

III. Thank God for the Colossians

February 3/4, 2010

Colossians 1:1-8

Aim: To introduce the Colossian church and Paul's epistle to the Colossians.

A. Introduction

1. Colossae

Colossae was situated in a region known in ancient times as Phrygia. When the Romans conquered it they incorporated it into their province of Asia (Anatolia of modern Turkey). For several centuries, Colossae was a thriving town in the valley of the River Lycus, not far from its junction with the Maeander River. At Colossae the Lycus Valle narrowed to a width of about two miles, and Mount Cadmus, some 8,000 feet high, towered over the city.

Colossae was on an important east-west trading route, connecting the large Aegean seaport of Ephesus (120 miles away) and Sardis to the west all the way to the Euphrates River in the east. It was also situated along the northern trade route to Pergamos. In its heyday, Colossae was an important center of the wool industry, to the point that a certain kind of high-quality dark red wool was known as 'Colossian wool.' Sheep grazed on the fertile pasturelands surrounding the town, and dyes were made from the nearby chalk deposits.

Ten miles downstream, in the direction of Ephesus, lay two neighboring towns which faced each other across the Lycus – Laodicea and Hierapolis (cp. 4:13). By the time that Paul wrote this letter, Colossae had seen better days. The Roman road to Pergamos was rerouted through Laodicea, bypassing Colossae. That, coupled with the rise of Laodicea and Hierapolis, led to the decline in importance of Colossae. In Paul's day, it was a small city, overshadowed by its more prosperous neighbors. An earthquake devastated the area in the early 60's AD. Laodicea was quickly rebuilt (per Tacitus; cp. Rev. 3:14-22), and Colossae was eventually rebuilt as well. Largely abandoned by the eighth century, Colossae was destroyed by the twelfth century. The site is currently unoccupied and there is nothing there now but unexcavated ruins.

The population of Colossae was predominantly Gentile (cp. 2:13), but there was a sizeable Jewish community. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Antiochus III the Great (223-187 BC) transported 2000 Jewish families to the region in 213 BC. The diversity of the population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highways meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together. Because Colossae had a mixed Gentile and Jewish population, it is not surprising that the apparently syncretistic religious movement threatening the Colossian church contained Jewish and pagan elements.

2. Colossians

It was during the period of time that Paul spent ministering in Ephesus that the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis got their start (cp. Acts 19:10). The man who founded them was not Paul, since he included the Laodiceans and the Colossians among those who had never seen him in person (2:1). Nor does the book of Acts mention Paul's founding a church in Colossae, or even visiting there.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

Paul spent two action-packed years in Ephesus, using a lecture hall owned by a man named Tyrannus during the lunchtime siesta. During that time, a man named Epaphras, a native of Colossae (4:12), was converted, probably under Paul's ministry. Another Colossian was converted in Ephesus under Paul's ministry there – Philemon. Epaphras served as Paul's lieutenant in evangelizing the three towns of the Lycus Valley, and Philemon became the host of the church in Colossae (Phm. 1-2). Paul, of course, had a deep interest in the churches there and prayerfully advised Epaphras and Philemon as necessary. So it was quite natural that when a major problem arose in Colossae, Epaphras came to him for help.

The letter suggests that most of the Christians in Colossae were Gentiles. Paul describes the conversion of the Colossian Christians in terms more naturally applied to Gentiles than to Jews (cp. 1:12, 21). The sins that characterized these believers before they came to Christ (3:5) are also more typically Gentile than Jewish. In addition to these positive indications, there are also two arguments from silence that cohere with (though certainly do not prove) a mainly Gentile audience: the lack of any explicit Old Testament quotations, and the lack of any explicit reference to the law.

3. Occasion

Colossians, of course, claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (1:1), and this claim is fleshed out with considerable personal and circumstantial detail (cp. 4:18). Yet one estimate puts 60 percent of current scholars who think that Paul did not write Colossians, a view of the authority of this letter which is relatively recent. It is the position of this study that Paul is clearly and unequivocally the author of Colossians.

