) argues that a later writer would have 'exulted in Paul's apostolate (as in Eph. 3:1-10) but that emphasis is singularly lacking in this epistle'.

## **Stylistic Differences**

We have only limited knowledge of how Paul's letters were constructed but Colossians might have involved the use of an *amanuensis* (4:18). If, for example, Timothy was allowed to write up the final version, then that might explain the occurrence of certain words not found elsewhere in Paul's writings, eg. there are 28 words not found elsewhere in Paul and 34 other words not located elsewhere in the NT, but these are mainly technical words that might be quoted from the heretics' arguments. The fact that Colossians

includes liturgy/hymn style and deals with a specific issue, could well explain the absence of Paul's more typical style eg. his use of particles, esp. in Col. 1:9-23.

## Conclusions

Two highly significant factors add weight to the arguments for the Pauline authenticity of Colossians –

### *a) Its Relationship to Philemon*

Paul's Letter to Philemon is widely accepted as authentic and Colossians does share distinct similarities to Philemon, as outlined by Harris (1991:3-4)

- i) The author is in prison (Col. 4:3,10,18; Phlm.9-10,13).
- ii) The author has friends who are recorded as sending greetings – Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas (Col. 4:10-14; Phlm. 23-24).
- iii) The greetings link Timothy with Paul in the brotherhood (Col. 1:1; Phlm.1).
- iv) In Philemon 2, Archippus appears as an addressee and in Col. 4:17 the writer instructs the Colossian church to press Archippus to fulfil his ministry. Philemon 12 refers to the return of Onesimus to Philemon (at Colossae), while Col. 4:9 mentions his going to Colossae with Tychicus.

### *b) Its Early Attestation*

The later Church Fathers accepted Colossians. (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* iii.14.1; Tertullian, *De Praescr. Haer.* vii; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* i.1). Even in the earlier decades, there was no dispute over the authorship of Colossians. It was included in Marcion's canonical list and in the Muratorian canon. Paul's own name appears at the start (1:1) and end (4:18), though that fact in itself cannot be considered conclusive of authenticity.

The special circumstances at Colossae, and in a congregation not personally known to Paul, go a long way to explain the distinctive language, eg. omission of 'my brothers', which is common in the 'authentic' Pauline letters. Thus Martin's final word (p.40) affirms that 'there is no serious obstacle in the way of an acceptance of apostolic authorship.' Similarly Bruce concludes (p.171) that 'There seems, in short, to be no sound argument against the genuineness of this epistle.'

# Map





# City, Cultures and Church of Colossae

## City of Colossae

(see Dunn p. 20f.)

Located in the southern area of the Roman province of Asia, otherwise known as western Anatolia. This section of territory was basically part of Asia Minor and corresponds to modern Turkey. A major river – the Meander – flowed in a valley from the hinterland into the Aegean Sea. This river was joined, 100 miles upstream, by the Lycus tributary, the latter flowing in a fertile valley that spawned three cities not far from the junction of the Lycus and Meander rivers, namely Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. This placed Colossae on the main artery for east-west communication during the Greco-Roman era.

According to Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.6, Colossae was large and prosperous 500 years before the NT era, being located on the main road between Ephesus/Sardis and the Euphrates. The wool industry dominated this area. However, by the Roman Empire period, Colossae was less significant than its two nearby urban rivals. It is difficult to estimate the exact size/importance of Colossae eg. Strabo 12.8.13 calls Colossae a *polisma* ‘small town’, yet other writers use this same term to describe Athens! Remarkably the site of Colossae has never actually been excavated!

These cities in the Lycus Valley had a significant Jewish minority. In the late 3<sup>rd</sup>. Century BC, Antiochus the Great had settled 2000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon into Lydia and Phrygia in order to bring stability to that area. See Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.147-53. We know that the Roman Governor Flaccus in 62 BC had tried to confiscate the gold collected together by Jews in Asia Minor as their part of the Temple Tax. Cicero defended Flaccus who had tried to confiscate the gold collected by Jews in Asia Minor as their part of the temple tax and *Pro Flacco* 28.68 indicates that over 20 pounds of gold had been seized in Laodicea. The Governor stopped them sending this gold to Jerusalem. This size of intended tax could mean that in this city alone, up to 11-14000 adult males were paying the half-shekel tax (2 drachmae). The Jewish population of Colossae in first century BC could have been around 2-3000 ie. a significant minority.

This collection of Temple Tax in Colossae suggests regular road links between Colossae and Israel. Acts 2:9-10 reports that people from Asia and Phrygia were in the Jerusalem crowd on the Day of Pentecost. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccles.* 3.31.2-5 says that Philip the Evangelist settled in Hierapolis with

his virgin daughters. The important factor is that Jewish folk were probably frequently travelling through this whole region of Asia Minor.

In the apostolic period, Colossae consisted of indigenous Phrygians, Greek settlers and the Jewish colonists already mentioned. The city of Colossae, now deserted, formed part of the Kingdom of Pergamum which was given to the Roman senate in 133 BC by the last Attalid ruler. It thus became re-formed into the Roman province of Asia, Laodicea being the seat of Roman Administration . See Cicero, *Att.* v.21. The city of Laodicea was famous for mineral waters, considered to have healing properties. A number of cities in the Lycus Valley were hit by earthquake in AD 60-61. See Tacitus, *Annals* xiv.27. In Paul's time Colossae as a city was declining but nevertheless remained a cosmopolitan city. The damage done by the earthquake makes it very hard to be sure about the size or likely population of Colossae in the AD 60's or whether there may have been a functioning synagogue in Colossae around this time.

### **Cultural/Religious Mix**

Jews were very much a part of this province of Asia, as indicated by grave inscriptions, but pluralism and syncretism of religious belief and practice was the fundamental scene here at Colossae. This strongly syncretistic religious melting-pot provided the background for a serious challenge to the uniqueness of the gospel of Christ.

A number of cults dominated the religious scene –

***The cult of Cybele***, great mother-goddess of Asia, had spread from Phrygia into Greece, Rome and surrounding cultures and was very strong in Colossae. Cybele herself was uncreated and thus separate from and independent of her creations. She is the mother of all and the yoked lions that drew her chariot along indicated her offspring's duty of obedience to the parent. This cult involved raucous and disorderly ecstatic worship, sacred prostitution, sacrifice in the form of castration and was originally a nature rite linked to fertility rituals and customs. The self-castration by priests was rooted in the myth that Cybele's lover, the deified fertility god Attis, was founder of Cybele's Galli priesthood of eunuch priests, and had castrated himself and died. In another tradition from the Roman Imperial era, Attis castrates a king to escape his unwanted sexual attentions and is then castrated in turn by the dying king. Cybele's priests find Attis at the base of a pine tree. Attis dies and the priests bury him, castrate themselves in his memory, and celebrate him in their rites to the goddess and in return receive powers of prophecy. Sacrifices were made to this goddess as Hera-Atargatis. This cult

also had an ascetic component which might explain Paul's mention in his Colossian letter of 'severity of the body' (2:23) and 'circumcision' (2:11). These latter references *may* refer to rites of initiation and acts of mutilation that were basic to this cult of Cybele. Many of the priests are referred to in the feminine but sometimes in a middle or third gender, thus quite likely raising the reality of serious gender confusion. The Galli sometimes wore effeminate dress and lived with an effeminate demeanour.

The goddess Cybele, like Ephesian Artemis, was also venerated in the form of a black stone and Cybele was identified with the Greek goddess Rhea. Her role in life was universal motherhood, control and protection over nature/cities, and giver of life to gods, humans and beasts. She was considered to be a vivid and forceful character, capable of inflicting vengeance against those who fail to submit to her. She rode in a chariot drawn by lions and was attended by a number of male demi-gods who acted as intermediaries between goddess and mortal devotees, with influence into the world of the dead, via dreams, waking trance and ecstatic dance/song. Cybele was often depicted with a youthful male escort, Attis, who was a Phrygian deity and this 'godhead', as it were, was supported by the rich patrons of her festivals, since Cybele was considered to be vital for the prosperity and protection of the Roman state, cities, agriculture and ship-building throughout the Roman Imperial period. Those who supervised and promoted Cybele cult worship gained great esteem and honour. Cybele cult involved the sacrifice of bulls and rams, followed by the sacrifice of blood, but generally only affordable by richer folk. This linked into the life, death and rebirth cycle of the cult, in which the celebrant personally and symbolically took the place of Attis and, like Attis, was cleansed, renewed or, by emerging from the pit or tomb under the sacrificed animals, experienced 'rebirth'. These sacrifices were intended to be renewed from time to time. Along with sacrificial offerings, worship of Cybele was accompanied by festivals, athletic games, plays and communal feasting.

***The cult of Isis worship***, a goddess from the polytheistic pantheon of Egypt, spread very widely in Paul's day and Isis would easily merge with a mother-goddess figure. Isis was worshipped as the ideal mother and wife, alongside her role as patroness of nature and magic and the needy across society. She was also protector of the dead, protector against evil and goddess of rebirth, reincarnation and children. Her 'child' was the pharaoh and Isis was first daughter of Geb, god of the Earth and Nut, goddess of the Sky. She married her brother, Osiris, and she conceived Horus with him. Isis was crucial in the resurrection of Osiris when he was murdered by her sibling, Set. Isis re-assembled Osiris's body parts to life. This myth was very important in the

Greco-Roman era. This particular death and rebirth was widely and ritually celebrated and a very popular image was that of Isis suckling her son Horus.

Isis was served by male and female priests, renowned for their powers of wisdom and healing. Her depiction as wearing headwear in the form of a throne led to the idea that she was a goddess of kings. Emperor Augustus favoured the restoration of traditional Roman religion but Caligula (Emperor from AD 37-41) was open to Isis religion and he put on female dress to take part in Isis Mystery rites, initiating a period of lengthy imperial sympathy towards Isis worship. Isis became variously known as ‘Queen of Heaven’ and supreme ‘Heavenly Goddess’. Great knowledge, wisdom and understanding were attributed to Isis, especially through the first and second centuries CE. Isis was very much a part of the syncretistic world of Greco-Roman religion.

***The cult of Apollo*** is indicated by Paul’s use of a verb in 2:18, relating to the Colossian mystery, which is also found in an inscription at a shrine of Apollo, god of prophecy and spokesman for Zeus, located at Claros. (*Apuleius* xi.23). A temple of Isis was built on the Greek island of Delos at the start of the Roman period. Interestingly, Delos is the birthplace of the Greek gods Artemis and Apollo who had temples on Delos long before the Isis temple was built.

