

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Colossians

Christ, the Head of the Church

July 1, 2012

Theme

In his Epistle to the Colossians, Paul highlights the divine person and creative and redemptive work of Christ against devaluation of Christ by a particular brand of heresy that threatened the church in Colossae.

Ephesian Origin

The ancient Marcionite prologue to Colossians says Paul wrote the epistle from Ephesus. This tradition is doubtful, however, because it also says Paul wrote Philemon from Rome. Yet Colossians and Philemon are inseparably linked, for both letters mention Timothy, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Archippus, and Onesimus (Colossians 1:1 and Philemon 1; Colossians 4:10-14 and Philemon 23, 24; Colossians 4:17 and Philemon 2; Colossians 4:9 and Philemon 10ff.). The duplication of so many names must indicate that Paul wrote and sent both letters at the same time and from the same place. Luke was with Paul when Paul wrote Colossians (Colossians 4:14); but the description of Paul's Ephesian ministry is not one of Luke's "we" sections in Acts. We should therefore reject an Ephesian imprisonment as the place of origin for Colossians.

Caesarean Origin

It is even more improbable that Colossians came from the Caesarean imprisonment. Caesarea was also a smaller and less likely city than Rome as a place to which a runaway slave might flee to escape detection. Onesimus would scarcely have come into contact with Paul in Caesarea, for only Paul's friends could see him there (Acts 24:23). Also, the expectation of Paul that he would soon be released (he asks Philemon to prepare lodging for him, Philemon 22) does not tally with the Caesarean imprisonment, where Paul came to realize his only hope lay in appealing to Caesar.

Roman Origin

Several considerations favor the Roman imprisonment: (1) it is most likely that to hide his identity Onesimus fled to Rome, the most populous city in the empire; (2) Luke's presence with Paul at the writing of Colossians agrees with Luke's accompanying Paul to Rome in Acts; (3) the difference in doctrinal emphases between Colossians, where Paul is not preoccupied with the Judaizing controversy, and the Epistles to the Galatians, Romans, and Corinthians, where he strongly emphasizes

freedom from the Mosaic law, suggests Paul wrote Colossians during the later period of the Roman imprisonment, when the Judaizing controversy no longer dominated his thinking.

Founding of the Church in Colossae

The city of Colossae lay in the valley of the Lycus River in a mountainous district about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. The neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis overshadowed Colossae in importance. The distant way Paul writes he has “heard” of his readers’ Christian faith (1:4) and his inclusion of the readers among those who have never seen him face to face (2:1) imply he had neither founded the church in Colossae nor visited it. Since the Colossians had learned God’s grace from Epaphras (1:6, 7), Epaphras must have been the founder of the church. Yet he was with Paul at the time of writing (4:12, 13). We may surmise that Epaphras became a Christian through Paul’s Ephesian ministry, evangelized the neighboring region of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, and visited Paul in prison to solicit his advice concerning a dangerous heresy threatening the Colossian church. Apparently Archippus had been left in charge of the church (4:17). Under this hypothesis we can understand why Paul assumed authority over the Colossian church even though he had never been there; since he was “grandfather” of the church through his convert Epaphras, his judgment had been sought.

Colossae was situated in a region prone to earthquakes, and one rocked the area in AD 61-62, causing severe damage and possibly destroying the city. Colossae may not have been rebuilt, since no references to the city appear in Christian or pagan sources after AD 61. Paul must have written this letter before this date when the earthquake destroyed the city.

A Gentile Church

The Christians in Colossae were predominantly Gentile. Paul classes them among the uncircumcised (2:13). In 1:27, the phrases “among the Gentiles” and “in you” seem to be synonymous.

The Colossian Heresy

We can infer certain features of the false teaching from the counter emphases of Paul. In fact, Paul probably borrows words and phrases used by the false teachers, such as “knowledge” and “fullness,” and turns them against the heresy by filling them with orthodox content. The heresy:

- detracted from the person of Christ, so that Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ (1:15-19);
- emphasized human philosophy, i.e., empty speculations apart from divine revelation (2:8);

- contained elements of Judaism, such as circumcision (2:11; 3:11), rabbinic tradition (2:8), dietary regulations and Sabbath and festival observances (2:16);
- included worship of angels as intermediaries to keep the highest God (pure Spirit) unsullied by contact with the physical universe (2:18) – a pagan feature, although orthodox Jews had constructed a hierarchy of angels, they did not worship them nor did they regard the materiality of the universe as evil; and
- flaunted an exclusivist air of secrecy and superiority, against which Paul stresses the all-inclusiveness and publicity of the gospel (1:20, 23, 28; 3:11).

The Colossians heresy, then, blended Jewish legalism, Greek philosophic speculation, and Oriental mysticism. Perhaps the location of Colossae on an important trade route linking East and West contributed to the mixed character of the false teaching.

Doctrine, Especially Christology

Read Colossians 1, 2.

Colossians has two sections: doctrine (chs. 1,2) and exhortation (chs. 3, 4). Paul puts the doctrinal accent on Christology. The epistle opens with a greeting, thanksgiving, and prayer. Then begins the great Christological discussion.

Paul's laudatory statements about Christ mention:

- His kingdom (1:13);
- His redemptive work (1:14);
- His being the outward representation ("image") of God in human form (1:15);
- His supremacy over creation as its Master and Heir (since first-born sons received twice as much inheritance as other sons, "first-born of all creation" [1:15] need not imply that Jesus was the first to be created);
- His creatorship (1:16);
- His preexistence and cohesion of the universe (1:17);
- His headship over the new creation, the church; and
- His primacy in rising from the dead never to die again (1:18).

In his polemic against the Colossian heresy (2:8-23), Paul charges that the false teaching obscures the preeminence of Christ; that its ritual observances, taken from Judaism, only foreshadow the spiritual realities in Christ; and that its asceticism and angel worship foster human pride and detract from Christ's glory.

Exhortation

Read Colossians 3,4.

The union of the believer with Christ in His death, resurrection, and ascension forms the basis for practical exhortations. Christians are to adopt God's point of view by regarding themselves as dead in Christ to sin and alive in Him to righteousness. "Scythians" (3:11) were regarded as particularly uncouth barbarians. Since salt retards corruption, speech "seasoned with salt" (4:6) probably means speech that is not corrupt or obscene.

A Summary Outline of Colossians

Theme: the preeminence of Christ

Introduction: greeting (1:1-12)

- A. Greeting (1:1-2)
- B. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
- C. Prayer (1:9-12)

I. The Preeminence of Christ in Christian Doctrine (1:13-2:23)

- A. His creative and redemptive work (1:13-23)
- B. His proclamation by Paul (1:24-2:7)
- C. His sufficiency over against the Colossians heresy (2:8-23)

II. The Preeminence of Christ in Christian Conduct (3:1-4:6)

- A. Union with Christ in His death, resurrection, and exaltation (3:1-4)
- B. Application of death with Christ to sinful actions (3:5-11)
- C. Application of resurrection with Christ to righteous actions (3:12-4:6)

Conclusion (4:7-18)

- A. The coming of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9)
- B. Greetings and final instructions (4:10-17)
- C. Farewell and benediction (4:18)