This letter was one of Paul's 'prison' epistles – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. He states twice that he was a prisoner when he wrote it (4:3, 18). The letter is closely associated with Philemon, through Onesimus (4:9), and the repetition of Paul's colleagues (cp. 4:7-18 with Phm. 22-24). Colossians is further associated with Ephesians through the messenger Tychicus (4:7; Eph. 6:21), Archippus (4:17; Phm. 2) and the close correspondence of organization and topics in the two letters. Thus, it is highly probable that Colossians was written by Paul at the same time as Ephesians and Philemon.

The question of the location of Paul's imprisonment is intensely debated in commentaries. There are three possible suggestions: an unspecified imprisonment in Ephesus during his ministry there (52-55 AD); during his two years in Caesarea (57-59 AD); or during his two years in Rome (AD 60-62). Caesarea is thought to be highly unlikely for several reasons, not the least of which is the high improbability that runaway slave Onesimus would head there. Ephesus is a possible haven for the fugitive Onesimus, primarily because of its close proximity to Colossae (120 miles). However, the association of Colossians and Ephesians with Philemon make Ephesus less likely. In addition, while Luke was with Paul when Colossians was written (4:14), he does not appear to have been with him in Ephesus. The most probable location from which these prison letters were written remains the traditional one of Rome. Thus, it is most probable that Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians and Ephesians, early in Paul's 'first' imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:11-31). The date of the letter, then, would be AD 60-61.

Although Paul had not founded the church in Colossae, he wrote this letter in response to the fact that Epaphras had traveled all the way to Rome while Paul was under house arrest. Epaphras' reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

the community. Apparently, Epaphras had joined Paul in his imprisonment (cp. Phm. 23). He was not able, then, to travel back to Colossae with the letter that Paul wrote, so Paul commissioned Tychicus to do this job instead (4:7-8).

4. Purpose

Paul wrote the letter to the Colossian church in response to news brought to him by Epaphras. A serious heresy had arisen, and Epaphras was so concerned that he made the 1000-1300 mile trip to Rome to visit Paul in prison. The Colossian church had not yet been infected by that heresy, and Paul writes to warn them against its dangers. Colossians is thus a preventative letter. Its purpose is to provide the resources that the Colossian Christians needed to fend off the new kind of false teaching to which they had been exposed.

But who were these false teachers and what were they teaching? Paul never refers to a particular false teacher, or false teachers, warning instead quite generally about ‘no one’ (*mēdeis*, 2:4, 18) or ‘anyone’ (*tis*, 2:8, 16). Nor does he describe very clearly just what the false teaching is—as the bewildering variety of scholarly reconstructions bear witness to. The letter gives no indication that the Colossians were facing teachers who had come to them from outside their community; in fact, the threat may have arisen from among fellow Christians (cp. 2:19). But it is hard finally to avoid the impression that the threat was a definite one and that it involved a single, relatively coherent, teaching: what Paul labels in 2:8 a ‘philosophy.’

Paul’s language and manner of dealing with the problem suggest, then, that certain Christians in Colossae had adopted and were advocating an approach to Christianity that stood in contrast to the teaching that the Colossians had received from Epaphras and that Paul judged ultimately to be not only deficient but ultimately dangerous to one’s spiritual health (see 2:19).

Letter writers in the New Testament are engaged in a long-distance conversation. In the text of Scripture we possess one side of that conversation. Thus in Colossians we hear Paul’s response to the issues at Colossae as communicated to him by Epaphras. But we do not have direct access to the other side of the conversation. Paul naturally presupposes that the Colossians know what the false teachers were saying, and so he only alludes to their teaching in making his own points. ‘Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part.’ This vagueness about the specifics of the false teaching in Paul’s day means that we can apply the apostle’s teaching in the letter to a wide variety of historical and contemporary movements that share the general contours of the false teaching.