***The cult of ‘Men Ascaenus’***, the chief god of Pisidian Antioch, was a healing cult, variously known as that of Apollo, Dionysus and Asclepius. *Men Ascaenus* was an ancient god in western, interior Anatolia, especially Phrygia. One inscription uses the name *ouio* which is a form of Yahweh. This cult claimed to be monotheistic and was linked in the Isis worship with the divine control of the ‘elements of the world’. (*Apuleius* xi.5). Does this relate to what Paul describes as *stoicheia* in 2:8,20? *Men Ascaenus* presided over the months and was seen as a lunar deity. Local tradition believed that anyone who believed the moon deity to be feminine would always be subject to women, whereas a man who believed that the moon deity was masculine would dominate his wife.

***The cult of Mithras***. Mithras had been born from a rock, though there are some variations on this theme. This was in the background of Colossae in Paul’s time. Worshippers of Mithras had 7 grades of initiation by harsh tests of endurance – the highest level being ‘father of fathers’ - related to the oversight of different planetary gods, meeting in underground temples – *mithraea* – but Mithraism had certain similarities to Christianity – liberator-saviour, hierarchy of bishops, deacons and presbyters, communal meal and the hard struggle between Good and Evil. The first 4 grades of initiation seem to be achievable through introspection and spiritual growth, but few

attained the highest, more specialized, offices. Mithras killed the bull and shared it with a sun god Sol. The underground caves and crypts that served as locations for the Cult of Mithras typically had reclining couches lining the walls and capable of seating 30-40 feasting initiates. The divine feast between Mithras and the sun god was mirrored in the human counterpart as men ate a ritual meal together in the cave.

We have very little evidence of the highly secret initiation rituals of the cult of Mithras, except that feasting with initiates reclining on stone benches, was a big part of the cult. There seems to have been no uniform Mithraic scripture or teaching and no central supervisory authority in a cult whose beliefs and practices were basically orally transmitted. Initiation was finally completed by the initiate shaking hands with the Father, re-enacting the handshake between Mithras and Sol, along with the re-enactment of the main Mithras narrative by male participants – birth from the rock, striking water from stone with an arrow shot, the killing of the bull, Sol's submission to Mithras, Mithras and Sol feasting on the bull, the ascent of Mithras to heaven in a chariot. The cult membership does seem to have been male only, especially soldiers, though other sources do suggest some female involvement. Moral stipulations were required of members. The key ancient writers with regard to Mithras have been Plutarch (45AD – 120AD), Dio Cassius (155AD – 235AD), and Porphyry (233AD – 305AD).

Very significant is the fact that almost all Mithraea contain statues dedicated to the gods of other cults and many Mithraic initiates could also be found participating in other religions and in other mystery cults. Some scholars believe that Mithraism was a very real threat to the survival and distinctiveness of Christianity. For example, Tertullian wrote that the Mithraic initiation ceremony began with a ritual bath and the receiving of a mark on the forehead, which Tertullian viewed as a diabolical counterfeit of the baptism of Christians. Similarly Justin Martyr compared Mithraic initiation communion with the Lord's Supper, claiming that the evil demonic world was responsible for producing counterfeits in the Mithraic Mysteries.

It does seem that Mithraism was a challenge and competitor to early Christianity, presenting a god who was considered to be creator and father of all and at the same time the god of the covenant who oversaw all agreements/contracts made between humans.

Interestingly, Zoroastrian, Iranian thought was totally opposed to any idea that gods could ever live on earth. The sacrificial act of 'tauroctony', in which Mithras slayed the bull, was claimed to be a guarantee of salvation for the participants. Some scholars say this sacrifice creates or ends the world. One

inscription does say that the god ‘saved us with the shed blood’ but the actual meaning of ‘salvation’ is not clear. Early celebrations of Christmas were blended into the ongoing feasts of the Saturnalia and celebrations of the birthday of Mithras which was believed to be December 25<sup>th</sup>. Mithras was portrayed as the Father who personally guides initiates in this *all male* cult. There is evidence in ground-plans discovered by archaeologists that Church buildings were being located in some cases on top of underlying Mithraeum buildings, signifying that “Christ keeps Mithras ‘under’” (MJ Vermaseren). Scholars widely claim that Mithraism was one of Christianity’s major competitors in the Roman Empire and Christians themselves regarded Mithraism as ‘a demonic mockery of their own faith’ (Henry Neil). This may well have been a trigger for Paul’s determination to stress Christ’s supremacy in Col. The bull-slaying – tauroctony – has been viewed by recent scholars as a symbolic representation of the constellations rather than an originally Iranian animal sacrifice scene. If this is indeed the case, then this might help explain why Paul lays such emphasis on the uniqueness of the Christ and his relation to Creation (eg. Col 1:15-20). Evidence from images and inscriptions suggests that Mithras may have been viewed as the Orphic creator-god Phanes who emerged from the cosmic egg at the beginning of time, bringing the universe into existence. The birth or rebirth of Mithras from a rock may have been seen as this god ‘rising from the dead’ and the rock or egg were somehow linked into the 12 signs of the zodiac. Imagery of Mithras very often includes stars, moon and sun. Indeed, Mithras was presumed to be powerful enough to be able to rotate the heavens yet was also seen as the mediator between Man and the supreme God of the upper and nether world. He was God of Truth and Lord of Heavenly Light. Some commentators see Mithras as a life-death-rebirth deity, similar to Isis or the Demeter cult or the resurrected Jesus. Mithras became known as ‘Judge of Souls’ and was called omniscient, non-deceivable, infallible, eternally watchful and never-resting. One of his functions was to protect the righteous from demonic forces and to lead them to paradise. According to Persian traditions, the god Mithras was actually incarnated into the human form of a Saviour by means of an immaculate virgin mother called Anahita, once worshipped as a fertility goddess. The conception of the Saviour was believed to have been from the seed of the prophet Zarathustra preserved in the waters of a lake in Persia. Mithra’s ascension to heaven was said to have occurred in 208 BC.

According to Persian mythology, Mithras was born of a virgin given the title ‘Mother of God’. The God remained celibate throughout his life and cherished self-control, renunciation and resistance to sensuality among his worshippers. Mithras stressed the importance of brotherhood in order to

unify against the powers of evil and he himself judged mortal souls at death and controlled how far demons could punish sinners in hell.

Mithraism first held that all souls pre-existed in the ethereal regions and inhabited a body on birth. Life was then a struggle between good and evil, spirit and body, children of light v. children of darkness. All souls were judged by Mithra – Elect went straight to heaven; good-intentioned awaited judgment to be resurrected; earthly and evil were annihilated in a great battle. Both Christ and Mithra were referred to as the ‘Logos’! Thus some definite similarities between Mithraism and Christianity existed, but some huge differences also.

## **Church of Colossae**

(see Dunn, Martin and Bruce)

The apostle Paul may have passed through Colossae around AD 52 but it appears to have been Epaphras who founded the community of believers here ( Col.1:6-7; Acts 18:23, 19:1). The readers of Paul’s letter knew Barnabas (4:10) who was engaged in gospel work in Pisidian Antioch. Col 2:1 seems to confirm that Paul was unknown to the Lycus Valley churches but he MAY eventually have visited the Colossians if he visited Philemon as planned. The apostle Paul was based in Ephesus, 120 miles west of Colossae, and may have sent other workers to the interior. Paul nevertheless FEELS a personal involvement with the Colossians (1:24-25, 2:1,5). Epaphras, as a native of Colossae, was an obvious choice to head up the work there (Acts 19:10; Col. 4:12). Thus the church in Colossae can be dated around the mid-50’s AD. If Col. 1:2 does not simply refer to the church in Philemon 2, then the Lycus Valley probably had more than one church (4:15). There may have been 4-6 small house churches but we cannot be entirely sure about this.

Paul praises Epaphras as a ‘faithful minister’ in Col. 1:7. Philemon 23 indicates that at some stage, Epaphras had shared Paul’s imprisonment in Rome and was thus unavailable to return to the Colossian church with Paul’s letter (Philemon 23). That letter was carried instead by Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-8), along with news of Epaphras’ welfare. The believers at Colossae would have been concerned to know how Epaphras was faring in his captivity. Other members of the Colossian church included Philemon and family (Philemon 1-2), Archippus (Col. 4:17), and the fugitive slave Onesimus (Col. 4:9; Philemon 11) who is to be welcomed as a fellow-believer and a new church member (Philemon 16-17).

It was during Epaphras’ visit to Paul in prison in Rome that news of the Colossian Church was presented by Epaphras. Much of this news was

encouraging but it was less than five years since Paul had left Ephesus and the Colossian Church was still very young, having been planted by Epaphras. Paul's Ephesian ministry had been carried out between AD 52 and 55. The new church at Colossae was in danger of allowing a new teaching that would eclipse or set aside the true gospel that Epaphras had first preached to them. The apostle Paul thus responds to this serious threat to gospel truth by writing his letter to 'the saints in Colossae' (1:2).

There does seem to be strong evidence that many, if not most, of the Colossian believers were Gentile converts –

1. There are very few references in Colossians to OT texts.
2. Col.1:12, 21, 27 indicate that those who were formerly 'outside' have now been brought 'inside'.
3. The sins mentioned in 3:5-7 suggest a Gentile context.
4. There seems to be little sense of the issue of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, although we need to take account of Col 3:11 and 4:11.



## Heresy at Colossae

There is no formal explanation of the core problem at Colossae. We have to reconstruct by inference from Paul's emphases in his letter. There seems to have been new teaching that was actually, or potentially, threatening the survival of the true gospel at Colossae. Recognition of the full significance of Christ seems to have been a key issue. Scholars have referred to this new teaching as the 'Colossian Heresy' or the 'Colossian False Teaching'.

James Dunn (1996:23-6) argues that such terminology could be confusing and is based on two major presuppositions –

1. There was already a clearly defined Christian 'orthodoxy', outside which 'heresy' could be immediately detected. Even the word 'Christianity' did not appear until 50 years after Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. The boundaries of a central, belief and practice of the Christian faith were still being defined at the edges over the first two centuries AD. We need to beware of presenting this 'new' teaching as totally erroneous and misguided.
2. There was an actively campaigning group of false teachers who were consistently trying to push the Colossians into a new belief system. This may be because we assume a Galatian-like scenario in Colossae, but Paul's approach is different in the two situations – cf. Gal. 6:11-17; Col. 4:7-17 – and in Colossians, Paul is less aggressive, crisis-centred and urgently alarmed by the situation faced there.

Dunn feels that a more accurate way of viewing Colossians is to see it as a threat from ***Syncretism***, meaning *the Fusion of different elements*, rather than as a confrontation with error. One question which he asks is whether a church has to wait for a heretic to bang on its door overtly in order to count as being in danger?

The greatest threat is surely that which comes secretly, covertly and with profound subtlety, eg the reality of the slow postmodern assault on truth in Western society.