There is a clue to the problem in 2:6-7. It seemed that there was a real danger that an impressionable young church might be seduced away from uncomplicated and straightforward devotion to Christ. This explains the apostle’s warning in 2:8. It seems that Epaphras had detected a new mood in the church, a worrying tendency to be influenced by currents of thought from outside, from society at large. The danger, which was menacing this congregation, was also threatening to cause disruption to every group of Christians who met throughout the region. Paul deals most directly and clearly with the false teaching in 2:8-23.

The first danger facing the church was a relapse into paganism. Paul warned them against that danger and exhorted them to continue in the faith (1:23; 2:6; 3:2). The world and the flesh exerted a strong pull on the Colossians. Even if they were not completely seduced by the world, there was the danger that the false teaching would wean people away from Christ in subtle ways

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

by making them preoccupied with other things in addition to Him. Therefore, the main thrust of Paul's letter is to counteract the influence of false doctrine. This is what gives Colossians its particular fascination. In order to counter this new emphasis, Paul wrote a letter that is full of Christ.

5. The Colossian Heresy

Some have seen in the Colossian heresy elements of what in the second century became Gnosticism. Others have noted similarities with the teachings of the Essene sect of Judaism. The Colossian heresy, however, cannot be identified with any particular historical system. It contained two basic elements – false Greek philosophy, and Judaistic legalism and ceremonialism.

a) False Philosophy

Some of the teachers in the church had adopted a number of new emphases. Among other things, they had begun to stress the need for 'fullness,' arguing in effect that the believers in Colossae were lacking something. They implied that Epaphras' message had been all right as far as it went, but the believers would not be complete until they received the vital extra that was missing. (In Colossae, this appears to have been some form of mystical knowledge or enlightenment). These teachers behaved as though they were much more spiritual than ordination Christians; they claimed to have 'superior' knowledge of sacred things. At heart, the new teachers were elitist. According to them, the gospel preached by Epaphras was all well and good, but only up to a point. First-century Colossians need the full gospel.

The Greeks loved knowledge and prided themselves on the sophistication of their philosophical systems. This claim to superior knowledge reached its full flowering in the second century in the dangerous heresy known as Gnosticism. The name comes from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnōsis*. Although the Colossian heresy was not Gnosticism, it included some similar concepts.

According to the Colossian heresy, God was good but matter (anything physical or created) was evil. Because the good God could not have created matter that was intrinsically evil, they postulated a descending series of emanations (or lesser gods) from the divine being. It was one of the lesser emanations, far removed from God, that created matter. Of course, this lesser god of creation was so far removed from the ultimate God that it was evil.

In such a scheme, Jesus was simply one of the higher emanations. This reasoning led to the belief that Jesus Christ, if he really was the Son of God, could not have taken on a human body because matter is evil. This delusion spawned romances about Jesus being only a ghost-like phantom. In this way of thinking, Christ was *not* the Creator, the Incarnation was *not* real, and Christ was *not* enough!

Instead Christ was considered one of the good emanations, or angels, in contrast to the bad emanations, or demons. Those demons formed a barrier between man and God. Only through superior knowledge, coupled with help from the good emanations, could one break through. Thus, angels were objects of worship (2:18) because their help was essential for salvation. For them, true spirituality involved gaining the mastery over the forces of evil and gaining the help of angels in order to do so. Thus, they built a system by which one could begin with Christ and work one's way up the series of emanations to God. In doing so, they were questioning the sufficiency of Christ. The Colossian heretics denied the humanity of Christ (cp. 1:22). They

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

also denied the deity of Christ (cp. 2:9) and the sufficiency of Christ for salvation (cp. 1:28; 2:3, 9-10).

b) Judaistic Legalism

The Colossian heretics also embraced elements of Jewish ceremonialism. They taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In effect, this added works to salvation, which Paul rejected (2:11; cp. 3:11). The false teachers also advocated asceticism, with its rigid denial and harsh treatment of the body (cp. 2:20-22). Still another aspect of the Colossian heresy was an emphasis on keeping the Jewish dietary laws and observing holy days, such as the Sabbath, festivals and new moons (cp. 2:16-17).

Thus, the heresy threatening the Colossian church was a strange mixture of Greek philosophy and Jewish legalism. This is the alarming message which Epaphras brought Paul as he waited in prison. Both parts of this odd combination of ideas denied the sufficiency of Christ. Thus, the answer that Paul provides to combat both halves of the false teaching in Colossae was the same: Christ *is* sufficient. Any teaching that questions the sufficiency of Christ – not only for ‘initial’ salvation but also for spiritual growth and ultimate salvation from judgment – falls under the massive Christological critique of Colossians. Paul’s brilliant response in the epistle to the Colossians presented Christ as the Creator and all-sufficient Redeemer in the sublimest terms found anyway in Scripture.

6. Themes

a) Christology

Colossians reminds us that Christianity is, at heart, a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is an epistle with an extremely high view of Jesus Christ. It leaves us in no doubt that the Christian life is a matter of being united to Him, of knowing Him and being known by Him, of loving Him and being loved by Him. It is full of encouragement for those who trust in Jesus Christ and want their lives to count for God.

Although the Colossian heresy contained many diverse elements, at its core was a denial of the sufficiency of Christ for salvation. Not surprisingly, the sufficiency of Christ becomes one of the main themes of Colossians. The density of references to Christ, the critical contribution of some of these references (e.g., 2:6), and some unusual Christological expressions cause Colossians to stand out in regard to its emphasis on Christ in comparison with the other letters of Paul. The Christology of Colossians has a very practical concern: to demonstrate the sufficiency of Christ for the believer’s every spiritual need. There is no doubt about Paul’s intention to make the centrality and supremacy of Christ a central plank in his response to the false teachers.

Paul’s central theme in response to the problems facing the Colossian church was to stress the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Paul portrays the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the Head of all creation and of the Church. There is no book in the New Testament, including John’s Gospel, which presents such a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ. This theme can be summed up in the words of Colossians 3:11: ‘Christ is all and in all.’

Christ’s unique relationship to God and His supremacy over creation are the two Christological themes that dominate the letter. Because Christ stands in a unique relationship to God, He, and only He, is able to bring all things in creation back under God’s sovereignty and thereby provide

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

believers with the resources that they need to live and flourish in a world dominated by hostile powers. The theme of Christ's unique position, His supremacy over all things, and His sufficiency for the Christian experience is woven throughout the fabric of the letter.

b) Other Themes

Christology is the theological heart of Colossians, and, like the spokes of a wheel, all the other themes of the letter radiate from it. First, the Christology of Colossians is a strong reminder of the significance of the cosmos in God's continuing work. The cosmological Christology of Colossians is, of course, a reaction to the false teachers, who were apparently suggesting that Christ was not sufficient to protect believers from all the 'powers' rampant in the world.

Second, Christ's authority over the cosmos leads into His authority over the church. The assertions about Christ's supremacy in the church at the beginning of 1:18 suggest that it is through the church that Christ's supremacy is now advanced and revealed in the world. As there is a single 'creation' over which Christ rules, so there must be a single, all-inclusive 'new creation, a 'church' (*ekklēsia*) where – and only where – Christ can be known, worshipped, and proclaimed.

Third, while no section of the letter is devoted to this topic, Paul weaves language about the power of the gospel into the fabric of the letter. The power and finality of God's word in Christ (the gospel message) emerges as a key theme of the letter.

Finally, the logical conclusion of the Christology of Colossians leads to a definite teaching on the Christian life. Few texts in the New Testament make the case so clearly that Christian living must be rooted in Christ. Colossians 3:1-4:1 provides a succinct but beautifully rich overview of the life God calls us to in Christ.