Dunn argues that there was a relatively relaxed atmosphere in the Colossian situation. His evidence is that there is a long development section (1:9-2:7) before the first definite warning bell (2:8)!! Moderate polemic occurs in 2:16-23, followed by a long section that indicates no clear-cut issue of false teaching (3:1-4:6). The concluding section seems to be untroubled. 2:19 appears to be the only indication of an existing impact of false teaching. Some scholars, however, feel that at a number of points, Paul takes up

certain catchwords and phrases of the opponents – see 2:9, 18, 21, 23. Dunn feels that rather than an overt false teaching, the key issue was the temptation for the Christians ‘to conform to more traditional or pervasive ideas and practices or the attractiveness of teachings on offer from one or more other groups in Colossae’.

No less than 44 suggestions have been made about the nature and identity of the heretical opposition faced by Paul in Colossae!

### **Hellenistic or Pre-Gnostic Syncretism**

This includes the influence of the Mystery Religions and then the syncretistic religious/philosophical ideas which eventually developed into later Gnosticism. Thus Lohse starts with Col. 2:8, the Colossian ‘philosophy’, and looks for aspects in the letter that can be linked to this philosophy, eg. ‘wisdom’ (1:9,28; 2:3,23; 3:16; 4:5), ‘insight’ (1:9; 2:2), ‘knowledge’ (1:6, 9-10; 2:2-3; 3:10), ‘elements’ (2:8,20) linked with cosmic powers of 2:10,15, plus angels in 2:18. Lohse assumes that this ‘knowledge’ is related to ‘cosmic elements’ and that ‘divine fullness’ can only be entered via a right relationship with these cosmic powers, through worship of angels. Lohse claims that such a philosophy demanded regulation observance and ascetic practice (2:16,21,23). He viewed this philosophy as a mystery cult with specific rites of initiation (2:11,18). Somehow, argues Lohse, this syncretism would have tried to locate Christ within the system.

The problem with Lohse’s position is that he has tried to link together his named aspects in a stronger fusion than actually exists within the text of the letter. ‘Wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ are actually linked to God’s mystery (1:25-2:3) which for Paul involves God’s saving purposes for the Gentiles. Since the idea of divine fullness (2:9) probably rests on the earlier reference in the ‘hymn’ of 1:15-20, this would require the idea that the hymn came from, or articulates, the Colossian philosophy. This is a big assumption! The ideas of God filling all things and of circumcision as initiation, are Jewish, not Gentile! Also in 2:18 the reference to seeing angels is more likely to relate to worship in the heavenly temple than to any initiation rite into mystery cult. Moreover nothing in the letter actually states that the fundamental ‘error’ in the Colossian church was Christological at all. Finally Dunn sees no clear evidence in the letter for the dualism that underlies Gnosticism. Thus, on textual and contextual grounds, Dunn sees considerable weakness in the ‘pre-Gnostic syncretism’ hypothesis as explanation of the so-called Colossian ‘heresy’.

## Jewish Syncretism

Recent years have brought a return to the hypothesis that Jewish elements lie at the root of the Colossian 'heresy'. It is true that the Lycus Valley cities probably did contain significant Jewish minorities. There may have been a number of synagogues in Colossae, plus Jewish worship meetings in houses. The church must surely have initially contained Jews and God-fearing Gentiles or proselytes – see 1:12,27; 2:13; 3:11; 4:11.

It is generally accepted that there was no early, clear break between church and synagogue. Over the following hundred years, many warnings were issued to Christians to maintain separateness from Jewish worship practice, eg. Ignatius wrote to believers in Asia Minor to warn them against 'living in accordance with Judaism' and against 'Judaizing' (*Magnesians* 8:1; 10:3). Other warnings came from Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom, the latter specifying that Christians should not attend synagogue on Saturday and church on Sunday. Synagogue and church co-existed for quite some time.

Though we have limited knowledge of diaspora Judaism, it is true that Jews in many places argued strongly to have the right to maintain their religious distinctiveness eg's. right of assembly and places of prayer (synagogues), payment of temple tax, maintenance of Sabbath and food laws. Examples of this are known in Laodicea (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.241-42) and Jewish feasts are stated in a Jewish inscription from Hierapolis (CIJ 777). We know that a group of Samaritans lived on the island of Delos in the Aegean. Diaspora Judaism was very diverse. We *cannot*, however, assume that Colossae was manifesting a uniform type of Judaism.

We do lack evidence for Jewish syncretism in these diaspora communities. Nor do we have evidence of a mixed Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism. Nor should we too readily accept the idea of Gnosticism in this period. Nevertheless in view of the firm stand taken within Jewish communities and of the similarity between Colossian's terminology and that found in Jewish writings, it does seem reasonable to propose a Jewish element in the Colossian 'heresy' over against a Hellenistic link. We do have evidence from cities in Asia Minor that the Jewish community and synagogue were *closely integrated* with the socio-cultural setting of Hellenism. We cannot assume that the Jews of Colossae were strongly evangelistic in their outlook. There *were* apologists for Judaism, like Philo, Josephus and Trypho, but this is not the same as evangelism or proselytism. Apology can simply be a mechanism for clarifying religion or gaining the respect of listeners to our explanations.

## The Colossian Philosophy

Based on 1:12, 21-22; 2:13 and 3:11-12, Dunn is convinced that for both Paul and his readers, the basic context of the threat involved Jewish covenantal distinctiveness and privilege. Issues previously thought to relate to Hellenistic background (2:8-10,15,18,20,23) can be linked more easily to Judaism eg. wisdom (1:9,28; 2:3; 3:16; 4:5) and fullness (1:9,19,25; 2:2; 4:12). Possibly the situation was similar to the Galatian problem, even though Colossians does not specifically mention 'law'. Some elements in Colossians clearly are Jewish (2:11-14, 16-17, 21-22).

Thus it is quite feasible that the propagators of the Jewish philosophy belonged to a Colossian synagogue and followed Jewish observances (2:16, 21-23) in order to gain access to the worship of heaven (2:18). These people might then have opposed the new teaching about the Jewish Messiah (1:12; 3:12). Thus we may be dealing here with a synagogue apologetic which put itself forward as a credible philosophy perfectly able to deal with the heavenly powers that controlled human life, rather than an actual 'heresy' or 'false teaching'.

For more detail on Dunn's position, see his article 'The Colossian Philosophy: A Confident Jewish Apologia' in *Biblica* 76 (1995) 153-81.

## Other Views

F.F.Bruce agrees that 'Basically the heresy was Jewish' (1957:166). However, he believes that it was not Galatian Judaism from Judea, but rather a local Phrygian form of Judaism that had merged with a non-Jewish early gnostic philosophy. Bruce believes that in diaspora Judaism, the barriers between Judaism and paganism were far from solid eg. there was a known case in which a Jewish lady could be both honorary ruler of the synagogue and priestess of the Imperial Cult. (Inscriptional Evidence Nos. 530 and 559 – Ramsay, *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia ii* Oxford, 1897). It would be entirely likely that when the gospel penetrated Phrygia, an existing Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism would simply absorb certain Christian elements and the product would be something like the Colossian heresy of the mid-first century AD.

That heresy seems to have involved the idea of angelic mediation through whom the law was given. These angels and powers were felt to control not only God's revelation to humans but also humans' prayer and worship to God. Thus homage needed to be paid to such spiritual intermediaries, eg. law adherence through ritual but also strict asceticism. All this was probably portrayed as some sort of advanced teaching for the spiritual elite, ie. seeking 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' through a series of initiations that would transport

the believer from the material to the spiritual world, especially via ascetic practices. Paul roundly condemns this angel worship! This was more serious than the Jewish legalism of the Galatian problem. The involvement of other 'lords' served to place fate above the divine will and to de-throne Christ and God. It may be that this heresy viewed Christ as having successively 'lost' power to these other powers during his incarnation process. The death of Christ and the apostolic sufferings of Christ would have been further proof that Christ was actually inferior to, and subservient to, these principalities and powers.

Paul stresses in his letter that Christ is the very image of God, embodying the divine fullness and in whom the elemental spirits have no place whatsoever. Believers find their fullness in Christ. Wisdom and knowledge are found in fullness in Christ alone. Christ is Sovereign Creator, even of the principalities and powers which the Colossians were tempted to appease. Christ defeated these powers on the Cross. To return to these powers would be a return to bondage for the Colossians who had already been set free by Christ. Paul has already referred to the cosmic role of Christ in 1 Cor. 1:24; 2:6-10 and 8:6, as well as in Rm. 8:19-22, but here in Colossians he amplifies the Person and Work of the cosmic Christ. The great stress of Romans and Galatians on individual justification by faith needs to be complemented by the corporate and cosmic insights of Colossians and Ephesians.

The overall dilemma of identifying and describing the Colossian 'heresy' has been stated by NT Wright (1986:23f.) – on the one hand there are clear Jewish ingredients in what Paul is opposing eg. circumcision. On the other hand, says Wright, there are other ingredients that look more pagan than Jewish eg. worship of angels (2:18) and ascetic practices that seem to deny the significance of the created order (2:20ff.). Wright then claims - though this is surely open to question – that

No syncretistic religion has yet been discovered which had exactly this blend of things pagan and Jewish; nor is this a mere accident of our limited historical knowledge, since it is in fact difficult to conceive of even the possibility of such a blend. (1986:24)

Wright feels that Paul in Colossians is simply portraying Judaism to ex-pagans as if it were just another pagan religion to be avoided. Thus Paul is telling pagan converts that they are free from any claims that the Jewish law might make on them. Colossians 2 is thus peppered with Pauline irony. Judaism has nothing more to offer. The new age of Christ has already come (Col. 2-3) and thus there is no need to submit to regulations that had been a

preparation for this new age. Colossians is thus primarily about Christian maturity and how to attain it.

RP Martin notes a dual aspect to the Colossian heresy. He states that a Gnosticising view of the universe holds the idea that God's fullness is distributed through a series of emanations from the divine, stretching from heaven to earth. These 'aeons' or aspects of deity had to be venerated as 'elemental spirits' because they ruled over human lives. Christ was one of these 'controllers' of access to the divine realm but he was not the only power in the cosmos. The gaining of fullness of life was being made to depend on asceticism, rules, regulations etc. as rites of passage into knowledge of divine mysteries. Ritual was a means of seeking and obtaining liberty from the power exerted by the 'elements' (*stoicheia*).

Martin points out that the overall flavour of Colossians stresses Christ's victory over demonic powers (2:15) and the Christians' freedom from those powers (2:20). This would also explain the concept of the divine 'fullness' dwelling in Christ and not in cosmic forces (1:19; 2:9). On the contrary, these powers owe their existence to Christ (1:15-20; 2:10). Even the rites of circumcision and food laws are more likely, according to Martin, to be linked to cultic practice than to Judaism. Also, even the ascetic practices, argues Martin, were probably preparation for overcoming hostile spirit powers. Angel worship was directed towards deities who inhabited stars in Hellenistic belief and who were felt to control human fate/destiny. The way to placate a deity was by invoking the power of a stronger deity. Hellenistic mystery religions did stress the need for purification and forgiveness and abstinence as a means of entering a vision that would move the soul upwards towards liberation.