B. Greeting (Colossians 1:1-2)

Paul always expands on the basic pattern of 'Sender to Recipient, greetings' by adding various qualifying words and phrases. By doing so, he often furnishes some clues about the main concerns and emphases of the letter to follow. In Colossians, however, the additions are minor and conventional, providing very little basis for speculation about what is to come.

1. Paul (1:1)

Following the practice of correspondence in the ancient world, Paul begins the letter with his name by which he was known in the Greek- (and Latin-) speaking world (*Paulos*).

Paul's title, 'an apostle (*apostolos*) of Jesus Christ,' was a reminder to his readers that he wrote with authority. He was more than a concerned friend. He was a special ambassador from the risen Lord, carrying the King's commission. Perhaps he needed to tell them what the role was that God had called him to fulfill because he had never visited the town or church of Colossae.

Moreover, apostleship was not something that he had aspired to, or attained through the sustained pursuit of spiritual excellence. It was not a matter of choice on his part but on God's part: it was bestowed upon him 'by the will of God.'

Although Paul was now a prisoner, faithful Timothy was still with him at the time of writing and was therefore included in the greeting. In spite of his physical weakness and occasional emotional frailty, he had become indispensable to Paul. Timothy, together with Epaphras and Philemon, was well-known to the church at Colossae (from his work with Paul in Ephesus).

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

2. Colossians (1:2a)

‘Saints’ translates a Greek term (*hagios*) meaning ‘holy ones.’ It refers to separation, in this case being separated from sin and set apart to God. Thus, ‘saints’ are people whom God has called out from the world and set apart for His own use. It does not mean ‘eminent Christians;’ it simply means ‘Christians.’ There were not more important than other citizens of Colossae; but they were born again through Christ’s cleansing blood and were separated from the world around them. They had been ‘set apart’ for God’s use and glory. ‘Faithful’ notes the very source of that separation – saving faith.

‘Brethren’ translates the Greek word *adelphoi*. It can mean either ‘brothers’ or ‘brothers and sisters,’ depending on context. As it is addressed here to the members of a church, it refers to them all, males and females of all ages. It reminds us that we are members of the same family. By calling his readers ‘faithful (*pistos*) brethren,’ Paul indicated that he thought that his readers were Christians of proven character.

Three times in this letter, Paul speaks of faithful brothers who worked with him and who were no doubt well known to the Christians at Colossae: Epaphras (1:7); Tychicus (4:7); and Onesimus (4:9). Each of these worked hard for the glory of God, and Paul uses the same term to describe the believers in the Colossian church. They had been loyal to the Christian message and had not deviated from the apostles teaching, but they had also worked hard to reach out with the gospel that was bearing fruit in their area as well as ‘all over the world’ (1:6).

But best of all, they were ‘in Christ,’ which is one of the deepest and most joyous of mysteries. This little phrase is one of Paul’s favorites. It occurs 33 times in his letters (only once more in Colossians – 1:28), and the fuller ‘in Christ Jesus [our Lord]’ (cp. 1:4) occurs 48 times. It means that the Colossians partook of all that Christ had done, all that He was (and is), and all that He ever would be.

3. Greetings (1:2b)

This is the usual greeting that Paul gave in most of his letters. It combines the normal Roman greeting with the Jewish one, except that he gave both of them a Christian overtone. Instead of the Greek word for ‘greeting’ (*chairen*), the apostle used a similar-sounding word which means ‘grace’ (*charis*). To this he added the Greek version of the familiar Jewish greeting, ‘*Shalom*,’ or ‘peace.’

‘Grace’ is a key theological concept for Paul. It expresses a fundamental characteristic of God’s new covenant people: that their status is ultimately dependent on God’s own unmerited intervention on their behalf. Grace is the undeserved favor of God, His kindness to those who merit His wrath and condemnation. The grace that Paul wrote about is that which is God’s precious, unmerited gift. Grace is a very big word; it speaks of all the blessings of salvation – past, present, and future.

‘Peace’ involves more than the absence of hostilities between God and man; it is the well-being which springs from a sense of the presence of God.. This is a peace that sustains God’s people, even when they are going through great and serious times of trial.

It is the same for all people: there must be grace before we experience the *shalom* of God. Grace (God’s work) comes before peace (our new relationship).

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

C. Thanksgiving (Colossians 1:3-8)

It was typical of Paul to give thanks for his fellow-believers and God's work among them in the opening of his letters. Only in Galatians and Titus is such a thanksgiving lacking.

1. God's Church (1:3-5a)

Paul's thanks were more than an expression of heartfelt gratitude. He made them known in order to address a pastoral need. Paul knew, from what Epaphras told him, that the Colossian believers had had their confidence in the simplicity of the gospel subtly undermined by the new teachers. When you repeatedly hear a line of teaching that leaves you to make the inference that you are lacking the vital element needed to make you a 'full' Christian, you begin to wonder whether you are a real Christian at all. This is the concern that Paul addressed in verses 3-5.

a) Thanksgiving (1:3)

Perhaps in a letter that elevates Christ, Paul wants at the outset to anchor the person of Christ firmly to God the Father. As supreme as Christ is in the work of both creation and redemption, His identity and His work cannot be understood apart from His relationship to God His Father.

Paul prayed frequently and regularly for his friends in Colossae. The Greek participle *proseuchomenoi* has a temporal sense, as in 'when we pray for you.' Paul prayed frequently and regularly for his readers and always gave thanks for them when he did so. Whenever he prayed for them, he always thanked God for them because he was confident that they really were true believers. He was especially grateful because the believers in Colossae were making good spiritual progress.

Verses 45 explain why Paul gives thanks for the Colossians: they are exhibiting the three cardinal Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope. These three qualities are mentioned numerous times (e.g., 1 Th. 1:3; 5:8; Rom. 5:1-5; Gal. 5:5; Eph. 1:15, 18; 4:2-5; Heb. 6:10-12; 10:22-24; 1 Pe. 3:8, 21, 22) as a sort of 'apostolic shorthand' for genuine Christianity.

b) Faith (1:4a)

'Faith' (*pistis*) is always mentioned first in the trio because apart from faith there is no Christian experience. By 'faith' Paul meant a solid conviction that certain things are true, combined with a willingness to venture everything on those truths. Far more than mere intellectual assent, it involves obedience. *Pistis* comes from the root word *peithō*, which means 'to obey.' Christian faith involves believing that the Bible is absolutely right. It also involves entrusting ourselves to Christ crucified, handing over our lives, our whole selves, and our eternal destinies to Him.

We should also note that Paul did not mean faith in the abstract, faith as a power of principle. Paul was very specific about the object of their faith: the believers in Colossae put their faith 'in Christ.' Faith has no intrinsic value in itself. It must derive its value from its object. Salvation does not come by believing in belief, or even in a set of doctrines or a creed. Salvation comes by believing in Christ. With Christ as its object, our faith is as secure as a house on a solid foundation, or a boat safely at anchor. So, Christian faith is not merely a statement of what they believe; it is a statement of who they believe in – Jesus. Paul is speaking about the personal relationship they had with Christ.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

c) Love (1:4b)

The second quality Paul mentions is their ‘love for all the saints.’ A church should be a fellowship which is characterized by love – not just love for lovely people, but for ‘all the saints (*hagioi*).’ For Paul, faith proved its reality by ‘expressing itself through love’ (Gal. 5:6). This kind of love is one way of proving that the faith we claim to have is genuine. One of the visible and strong fruits of true saving faith is love for fellow believers (cp. Jn. 13:34-35). Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.