Thus the basic problem faced by Paul in Colossae seems to have been that God and the world were being set in opposition to each other. God was remote. The world was spurned and evil/flesh had to be disciplined, though some would have pushed people into the opposite direction of libertinism, ie. if matter is not related to God, then the material body has no relation to religion. Therefore a person can indulge his or her body without restraint. This might explain Paul's moral warnings in 3:5-8. Thus, Martin feels that Phrygia did yield odd religious practices and the synagogues did tend towards laxity in relation to the Greek world. This produced a *syncretism* in which Christ was part of a hierarchy and in which asceticism was intended to yield an ecstatic vision as reward. Both gospel doctrine and gospel lifestyle were thus under serious threat, and Paul felt compelled to put reed pen to papyrus roll in defence of the truth of Christ and His gospel.

# The Main Elements of Colossians

## Three Views –

### 1 Prof. Morna Hooker

A Summary Of ‘Were There False Teachers In Colossae?’ By Prof. Morna Hooker, in *Christ and Spirit in NT Studies, in honour of C.F.D.Moule* Ed B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley. (CUP, 1973) pp. 315-331.

It seems to be accepted by all commentators and writers on Colossians that the basic reason for the letter’s composition was the existence of some kind of aberration in the Colossian community. Sometimes this is referred to as a ‘heresy’; more cautiously it is described as ‘false teaching’ or ‘error’. Its proponents are variously thought to be members of the Christian community spreading corruption from within, or outsiders attacking the Church’s beliefs; the teaching has been interpreted as Jewish, as Gnostic, or as a mixture of the two.

From the Christological ‘hymn’ in Col 1. and from the warnings about regulations in Col 2, there has emerged a picture of a false teaching whose advocates do not recognize the uniqueness of Christ, but try to set him in some kind of hierarchy of powers.... The teaching in Col 1 is entirely positive.... Certainly, Paul is here describing the supremacy of Christ, and the comprehensive character of his work in creation and redemption. This does not mean, however, that he is refuting teaching which has suggested that others have a role in this work. Exhortation to avoid a certain course of action certainly does not necessarily indicate that those addressed have already fallen prey to the temptation, as every preacher and congregation must be aware. Only in chapter 2 verse 20 is there a possible indication that his readers have allowed themselves to be misled by ‘false teaching’ consisting of various negative rules listed in 2:21.... It seems more likely that Paul is issuing a warning than an accusation.... To the newly-baptized Christian, called to be ‘holy and blameless and irreproachable’ (1:22) and surrounded by the lax morality of the pagan life he had abandoned, the pressure to achieve purity by keeping the regulations of Judaism must have been enormous.

It may be that Paul is deliberately reminding the Colossians of the reality of their faith; but he in no way suggests that it is weak.

As we try to reconstruct the situations behind Paul’s letters, we need to beware of the danger of circularity caused by ‘mirror-reading’ of biblical

texts. It is all too easy to use what hints there are in a letter to build a false picture of events, and then read this back into what is said.

Why did Paul think it necessary to write these things to the Colossians? Was it because false teachers were insisting on the authority and role of other powers besides Christ? Or was it because, living in a world which took the existence of such spiritual powers for granted, and wrested from their pagan beliefs and superstitions by Christian preachers, the Colossians would naturally have qualms about these beings, and wonder whether they still had power to influence their destiny?... The reassurance which Paul gives seems more suited to calm such fears than to correct veneration of angelic powers.

Paul, then, stresses the position and the power of Christ, in order to remind his readers of the importance of what has already happened and of what will happen; in 1:23 we have again a reference to the hope of the gospel. We have here indications of the cosmic significance of Christ :

*Creation; New Creation; New Heaven And New Earth.*

We would not for a moment deny that Paul believes that the dangers surrounding the Colossian Christian community are real.... What we are questioning is the theory that they are under attack by a specific group of teachers who are advocating a particular doctrine which can properly be termed, 'The Colossian error'. Paul's warnings here seem to us to be just as applicable to the situation which we have suggested existed in Colossae, in which all kinds of alternative philosophies and doctrines might assail the young convert.... Perhaps it is unnecessary to choose between 'gnostic' and Jewish, or to solve the problem by speaking of an amalgam; Paul has in mind *any* 'philosophy' which looks for salvation anywhere outside Christ. This cosmic Lord has disarmed all powers and authorities and rules over them. Once again, what Paul has to say about 'rulers' and 'authorities' seems to suggest that the Colossians are still worried about the power of these spiritual beings, and need encouragement to be confident in Christ's power over them.

Paul also refers, however, to the fact that the Colossians have been circumcised in Christ.... Here Paul's argument seems more appropriate to meet fear that salvation in Christ is not complete, that something more is needed to qualify the Colossians to be full members of the community of the saints (1:12), and that some method of dealing with trespasses is still needed. This suggest that Paul has in mind pressures on pagan converts to 'complete' their conversion by accepting Judaism and all its demands. This seems confirmed by the following verses, 2:16-19, which urge the Colossians not to allow anyone to condemn them in matters of 'food and drink, or with regard to a



festival or a new moon or a Sabbath' – scruples which, on the whole, seem to be Jewish in character.

The fact that Paul refers in this chapter 2 both to the defeat of the rulers and powers/authorities, and to the futility of religious practices, has been interpreted by some commentators as an indication that the 'error' comprised these two elements of belief in spiritual powers and the search for salvation through ritual observances. It is perhaps Paul himself, however, who has deliberately fused these two themes. If in Galatians he can describe the circumcision of Christians as a return to bondage to the 'elements', similar to their previous enslavement to beings which are not gods (Gal 4:8-9), it is not surprising if his warning to the Colossians is couched in similar language. They, too, had formerly been in bondage to these spiritual powers; the submission of all spiritual powers to Christ means not only that the Colossians can be free from fear of the forces which oppressed them in the past, but also that they need not submit to any others.

Paul's teaching in Colossians, then, seems to us to be quite as appropriate to a situation in which young Christians are under pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbours, as to a situation in which their faith is endangered by the deliberate attacks of false teachers. Paul's emphasis on Christian hope and maturity in Christ is understandable if the Colossians were subject to the obvious temptation to look for perfection in the regulations of Judaism. Even after reading his pastoral letter, these converts from paganism may well have found themselves wondering *how* they were to obey his exhortations to put off the things belonging to the old man/woman and put on those belonging to the new; a code of rules is much simpler to obey, and enables one to measure one's progress!

If our interpretation is correct, then this has certain consequences for our understanding of the Christological passage in Col. 1. If no Colossian 'error' existed, then Paul's Christological statement here was not, as has been suggested, developed or formulated in any attempt to combat false teaching. It may, however, have been developed and formulated (whether composed specifically for its present position or not) in order to demonstrate that both creation and redemption are completed in Christ because he has replaced the Jewish Law. Paul's argument that Christians need neither fear nor obey other 'powers' depends upon the supreme authority of Christ, of whose kingdom the Colossians are members; legal requirements have been done away with because they are only a shadow of the reality which exists in Christ.....it is Christ who is 'our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Cor 1:30) – these things belong to those who are in Him, not to those who are obedient to the Law.

Jesus Christ had indeed replaced the Torah as the revelation both of God's glory and of His purpose for the universe and for mankind. It is this fundamental truth which is expressed in Colossians, in terms which demonstrate its relevance for those who have been rescued from the grasp of alien powers, and who are subject to the constant temptation to look for perfection through religious rites and regulations, instead of simply relying upon the One in whom all the fullness of God dwells, and in whom they find fulfilment and the confident assurance of final glory.

## **2 Rev. Dick Lucas – The 'New Teaching'**

Mirror-reading of a biblical text involves drawing clues from a text and making inferences/drawing conclusions when the text does not explicitly state the issue being investigated. Such reading needs to be done with caution! It is also the case that a number of socio-cultural, religious and historical influences were impinging on the Colossian church scene in the mid-first century AD, including Jewish, Greek, Roman, Mystery Religion, Gnosticism and any combination within this group! We need to beware of constructing too neat a package of factors that might explain the setting of the Colossians letter. Having said that, it is helpful to note Dick Lucas's attempt to reconstruct the so-called 'new teaching' that seems to have influenced this very young church at Colossae –

- a) The 'new teachers' offered a 'spiritual fullness' not previously experienced, eg. Col. 2:10 'fullness of life' ie. the idea that what the believers had received already was OK, but they had not yet got the full picture or experienced complete spirituality.
- b) New spiritual freedom eg. 1:13; 2:8-20f. The 'new teachers' may have been claiming to set people free but were actually putting them back into slavery.
- c) New insight into evil powers. Paul stresses Christ's total victory and His authority over evil powers. He writes about the share of ALL believers in this victory. 2:10,15.
- d) Stress on fasting and asceticism. However, such claims to perfectionism still fail to attack and deal with self-indulgence – see 2:18,23 cf. 3:5-8.
- e) Deeper knowledge of God and experience of His power. Paul attacks such claims of the 'new teachers' in 2:8-15 and makes a distinction between what is already ours and what is not yet ours – 1:9-14.

- f) The 'new teachers' were critical of 'ordinary believers'. But what they considered as 'progress', Paul believed to be 'steps back' 2:16-17. Paul rejected the idea of a spiritual elite who might deflect and discourage believers. The result would be damage to the gospel and to the unity of the church in Colossae and beyond.
- g) The newcomers had caused division and Paul therefore pleads for unity in the church – 2:1-5; 3:9-17.