Paul gives thanks that the Colossians love all the saints. Their love was nonselective. Apparently there were no divisive cliques at Colossae, such as those that fractured the Corinthian church.

d) Hope (1:5a)

Thirdly, Paul mentions the ‘hope which is laid up (*apokeimai*, ‘in store’ or ‘reserved’) for you in heaven.’ Hope is placed last here because, in this instance, Paul saw faith and hope springing from it. While Paul often juxtaposes faith, love, and hope, only here does he make hope the basis for love and faith. As pagans, the Colossians had been without God and without hope in this world. Then came the gospel from Epaphras and Philemon and the wonderful, surprising joy of salvation and hope of heaven.

The Christian’s hope is something definite. Christians look forward to heaven; that is their hope. The way that Paul described this hope almost suggests that his readers needed some assurance on this matter, perhaps because the newcomers had been teaching things that called into question the Christian’s confidence in a blessed future. A hope that is located in heaven is beyond the reach of anything that might threaten it. No combination of spiritual foes can undermine this hope.

Faced with teaching that led them to wonder whether Christ could supply all their spiritual needs, the Colossians needed to be reminded that their present experience of faith and love rested on the solid foundation of what God had committed to do for them in the future. While not yet something the Colossians had experienced, their ultimate salvation already existed, ‘reserved’ for them in heaven.

2. God’s Truth (1:5b-6)

Paul also wanted to assure his readers that not only were they true Christians, but also that they had heard the true gospel. It is unlikely that many of the believers in Colossae would have heard Paul himself. Some, influenced by the new teachers, would therefore be tempted to jump to conclusions that Epaphras was not teaching all that Paul taught. Paul went on to address this concern in verses 5-8.

a) The Word (1:5b)

This hope was something they had already ‘heard before,’ essentially an endorsement of Epaphras over against those who had intruded themselves into the church with a very different message from his. Paul uses three words to describe this message ‘word,’ ‘truth’ and ‘gospel.’

‘Word’ makes a simple but important point. In the first century, the gospel was presented verbally. Epaphras had won a hearing with his fellow Christians by talking to them.

‘Gospel’ is the Greek word *euangelion*, from which we derive the English word ‘evangelize.’ It literally means, ‘good news.’ It was used often in classical Greek to speak of the report of victor brought back from a battle. The gospel is the good news of Jesus’ victory over Satan, sin, and

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

death. It is also the good news that we, too, can triumph eternally over those enemies through Him.

In the Old Testament, ‘truth’ often involves the ideas of reliability and authenticity, and this meaning carries over to the New Testament. A ‘word of truth’ then is a word, or message, that can be relied upon (e.g., Ps. 119:43). Paul coupled the word ‘truth’ with ‘gospel’ to make the point that the Christians in Colossae had not heard an incomplete presentation of the Christian message that would need rounding off. The gospel, then, Paul implies, is to be contrasted with the false teaching, which cannot offer a reliable basis for hope.

b) The World (1:6a)

In verse 6, Paul makes two basic comparisons: 1) the gospel has come to the Colossians just as it has to other people; and 2) the gospel is transforming people and communities in Colossae just as it has in other parts of the world.

The Colossians could feel confident in Epaphras’ message was that the message that came to them had also been heard ‘in all the world.’ Paul’s statement ‘in all the world’ indicates the rapid spread of the gospel and its triumphant progress. The diffusion of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire foreshadowed its spread throughout the world. The gospel is universal. It was not merely one more cult like the others at Colossae. It was and is the good news for the whole world. The gospel transcends ethnic, geographic, cultural, and political boundaries.

Believers in Colossae could be assured that, far from having heard an incomplete version of the gospel that would need to be fleshed out with important details that Epaphras had missed, they had heard the same gospel that all other Christians everywhere had heard. The point is that the gospel is exerting its power widely, in many different places, and by doing so, attests to its validity. The widespread experience of the gospel is testimony to its truthfulness over against the claims of the false teachers, who were propagating a local heresy.

c) The Fruit (1:6b)

Faced with false teachers who apparently encouraged Christians to look beyond the gospel for ultimate spiritual fulfillment, Paul stresses the inherent power of the gospel itself. The gospel is not merely a stagnant system of ethics; it is a living, moving, and growing reality. The gospel has both an individual and a universal aspect. It both is both bearing fruit and increasing.

The Colossians could reflect with encouragement on the thought that the gospel that was ‘bringing forth fruit’ in their town was equally productive elsewhere. Those who believed were being enriched in every part of their lives; they were seeing evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

But Paul also specifically mentions that the gospel was ‘growing.’ He means that more and more people were being brought out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son (1:13). The gospel produces fruit both in the internal transformation of individuals, and also in the external growth of the church. The two concepts are interrelated. The spiritual growth of individuals will lead to new converts being won to Christ. As the gospel produces fruit in individual lives, its influence spreads.

d) The Grace of God (1:6c)

The Colossians had no need to fear that what they had learned from Epaphras had been inadequate, partial, or even false. They ‘heard and knew the grace of God in truth.’ ‘Grace’ is

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 3

the very heart of the gospel. It is God's freely giving us the forgiveness of sin and eternal life, which we do not deserve and cannot earn. The phrase 'in truth' carries the sense of genuineness.

It is worth noting that Paul in verse 6 seeks to ground the Colossians spiritually by appealing both to the truth of the gospel and to its life-changing power. The gospel is authenticated not only by its truth only nor by its power in people's lives only, but by both working in tandem.

3. God's Minister (1:7-8)

In verse 7, Paul turns from message to messenger. Epaphras is mentioned only in Colossians and in Philemon (v. 23) in the New Testament. Little is known about him, though we can infer that he was a native of Colossae and that he was perhaps converted by Paul himself during the apostle's ministry in Ephesus.

The mention of a co-worker at this point in a Pauline epistle is unusual, and the strength of Paul's endorsement of him is also striking. The peculiar circumstances of Paul's letter to the Colossians may explain this emphasis: writing to Christians he has never visited demands that Paul go out of his way to accredit his representative among them. Paul's defense of his colleague Epaphras gives us a portrait of the kind of person who can proclaim the life-changing gospel with creditability.

a) *Epaphras' Ministry in Colossae (1:7)*

Paul's endorsement for Epaphras and his ministry among the Colossians in bringing the good news of God's grace is stated clearly in verse 7. The Colossians had 'learned' the gospel from him. Paul's choice of verb is unusual here. Ordinarily we find Paul writing of Christians 'believing,' 'hearing,' or 'obeying' the gospel. It is likely that his choice of words was deliberate and that he intended to suggest that Epaphras had done his work well, providing thorough and systematic teaching of Christian truth.

Paul often referred to himself as a *doulos* ('bond-servant') of Christ (e.g., Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Titus 1:1). Epaphras is Paul's 'fellow bond-servant' (*syndoulos*). The only other co-worker Paul describes by this term is Tychicus (cp. 4:7). Not only is Epaphras a dedicated worker, but he is also 'dear' (*agapētos*, 'beloved') to Paul. 'Minister' is one rendering of a Greek word (*diakonos*) that would be better translated 'servant.'

By referring to Epaphras as his 'fellow bond-servant' and calling him a 'faithful servant of Christ on your behalf,' Paul connects Epaphras' ministry back with his own. Epaphras was Paul's representative at Colossae, backed by his authority and that of the Lord Jesus.

b) *Epaphras' Report of Colossae (1:8)*

If verse 7 is primarily about Epaphras' faithfulness as a minister to the Colossians on behalf of Paul, verse 8 is about his reliability as a messenger to Paul on behalf of the Colossians. For Epaphras has communicated to Paul that the Colossians are continuing to manifest a key quality of Christian existence: love (cp. 1:4).

Epaphras had told Paul and Timothy about the Colossians 'love in the Spirit' – that it to say, it was a love that was supernatural in origin, a love that no one could produce by himself, but the Holy Spirit had been at work in Colossae in such a way that the believers there showed clear evidence of it.

For next time: Read Colossians 1:9-14.