### 3 Prof. Ralph Martin – Christology

- a) The core issue for Paul is Christology. This false Colossian philosophy cuts a person off from union with Christ, the Church's Head (2:19) and thus from the very source of spiritual life and fellowship with God. Theologically, Christ is rendered as just one power among many, and on a practical level, there is doubt about Christ's sufficiency to grant fullness of life. Paul thus portrays Christ as cosmic Lord and Redeemer (esp. 1:15-20). All the fullness the Church needs dwells in Christ. The powers of the universe have *all* been subjected to, and defeated by, the victorious Lordship of Christ. Nothing is outside His control. By His death and resurrection, Christ's position as Lord over all powers and authorities has been confirmed and sealed by the coming of the Holy Spirit in power.
- b) The syncretists also, in separating God and cosmos, except through a long line of intermediaries, had cast doubt on the humanity of Jesus. Gnostics saw God as pure spirit, alienated from the material world. Redemption involved the soul being set free from this world of matter and rising to the higher world above. This view was opposed to the facts of Jesus' incarnation, historical existence, death and resurrection. In the face of such a mind-set, Paul insists on –
  - i) The historicity of Jesus' incarnation – 1:22; 2:9,11.
  - ii) The suffering and death of Jesus – 1:20,24.
  - iii) The cosmic significance of Jesus' earthly death – 1:20.
  - iv) The believer's relationship to a living, real Christ, not to a mystical, fantasy figure.
- c) /

- c) The gospel was and is a 'word of truth' (1:4-7; 2:6-7) proclaimed by apostles, not as human tradition. The believers had received the word of power and it was divine truth that was yielding fruit as the believers submitted to Christ and His truth. The apostolic word of truth 2:2; 4:3 contrasts sharply with false human traditions 2:23.
- d) The Colossian heretics stressed dietary taboos and ascetic practices but Paul underlines freedom (2:8) and the need for believers to be freed from the dark shadows of bondage. The believer has died to demonic powers (2:20) and now draws on Christ's risen power (3:1-3). Be free of false philosophy and religion (2:23)!
- e) New life for the believer *is* Christ. The old nature dies to self and sin and the new nature is received as a divine gift (2:11-12; 3:9-12). This new life is lived out in the body of Christ, which finds its coherence in the cement called 'love'. The focus of Col 2-3 is on the living out of this new life, in and with Christ.

# OVERVIEW

## Contents Of The Letter

### 1 Message In A Nutshell –

Paul's desire is not only to save this Church from the damaging effects of false teaching but to enable the Church to continue to maturity in the faith. Col. 1:23; 2:6

### 2 Paul's Goal In His Letter

God's goal for the Colossians and all believers is spiritual growth, continuity and maturity. In Christ God has achieved what the law, human tradition and human wisdom could never achieve. He has, by the Cross and Resurrection, accomplished real reconciliation with God, with people and with the cosmos. The total dynamics of the cosmos have been altered by Calvary. God's plan for human life has been implemented. The Cross has produced forgiveness for past and present sin, has opened the way for maturity now and has given hope for the future. We have the *already* and *not yet*.

The church in Colossae was Christ's Body, already in heavenly places and yet, at the same time, called to suffer, strive and testify *in* the world in the here and now. Christ is sufficient and frees us from human requirements, rules and regulations.

The core of Colossians lies in Paul's insistence on monotheism and in the centrality of the Person and Work of Christ. These are the foundations for redemption, repentance, forgiveness, transformation of our living and the hope of eternal glory in and with Christ.

### 3 The Flow Of Paul's Arguments

**Chapter One** – Amidst the spiritual confusion in a very young church that was coming out of a plethora of a syncretistic mix of Greek, Jewish, Pagan, Roman and demonic ingredients, Paul seeks to clarify the nature of the true gospel of Christ (1:15-22), to persuade the Colossians that they have indeed responded to this genuine gospel of Christ in a fruit-bearing way (1:1-14) and to set before the church the challenge of continuing and maturing in this new faith in Christ (1:23-29).

**Chapter Two** – 2:4,8 offer the first clues that the Colossian Church is in danger of being deflected and deceived by falsity! Christ has disarmed the supernatural powers and authorities by His dying and rising (2:13-15). He is all-victorious and all-sufficient. Paul lists the ways of a return to bondage and slavery through externals, false humility, worship of angels, rules and asceticism (2:16-23). The apostle then highlights the way of continuation to maturity by being rooted, grounded and in tight relationship with Christ – they had died with Him, been buried with Him, been raised with Him and are alive with Him. Paul stresses this bond in 2:6-7, 9-12, 19. We have fullness by, with and in Christ.

**Chapter Three** – This new relationship to Christ must lead to a transformed living (3:1-4). The old life, dominated by self and the old nature, must be put to death and cast off (3:5-11) for now we are to be renewed into the image of God by knowledge of God. Old attitudes and actions are to be laid aside. We are to put on Christ, displaying His life characteristics, (3:12-14) and learning to live a new life within the redeemed people of God in Christian Community (3:15-17). Christ is to live at the very centre of this Church, changing all the relationships of the wider family, as each person obeys Christ (3:18-4:1).

**Chapter Four** – There must be watchfulness, gratitude, prayerfulness, evangelism, wisdom and gracious relationships with those outside the Christian Community (4:2-6). Even the final part (4:7-18) focuses on the people converted and changed - now showing new love, service, faithfulness, encouragement, prayer, amidst painful suffering too!

# Christian Growth in Practice

## 1 Our Position in Christ (already achieved!)

1:2 'holy and faithful/believing' brothers  
God has brought them into Christ.

*How?* By *His* work of redeeming love 1:12-14, 21-22.

They have been transferred from one kingdom into another:

- ie. *From* darkness 1:13      *to* light 1:12
- from* alienation 1:21      *to* reconciliation 1:20-22
- from* evil behaviour 1:21 *to* holiness of life 1:22
- from* a hostile mind 1:21      *to* a new peace 1:20
- from* tortuous bondage 1:13 *to* true freedom 1:22

*Result:* Redemption, forgiveness and peace came through Christ's death on the Cross – 1:14, 20.

This is a work of divine grace – HE has done it.

## 2 Evidence that Growth has Happened

*Faith* in Christ 1:4

*Love* for the saints 1:4 and in the Spirit 1:8

*Hope* of eternal glory in heaven, already stored up for them 1:5

That hope is the risen and glorified Christ.

## 3 Paul's Prayer Growth

—To be filled with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding 1:9-10. The *goal* of this – a life worthy of Christ and pleasing to God.

—What does this life look like? -

    Bearing fruit in good works 1:10

    Growing in the knowledge of God 1:10

    Being strengthened by His power 1:11

—What is the fruit of this life? -

    Endurance 1:11

    Patience 1:11

    Joy 1:11

    Gratitude 1:12

## 4 Faith and the Mind in our Growth

- 1:5 They heard about hope in the word of truth
- 1:6 They heard the Gospel
- 1:6 They understood God's grace in all its truth
- 1:7 They learned it from Epaphras
- 1:9 They knew God's Will through spiritual wisdom and understanding
- 1:10 They grew in knowledge of God
- 1:21 They were formerly enemies in their minds
- 1:23 They heard the Gospel
- 1:23 They had the Gospel proclaimed to them
- 1:28 They were involved in proclamation
- 2:2 They were growing in complete understanding
- 2:2 They were called to know Christ
- 2:3 They sought knowledge in Christ
- 2:4,8 They were to resist deceitful arguments
- 3:1 They are to set their hearts on things above
- 3:2 They are to set their minds on things above
- 3:10 They are being renewed in their new self in knowledge
- 3:5-14 They are being transformed in their mindset
- 3:16 They are to be indwelt by Christ's Word
- 4:2-6 They are to use their minds in prayer and witness
- 4:7-18 They are to hear Paul's greetings and instructions
- 4:16 They are to listen to Paul's letter being read and are to have it read and listened to.

*The place of the mind* is central in the Christian life. How are we to respond to this truth in a postmodern context in which it seems that –

- a) More and more people seem to read less and less in a fast-living society of sound bites.
- b) Some sectors of society exhibit a tendency towards a certain 'anti-intellectualism'.
- c) Postmodern folk tend to resist anything that smacks of authority and mind-control in their reaction against the failed promises of the 'modern era'.
- d) Many people say they are no longer looking for 'intellectual proof' of the Bible's claims about the Person and Work of Christ, but rather the proof of transformed living by those who name the Name of Christ in their own lives.



## **5 Growth to Christian Maturity**

### **(a) God's Initiative**

- i) You died with Christ to the basic principles of this world 2:20  
You have been buried with him in baptism 2:12
- ii) You have been raised with Him through your faith in God's power that raised Christ from the dead 2:12
- iii) You received Christ as Lord 2:6
- iv) You were circumcised in and by Christ in the putting off of the sinful nature 2:11
- v) You have been made alive with Christ by the forgiveness of all your sins 2:13
- vi) You were given fullness in Christ 2:9

### **(b) Our Response**

- i) You must continue to live in Christ, rooted and built up in Him,
- ii) strengthened in the faith as you were taught 2:7.
- iii) You must set your hearts on things above, since you have been raised with Christ 3:1
- iv) You must set your minds on things above 3:2
- v) You died and your life is hidden with Christ in God 3:3
- vi) You will appear with Christ in glory 3:4
- vii) You must put to death the things that belong to your earthly nature 3:5-11
- viii) You must put on the new nature 3:12-13
- ix) You must function as a unified body 3:14-17
- x) You must demonstrate transformed relationships 3:18-4:1
- xi) You must pray and be a witness 4:2-6

## **6 The power of continuing /**

## **6 The Power Of Continuing**

1. The power of prayer to transform – 1:3,9,10; 4:2-4,12
2. The power of gratitude – 1:3,12; 2:7; 3:15,16,17; 4:2
3. The power of suffering/struggle – 1:24; 2:1; 4:18
4. The power of the truth of God's Word in its fullness – 1:25,28; 3:16
5. The power of the indwelling Christ – 1:28; 2:12; 3:15
6. The power of God's Spirit at work – 1:29; 2:19
7. The power of Christ over all other powers – 2:10,14-15; 4:2
8. The power of a human decision to act – 1:29; 2:1; 3:5-11,12-14,15-17,23; 4:13
9. The power of unity, love, submission and obedience in relationships – 3:14-4:1
10. The power of encouragement – 1:28; 2:2; 3:16; 4:8,11
11. The power of forgiveness – 1:14; 3:13
12. The power of standing firm – 1:4; 2:5,7; 4:12

# Application

## How might Colossians impact a Postmodern Audience?

### Developing Themes Surrounding ‘Faith’ through the Colossian Letter – Confusion, Clarity, Continuation, Completion.

Colossians is a short letter but at the same time gives us a *huge view* of Christ. He is not merely the Lord and Saviour of individuals, but of communities and indeed the whole cosmos. We have a cosmic Christ at the heart of an earth-shattering gospel.

Christ offers the *Hope* that challenges and defies the sense of postmodern hopelessness, despair and discouragement that has infiltrated not only our society but also our own minds, attitudes and spirits within the Church, injecting a sense of oppression, heaviness and at times apathy.

One of my last questions to the BA Theology and Youth Ministry students at ICC Glasgow was this – What are young people looking for in today’s world? They jotted answers down and the consensus was agreed in a single word – *Authenticity*. Don Carson in the 1960’s was often asked by university students during Missions about the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Today that line of questions has changed radically. The question today is ‘Does it work? Does this faith in Christ actually make any difference to life? Show me the difference’. These are very valid questions facing the Church. Colossians is full of the challenge to live a different, transformed life – an authentic life to challenge secular society by its sheer sacrificial difference.

Colossians presents a massive metanarrative with an overarching authority figure – anathema to the postmodern mindset, so we are told, and yet this gospel of Christ in Colossians can bridge the apparent dichotomy, contradiction and oxymoron of the postmodern who rejects and despises authority on the one hand and yet longs for freedom on the other! The key, it seems to me, is that Colossians re-defines our view of authority and freedom in light of the overwhelming compassion of Christ, ruler of the universe, the cosmos, who was impaled on a piece of wood. Christ and Cross – the ultimate oxymoron.

We cannot begin to understand this world without recognizing the reality of spiritual warfare. This can be explored in Col. 2 and incorporated into a sermon series on Colossians in an effort to teach this issue to our people in a careful, balanced and relevant way. Christ by His Cross has disarmed the powers and authorities. (See ‘Preaching Spiritual Warfare’, also by Derek Newton, in this series.)

1. In spite of the apparent glory, majesty and splendid architecture of the Roman Empire, life in Colossae under the Empire was aggressive, hostile and frightening. Into this mix, the Colossian Letter was highly subversive.

Some say that the context is all about just where Christ might fit into a particular pantheon of gods or emanation of divinity within Gnosticism. Some say it was a heresy of a type of perverted Phrygian Judaism or an early gnostic philosophy or a Greek/Egyptian cultic ritualistic religion. Ultimately Paul is claiming that the Christ is the *One God of the universe* – the cosmic Lord who rises far above *all* philosophies and pantheons. Compared with this Christ, Caesar was nothing! How alarming would that have been to the Imperial authorities controlling Asia Minor! To what extent are we all influenced and controlled in the 21st Century by the global consumerist market. (See Walsh et al, 'Colossians Remixed', in the Bibliography)

2. The material in Colossians on Redemption, involving concepts such as sin, Satan, Spirit, judgment, resurrection, will be very challenging for a postmodern 'audience', given the current skepticism towards most, if not all, of these elements of salvation. Yet postmodern cynicism about religious authority, rules, regulations, traditions, bias, ceremonial and ritual can be tackled head on as audiences realize that Paul too was debunking and demolishing all that smacks of falsity and pretense in this world. In this sense, postmoderns will find a friend in Paul and his teaching.
3. The Colossian Letter is highly *Christo-Centric*. We have been saved *by* Christ, so that we are now *in* Christ and Christ is now *in* us. Where do we go from here? Postmodern thinking loves the idea of travelling on a 'journey' in life, but resents and resists the idea of arriving. In Christ there is a real sense in which we have arrived, but the journey continues. We journey with Christ in a personal rootedness *with* Christ. This makes a reality our Continuation In Christ, by perseverance in His grace and provision. This idea can be explored with postmodern congregations.
4. The postmodern world craves 'community' and 'life in community' and yet in reality, in the Western world especially is bogged down in the sort of selfish individualism that creates estrangement, loneliness and separation. Chapters 3 and 4 of Colossians especially paint a picture of life in a transformed community and can be used to challenge society along these lines.
5. The foundations for healthy, balanced and vibrant family life are laid down in Col 3, in a way that ties relationships strongly into fellowship with Christ Himself as Lord who builds and maintains the concept and practice of family. Postmodern fracturing of family relationships can be overturned by the teaching of Colossians, coupled with an ongoing personal relationship with, and empowerment by, Christ Himself.

# **SERMON OUTLINES – Colossians**

See also the Introductory Sermon on p4

Sermon 1	Col. 1:1-14	The Fruit of the Gospel of Christ
Sermon 2	Col. 1:15-20	What is this Gospel of Christ?
Sermon 3	Col. 1:21 – 2:5	The Pain and Privilege of Ministry
Sermon 4	Col. 2:6-23	Our Continuation in Christ
Sermon 5	Col. 3:1-4	Our Union with Christ
Sermon 6	Col. 3:5-11	Dying to the Old Life
Sermon 7	Col. 3:12-17	Living Out New Life under Christ's Rule
Sermon 8	Col. 3:18 – 4:1	New Family Life in Christ
Sermon 9	Col. 4:2-6	Christian Living in the World
Sermon 10	Col. 4:7-18	Marks of Maturity in Christ

## Sermon 1      Col. 1:1-14      The Fruit of the Gospel of Christ

Whether the core problem was false teaching from outside *or* new teaching emerging from inside *or* a new perspective on spirituality, the apostle Paul seeks to reassure true believers of their Christian standing and to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the gospel message brought to them by Epaphras. Uncertainty and confusion left some Colossians wide open to more deviation – not unlike the sheer confusion widespread in pluralistic postmodernism today.

Paul seeks to reassure his Colossian readers by two complementary approaches – he stresses in 1:5b and 6b that this gospel message is truth; it addresses initially the human mind and Paul lays great emphasis on the place of our own understanding; it came to them through Epaphras, a faithful and trustworthy servant; it bears fruit wherever it is preached; it is a gospel of *Grace*.

The apostle then underlines the evidence of Colossian conversion by this gospel, namely, saving *Faith* (1:2,5) is a sure mark of God's grace and Spirit; *Love* is a gift from God (1:8) but is shown in its binding together of highly diverse people; *Hope* (1:5) is focused on our living by perseverance here in anticipation of glory there in the new heaven and new earth. The contemporary Christian focus often seems to be a case of living for the present, with scant regard for the future!

It is possible that the so-called 'new teachers' had suggested to the Colossian believers that they had received from Epaphras only a *partial Gospel* which these teachers then attempted to 'fill out' with their own version of the gospel. Paul thus focuses in 1:9-14 on his prayer for the believers and his praise for them and he now concentrates on the essence of the one true gospel of grace –

- a) **Knowledge** (1:9). Paul believes that many of the Colossians *have indeed* received the true gospel and *have* responded to it. They must now *continue* and *grow*. How? In contrast to the false teaching of elitist knowledge, Paul's focus is on the full knowledge of Christ that we all need, so that we know how to live in this world (1:10). Our minds need to continue to be fed seriously with the knowledge of God and His will. The Church will not grow without this essential. Grace absolutely *must* lead to works, to fruit, to godly living and to further knowledge of God.

- b) **Power** (1:11). Paul wants the believers to have the fullness of power from the Godhead, but it is power for a clear purpose, namely that they might know *endurance* and *patience* (1:11-12). That is the only way by which we will know the ability to *persevere* in the midst of struggles, suffering and disappointment. That is the proof of God's power upon us – see also 1:29. Clear links here with Paul's own personal experience in 2 Corinthians.
- c) **Gratitude** (1:12-14). The apostle Paul returns now to his opening theme of praise and prayer – key themes for all ministers of the gospel. Paul reminds his readers of the glorious and eternal inheritance granted to them by grace. Out of darkness into wonderful light! Strong link here into Col 2:6-7. Our redemption is by grace – that is our great foundation and motivation - but must be shown forth by active works of gratitude.

## Sermon 2     Col. 1:15-20     What is this Gospel of Christ?

It may be that the false teaching/teachers were offering the Colossians a greater fullness of experience, a new freedom, greater power, initiation into divine secrets or attainment of specialized knowledge for the spiritual elite in Colossae. Paul is determined to say that the gospel of Christ is full, complete, sufficient and totally adequate. *Word* and *Will*, via wisdom and understanding = *New Life*. Having focused on the marks of grace already visible in Colossian lives in 1:1-14, Paul throws the spotlight on the actual ingredients of Christ's gospel in 1:15-20.

**Christ in creation** vv. 15-17. Twice we are told that *all* things were created by Christ (v.16); *all* things were created for Christ (v.16); the existence of *all* powers and authorities is dependent entirely on Christ (v.16); Christ was God incarnate, reflecting *all* the fullness of God (v.15); Christ is superior to *all* creation and existed before *all* creation (vv. 15,17); in Christ, *all* things have been perfectly framed, held together, placed together (v.17). This vast cosmos is ultimately beyond our comprehension eg. Light travels at a speed of over one thousand million kilometres per hour and yet its 'journey' across this universe takes 15 billion years. This estimated universe width is something in the region of 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 kilometres!! The staggering truth is that God became visible in Christ. The Creator has entered His creation. Christ was first-born – not the first of created beings, but He takes priority as the heir of all things, holding *all* power and authority. His power is sufficient to sustain the universe and is therefore more than sufficient to take care of the Colossians.

**Christ on the cross** vv. 19-20. The fullness of the creator God was in Christ. The gradation of spiritual intermediaries to span the gulf between God and humanity was not needed. Christ was the only mediator, fully divine and fully human and *because of that*, God in Christ was able to reconcile *all* things to Himself, in the midst of the strife and dislocation that fallen humanity had brought. In His death and resurrection, Christ represented humanity and paid the price of taking our sin on the Cross and bearing the divine punishment for it. He who had the power of the universe at His disposal chose voluntary but utter humiliation on the cross – physical agony, social shame and real separation from His Father. The One of supreme strength died in total weakness. Satan, knowing his defeat by Christ's death and resurrection, offers *another* gospel (2 Cor 11:1-6). The reconciliation of the cosmos to God includes our salvation in Christ.



**Christ in the church** v.18. The One who upholds this vast universe allowed Himself to be taken by sinful humanity, nailed to a Cross *but* by His resurrection, his supremacy is confirmed and He calls out and builds His Body, the Church, that shares His risen life by the gift of His Holy Spirit. Our calling is to live and stay in union with the Head of that Body, and the Head *is* Christ Himself. Paul is presenting the essence of the gospel of Christ and he goes even further!

**Christ *in you*, the hope of glory** vv. 11,27-29 That's why Paul lives – to be transformed and to bring Christ to others, so that they might bear the fruit of a changed life in humility, honesty and holiness. He and we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit to be strengthened to deal with all the pain that *will* come our way in life.

### Sermon 3      Col. 1:21 – 2:5      The Pain and Privilege of Ministry

**The change in our lives 1:21-23.** Paul wants to remind his readers about their personal experience of Christ's work of reconciliation in their lives. He records three stages of this – *past* in v.24 What you once were. They were hostile Gentiles with a disposition of mind, heart, thoughts and feelings that led into evil deeds; *present* in v. 22 Where you now stand. God counts us as innocent because Christ paid the penalty on our behalf. We now live in a transformed relationship with the Godhead; *future* in v.23 How you must go on. We are to *continue* in the faith, rooted in the Word of God in its fullness, having our minds fed, our emotions moved and our wills stirred. We are indwelt by Christ, the Spirit and the Word but it requires *our* effort but *his* power –1:29.

**The calling on our ministry 1:25-28; 2:2-4.** Here is the core and heart of Paul's ministry – the fullness of God's power and glory reside in Christ and believers are united by faith to Christ. Christ's work for us and in us are inseparable sides of the same coin. Paul in his 'servant ministry' has been called and commissioned by God to present to the church the word of God in its fullness (1:25), to make known this remarkable mystery of Christ's indwelling of His people (1:26-27), to teach this Word with such divine wisdom and power that the church is brought to completion in Christ (1:28), to bring the church by discipleship into complete understanding and personal knowledge of Christ (2:2-4) and to equip the church to detect and respond to those who try to deceive it (2:4). We are called to *think* theologically and to *live* theologically. Knowledge of God and our understanding of it leads to love, unity and encouragement but in 2:2 the reverse is also true, namely that a church *needs* to exercise encouragement, love and unity to produce a situation in which the Spirit will produce understanding and knowledge of Christ *with continuation in him*. This is all desperately important to Paul who uses the personal pronoun 'I' ten times in this section to plead with this church not to get discouraged, not to drift. Our ministry is not only to teach the Word and to live it out but to *train* people.

**The cost of a teaching and training ministry 1:24,29; 2:1,5.** There *is* pain and struggle for all who are serious about Scripture and about living a transformed life in a hostile world. Paul's suffering – and ours – is part and parcel of Christ's suffering in His Body, even as the church awaits the consummation of God's work of cosmic renewal (1:24). In the 1970's Cambodia, 90% of pastors were massacred as they sought to nurture their young congregations during the Pol Pot regime and the brutality of the

Khmer Rouge. God had warned the apostle of the pain to come (Acts 9:16); the pain brought him closer to Christ (Phil 3:10); therefore, Paul does not lose heart (2:5). Life and ministry can and will be painful but it also involves sheer hard work – at times unrelenting and exhausting (1:29; 2:1). *And yet*, God sustained Paul *with divine energy* (1:29). This is God’s amazing encouragement for His people! Paul uses a strong word ‘I labour’, indicating tirelessly and with huge expenditure of effort. ‘Struggling’ suggests single-mindedness to the goal of training people in the Word. Does God intervene? Indeed, He does. God deals with us in wisdom, for that is foundational to His character. He grants His Spirit and power. We are called to continue and persevere. God will provide the strength.

**The call to continuation 2:6-7.** The apostle urges the Colossians, having been united to Christ, to press on into freedom and not to return to a state of bondage. They are to continue in godly living and this discipline in their lives will be the evidence that the indwelling Christ is operating as Lord. They are to continue to be rooted in Him and built up in Him, showing clear growth. They are to continue to be established in truth and in deep gratitude, steeped in the whole counsel of God. As preachers, we are to avoid the pitfall of the accusation – “Ten thousand thousand were his texts but all his sermons one!” In a nutshell, we are to resist all attempts to deceive us and divert us from divine truth. The real truth is that we share Christ’s victory by our union with Him and we possess in Christ all that we need in this life to continue in our new freedom.

**The means to continuation 2:8-23.**

**1. Fullness in Christ 2:9-10.** The Colossians have been made complete ‘in Christ’ by spiritual union. Thus, there is no ‘Christ plus’ to be sought and found.

**2. Fellowship with Christ 2:11-12.** A sequence has taken place in a believer’s life:

- ‘dead in sins and uncircumcised in sinful nature’ (2:13);
- ‘circumcised in the putting off of the sinful nature’ (2:11);
- ‘forgiven all our sins’ (2:13);
- ‘died with Christ’ (2:20);
- ‘buried with Christ in baptism’ (2:12);
- ‘raised with Christ’ (2:12);
- ‘alive with Christ’ (2:13).

We are now free from the condemnation of sin but not yet free from the corrupting presence of sin in us.

**3. Freedom through Christ 2:13-23.**

- a) **Deliverance from the grip of evil powers 2:13-15.** In forgiving us at Calvary, Christ has broken the *power* of sin. The Spirit applies this freedom into our experience. The debt bond of sin we could never pay has been cancelled by Christ’s death and Christ in His Cross has been victorious over all evil powers.

- b) **Deliverance from the shadows of external traditions** 2:16-17. The false teachers *may* have taken OT feasts and injected them with pagan significance as a way of reaching ‘advanced’ spirituality. The old rules, rites and regulations were shadows that have now found their fulfillment and completion in Christ. The Colossians must not listen to those who use a legalistic means to measure.
- c) **Deliverance from the false judgments of others** 2:18-19. The Colossians must beware of those who *seem* impressive but are actually involved in false humility, angel worship and claimed visions. Pride lies at the root of these folk’s living and they are actually controlled by a fleshly mind, not a spiritual mind. Such people have lost their hold on Christ as Head and are very liable to be a weakening influence on the unity of the Body of Christ, the Church. This is dangerous. We are called to be channels of *Christ’s* life for the Body, to produce growth in it.
- d) **Deliverance from the bondage of empty and invalid human rules** – 2:20-23. Satan will always seek to direct people’s religious thinking away from grace and into the deception of justification by law, regulations and works. The false teachers were trying to steal the allegiance and obedience of the Colossian Church but were actually sending believers back into bondage to sin, not freedom! Paul wants to free the Colossians from man-made religiosity. The Colossians need not abstain from certain foods or practices for fear of falling under demonic influence or for fear of being condemned by the self-righteous. Connection to Christ is vital. Ultimately only *Divine* power can change lives v.23.

## Sermon 5     Col. 3:1-4

## Our Union with Christ

Paul is addressing new and confused believers in this very young Colossian Church. The confusion was there because of at least two streams of influence –

1. False teaching about just who Jesus was and what He had achieved.
2. The overlap and collision between their old former religious mind-sets and their new exposure to, and experience of, the Christ.

Having explained to the church the various false routes to Christian continuation in faith – legalistic observance, initiation ceremonies for elitist groups, ascetic practices, supernatural visions, special knowledge or ecstatic experiences – Paul now shows the church the way to continue in the faith. The whole letter hangs on the key hinge of Col 3:1-4.

**Our position** – We *were dead* in our sins, trapped in our sinful nature 2:13; Christ *died* to redeem us and made us alive by His death 2:13-15; we *died* with Christ to the principles of this world 2:20; we were buried and raised with Christ. Everything that happened to Christ – death, burial, resurrection – has been applied to us as believers. Beware of over-focusing on His death and neglecting His rising up! Our death with Christ has severed our links with our former existence, whilst our resurrection with Him has brought us into a new level of existence.

**Our practice** – We are now to ‘set’ (used 26 times in the NT, of which 23 are in Paul) our hearts (3:1) and ‘set’ our minds (3:2) on things above. Our aims, attitudes and ambitions are to be centred in and with Christ. Why? Because we now live in and with Christ. We are to be heavenly-orientated but still on the earth! We are called to reveal Christ on earth in all we think, speak and do. This involves putting to death the old life (3:5-9) and putting on the new life (3:10-14). This is only possible because of our new position in Christ, having died with Christ, been buried with Christ and been raised with Him *already* in *this* life. Our union with Christ transforms our minds, hearts and wills.

**Our source of power** – We are to *do* in practice the commands of 3:1-2. We decide and we determine to do this, *but* we live out the life of Christ by the power of Christ as we live in union with Him. We take part *now* in the resurrection life of Christ. We have a supernatural power source in the Spirit of God (Col 1:29; 2:1). Christ at God’s right hand is *not* a static idea. Even HM King Charles seldom sits inactive on his throne – he is active. Christ, all the more so, is continually empowering us for life and ministry and we need to depend on Him.

## **Our promises from God –**

*Past* – 3:3 You died but Christ is now your life 3:4. A new life *is* possible because of our new position in Christ and the power of the Spirit.

*Present* – A believer is *safe* in Christ. ‘Our life is hidden with Christ in God’. This new life is *not* too big a risk to take. Why seek the things of this world that will never satisfy? Our life is already hidden away in heaven and the double-glazing we possess in Christ gives us protection and security.

*Future* – This world – its values, attitudes and actions – will not always be sympathetic with our new life. Whatever we lose or sacrifice by living a new life here and now, will be as nothing, for we will share the eternal glory of God in and with Christ. All this makes living the new life here and now utterly worthwhile.

How can we possibly live a new life? Only by being made a new person. It is only our new relationship with Christ that makes possible the living of a new life. Maybe the relative lack of teaching emphasis on Christ's resurrection today has tended to blind us to the fact that in a real sense, we have *already* been raised. Why do many get stuck in the Christian life or struggle with ongoing sinfulness? Col 2 is full of passive verbs showing the great position we've been brought into.

Col 3 is full of active verbs showing ways in which we must act in our new living. Check out the imperative commands in 3:1,2,5,8,9, 10,12, 13,14. There must be a continuous seeking and a continuous setting. The source of this new life is Christ and we live it out by cultivating our union and fellowship with the exalted Christ.

Verses 10–11: There can be a place for visionary experience, sense of peace, a feeling of spiritual compulsion and an inner leading *but* these must always be subject to the test of *Scripture*. The new life of Christ which indwells us is constantly renewed. How? In *knowledge* by the joint work of *Word* and *Spirit*. Though we have a new life, we retain an old nature which needs to be dealt with ruthlessly. Three times in 3:15,16 and 17, the Colossians are urged to be thankful. When this happens, believers will be grateful for each other and barriers in the church will fall when 'Christ is all and is in all' (3:11).

**The earthly nature/old life that we need to crucify** – This is a strong call to the church in Colossae to remember the life they once lived out of sin and ignorance. The call now is for self-denial within the life of the Church –

- a) **The vice list of five** – This is rooted in the fallen-ness of the human person – 'sexual irresponsibility' cf Gal 5:19; 'impurity' or moral uncleanness (very similar to immorality); 'lust' or passion/sexual perversion/erotic passion; 'evil desires' that need to be resisted by continual walking in the Spirit; 'greed' or covetousness or a sexual longing to possess others' possessions, including another's wife. All these sins were ultimately demonic drives to split a church. Such persistent sinfulness will come under divine judgment (v.6). The 'box' of sin categories is now much smaller in secular postmodernity than in former days! Verse 7 points to the decisive change of Christian conversion. Paul's ethics are rooted in the living out of the death and resurrection of Christ in a community.



- b) **‘Put Away’** and **‘Put Off’** *anti-social attitudes and actions* – All of these carry damage to other people, especially through *speech* (3:13,16,17). The Church is God’s new society – a new order in which all racial, religious, social and cultural distinctions have been abolished v.11. ‘Anger’; ‘Wrath’ or ‘rage’; ‘Malice’ or moral evil or evil-speaking; ‘Slander’ or blasphemy (cursing directed to God or defamation aimed at people); ‘Foul talk’ that is a weapon of hatred and spite towards others or is an unthinking participation in crude conversation; ‘Lying’ destroys mutual trust between parties and creates divisive suspicion within Christ’s Body. This new nature and consequent new life in Christ is to be lived out *in community* – a deep challenge to the Colossians but an equally profound challenge to the selfish individualism of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!

## Sermon 7     Col. 3:12-17   Living Out New Life under Christ's Rule

**Be ruled by the new life of Christ – 3:12-14.** The Colossians and ourselves have received the true gospel, have responded in repentance and faith, have died with Christ, been buried with Him, been raised with Him and are now living in union with Christ, revealing His risen life in a hostile but needy world. *Therefore*, says Paul, show forth the fruit of transformed relationships. There must be a bearing with one another, a forgiving of one another and a deep loving of one another. In short, we are to submit to the rule of Christ by living out the new resurrection life of Christ. *But **why** should we live out a new life?*

- a) Because it is **Possible** – we can live differently from before and differently from how this world lives out life because we are in union with Christ 3:1,5,12. We share and show *His* resurrection life here and now.
- b) Because it is **Powerful** – we are responsible to take steps of action but we have a power source, supernaturally charged for life and ministry 1:29
- c) Because it is **Preparatory** – Christ will come (3:4) and bring judgment (3:6). We are safe in Christ (3:3) but the truth of these texts should drive us to holy living in this life. We do have a new life now; we do experience the grace of God and gifts of the Spirit now; we do reflect God's glory now, albeit dimly. But one day the world will finally see us for what we are. We will be revealed as sharers in God's glory through our union with Christ.

**Be ruled by the peace of Christ – 3:15.** Churches allow differences of opinion, yet at the same time maintaining unity. The Body needs peace for it cannot function well if there is discouragement, disruption and discord. Unity and peace are causes for gratitude – they cannot be taken for granted! Unity in the churches was of central importance to Paul, but there was an even greater issue for the apostle – *truth!*

**Be ruled by the Word of Christ – 3:16.** We are called to do three things –

- a) to teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.
- b) to worship with thankful hearts.
- c) to do everything in Christ's name with gratitude.

These goals cannot be achieved unless we 'let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly'. Ultimately, we are called to live under the rule and control, not primarily of our leaders or denominations or Mission Boards, but under the direction first and foremost of God's Word and Spirit. Paul's Letter to the Colossians paints a very high Christology; we need an equally high view of divine Scripture. That will not please all our critics but it will satisfy God and we will be serving one another according to the *word and will* of the Lord God Himself. That's what ultimately matters.

When travelling on planes, we are given lifejacket instructions to sort ourselves out first, before helping others. Sounds a bit selfish at first but actually the best way to defend, protect and deepen the life of the church is to sort out and maintain our own walk with God by letting His Word dwell in us richly. It is that Word and Spirit that mold and transform our whole being. In a world of conflicting claims to 'knowledge', it is God's Word that changes our behaviour.

Hellenistic society had **household codes** for ethical behavior in the family. For believers, however, Christ has brought the new dimension. This section of Paul's Letter is devoted to how true spirituality and the 'new self' shown in 3:1-17 should govern relationships.

In the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 Paul applies v21 ('Submit yourselves *to one another* out of reverence for Christ') to all six groups.

a) **Wives** – The submission of the wife to the husband, not out of obligation or inferiority, is the suitable response of someone who submits to Christ's Lordship.

b) **Husbands** – Submission of the wife will be easier if the husband fulfills his duty to be loving and gentle towards his wife. This means unceasing care and loving service in a relationship that has joint commitment to honour the Lord.

c) **Children** – Again, this relationship is linked inextricably to our relationship with God: children are to be obedient to their parents in every way *because* this pleases God (v. 20b). It is very hard for parents to share encouragement to their children if they are not being obeyed. It is the obedience of children in their home setting that provides a strong foundation for their future service in church.

d) **Fathers** – To strengthen children's obedience to parents, the father must not 'provoke' or 'embitter' his children, for this will trigger disobedience. Indeed, the father cannot demand obedience without showing love. He must not make his love for his children conditional on their obedience to him. The father must avoid giving continuous criticism and harsh punishments to his children as these will have a damaging effect on them and will make them weak in self-confidence. The overall rule in all family relationships is submission to, and love for, Christ's rule.

e) **Slaves And Masters/Employees and employers** – It does seem in the NT that Paul did not push for the abolition of slavery, though in the case of his letter to Philemon there are strong hints that the apostle took steps towards the emancipation of the runaway slave Onesimus. Col 3:18-4:1 does indicate that a slave could enjoy freedom in Christ *and* serve as a slave. Paul makes a number of key points regarding –

- i) *the slave should not be 'men-pleasing'* – The temptation for slaves is to perform at the minimum required work levels so as to satisfy their Master and avoid being punished. In Christ, the slave should work 'with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord' (3:22). This different attitude reveals the rule of Christ.
- ii) *the slave is freed by Christ to work to his optimum* – Some first century slaves in the Greco-Roman world lived in households and led relatively comfortable lives as tutors to children; others toiled in horrendous conditions in fields, harbours and mines. Whatever the work, the slave in Christ is of huge value, and his service to masters is viewed by God as sacrificial service to the Lord Himself (3:22-23). Christ accepts the slave's work as unto Himself!
- iii) *The slave receives a reward for his service to Christ* – Even if the master refuses to pay the slave, Christ will reward the slave with an 'eternal inheritance' (3:25). Whether this verse refers to masters or slaves, the message of Paul is the same, namely that God will judge anyone who lives wrongly in this life. Masters are commanded to be 'right and fair' towards their slaves (4:1). Both masters *and* slaves are called to do what they *know* to be right (3:24; 4:1). The triangle of *slave, master and God* insists on fair, right and fruitful relations.

The key in all this is that we must control our 'ego' by God's enabling and by our discipline and obedience. We must put off the old self. The new self is motivated by unconditional love that gives and does not expect anything in return.

This is a mixed bag of a section but probably completes the teaching on the practical outworking of the rule of Christ and the need to hold on to Christ amidst conflicting views, possible disunity and pressures from inside and outside. There was a collision of mind-sets, resulting in tension, discomfort, confusion and fear. How will the Colossian Community survive the stress? Paul's answer is to focus on the double issue of *Communication And Relationship*.

1. **Be watchful in warfare** (4:2) – When a church fails in the area of prayer, the door is open for the enemy to take full advantage and to cause big disruption. Paul might have asked prayer for his prison cell doors to be thrown open but instead he asks prayer for a door to declare the message of the mystery of Christ! Paul (1:9-10) and Epaphras (4:12) were both men of prayer, so Paul was not asking for something he himself did nothing about! A great lesson for ministers. Attempts at serious prayer will invite strong spiritual opposition. It is by the operation of Word and Spirit that we are brought to faith in Christ and it is their ministry that will be under constant demonic attack. Truth is under great attack!
2. **Be clear in communication** (4:4) – It was said of Martin Luther as a pastor and preacher that “It is impossible to misunderstand him”. A great tribute to any minister today! Paul needed prayer for clarity as he sought to explain the great mystery – that all wisdom and knowledge are located in Christ and that Jews and Gentiles are now on an equal footing in Christ. Paul asked prayer for boldness (Eph 6:19-20) as well as for real clarity. It is the combination of these two that can make us agents of powerful divine change in people and situations through our communication. At the same time, our lives and lips must be in complete and continuous sync.
3. **Be wise in your walk** (4:5) – The members of our congregations will read our lives more closely than our sermons and handouts. Outsiders, as well as insiders, should see Christ in the way we live and relate to them. FF Bruce once said “It remains true that the reputation of the gospel is bound up with the behavior of those who claim to have experienced its saving power”. There is much Christian living to be done before we speak!

4. **Be considerate in conversation** (4:6) – Where gospel communication is concerned, it is often a great help and strength when outsiders open up a dialogue with us. We are then in a position to respond and seek to answer their questions eg Acts 8:34-35. We are to be enthusiastic but also gracious and tactful in all our dealings with people. If our lives are right, people are far more likely to listen to us and see truth. Gracious speech should be a reflection of our own experience of grace in the gospel. Our speech is not to be bland or boring or passive, but spicy and salty, with real and genuine pastoral sensitivity to all we encounter. We need to do or say very little until we have listened very much indeed. God makes us responsible and accountable for the faith of our members.
5. **Be grateful for grace** (3:15,16,17; 4:2) – ‘Thankfulness’ occurs 46 times in Paul’s letters – more times line for line than any Hellenistic writer, pagan or Christian. Beware of discouragement or depression, for God *does* make provision as well as allowing struggles. Thank Him.

Paul is in prison and therefore separated from his dear friends in the churches in the Lycus Valley, around 100 miles east of Ephesus. The apostle thus takes the chance to renew warm friendship and fellowship with them all, albeit by letter. He had already stated his confidence in them (2:1-5) and now he renews trust. Careful reading of this closing section reveals much about Paul's own character and the challenge this constitutes for all in Christian ministry today –

1. **His concern to pray (1:9-10)** – Paul had already asked God continually to equip the Colossians with the knowledge of God's will and to empower them to live transformed lives. His own example as a 'prayer warrior' is the only really valid credential he has to justify his challenge to the Colossians to be equally keen to spend time on their knees (4:2,12). The joint prayer intensity of Paul and Epaphras must surely go far towards explaining the growth of the church here.
2. **His concern to be focussed (1:2,7; 2:6,7)** – Paul wants to take every opportunity to fulfill the ministry God has given him in the limited time still available to him. He wants this also for his fellow-workers. Hence his stress on qualities such as gratitude, loyalty, stickability, perseverance, continuation and maturity as he and his co-workers aim for the completion that is genuinely full, and not the fake imitation of deceivers.
3. **His concern to support his co-workers** – The apostle has particular praise for Epaphras in 4:12-13 cf 1:7, noting also such qualities as 'faithfulness', 'loyalty' and 'hard work' (4:7,9,11,13) in his other friends. Paul sets us a great example – he was not so obsessed with *his own* ministry that he failed to be deeply interested in the ministry of others.
4. **His concern to partner with other ministers in ministry** – The apostle was ready to share his life and ministry with others that he names specifically in his letter – Aristarchus (4:10); Tychicus (4:7); Mark (4:10) and Justus (4:11). Paul did not have a 'one-man-band' mentality of Christian ministry. A mark of a man's true humility in the work of God.
5. **His concern for people** – Paul actually was highly relational in character, contrary to those who tend to think of Paul as cold, calculated and distant. The repeated use of 'dear' indicates warmth and real love in his relationships with those who worked alongside him. The call to exercise genuine love is an indispensable foundation for every aspect of our life and ministry. Actions and attitudes ultimately will speak louder than our words.



6. **His concern for good channels of communication** – Paul is very aware that good communication in all directions is absolutely vital in the warfare of ministry. Our enemy will very readily exploit loopholes and weaknesses in our communication to create frustration, misunderstanding and upset in our relations with fellow-workers and with those we seek to reach for the Kingdom of Christ. Miscommunication or no communication are surely major causes of bad feelings and sense of being neglected. The apostle is ready to exercise his authority as apostle in the issuing of instructions (4:7-9,10,16) and yet, at the same time, he clearly misses the closeness and warmth of personal relationships when he has to be separated by circumstances from his fellow-workers.

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