

“Colossians”

Summer Series 1

Lesson 1

“Introduction to Colossians and, 1:1-8”

Objective: To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.


Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

Procedures

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

In a letter that gives us one side of a conversation and is written almost two thousand years ago, the problem of identifying the exact nature of the teachings and practices of those that Paul opposes in the context of the Colossian church is notoriously difficult. There have been times in recent history when it appeared that a consensus had been reached on the precise nature of these teachings and practices, only for that consensus to disintegrate as fresh studies of this letter emerged. “Syncretism” is a word that is very often used to characterize the beliefs and the practices of those who are couched as the opponents of Paul in the Colossian Epistle. It is certainly plain that there is some type of mixing of religious ideas that stands behind this self-styled “philosophy” that Paul is in opposition to in his writing.

Grappling with this issue is important for us because understanding the original situation and context at some level is crucial for us in our effort of applying what Paul says to our modern situation. It is crucial that we understand as much as we can about what the original audience will have likely understood Paul to be saying. If we do not do this, we are in danger of ripping the letter from its contextual moorings and can then make it say



virtually anything we might imagine by simply changing the questions or issues that Paul is addressing in our constructed contextual framework.

Colossians is one of Paul's shortest letters, but it is also one of his most exciting, written to a young church discovering for the first time what it means to follow Jesus. It seems apparent that Paul shares their sense of wonder and excitement as he writes in such evocative and provocative language. It must be noted however, that this letter was written to a particular people, and a particular set of circumstances, in a particular time. Without this contextual anchor it is virtually impossible to avoid drifting into all sorts of interpretations that were not the intent of Paul in writing this epistle. There is widespread agreement among scholars on at least the general direction of the problems confronted here by Paul.

Within the overall direction of the arguments of this letter two features are prominent (1) the central position of Christ and; (2) Paul's theological challenges that are most likely addressed against Judaism in some form. The issues, on the face, may seem simple but there are elements of complexity here based primarily

around chapter 2 with special emphasis on 2:11-15¹. It is here, in these verses that the issue of circumcision is clearly highlighted. There is no doubt that circumcision in the ancient world was widely perceived by Gentiles as a symbol of Judaism's otherness. As Paul points out, in Acts 15, circumcision was not seen as a necessity for salvation for the Gentiles, though there were certainly those who sought to press the idea that circumcision was indeed essential for salvation, whether you were a Jew or a Gentile. It may be the case that they were pressing for adherence to the entire Jewish Law.

The masterstroke in Paul's argument rests in the classification of Judaism as if it were "just" another religion, like the other pagan religions. He classifies it as if it is a "philosophy" that was developed by human tradition (2:8-22), according to Paul. This hypothesis has three particular strengths. (1) The underlying view of the place of Jesus Christ, in this letter, is that Jesus has taken the position that the Jews had formerly assigned

¹ **So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called "uncircumcised" by Jews who are physically circumcised. 12 At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. 13 But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 2:14 Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. 15 He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. CEB.**

to the Law. With this in view, the new converts possessed all that they needed and Judaism now had nothing more to offer them toward their salvation(2:21-22). (2) A contrast with Judaism adds significance to several passages in the letter. Paul's argument amounts to a redefinition of the central Jewish doctrines of monotheism and election. Paul declares that the church has had its own "exodus" and therefore is the true heir to the promises of God with regard to the greater "Promised Land." In chapters 2 and 3 Paul stresses the fact that the church already lives in the "age to come" that had been anticipated by the Jews and therefore there is certainly no obligation to submit to regulations that were intended to be a preparation for that other age.

Also (3), this position enables us to understand the many significant parallels between Colossians and several other Pauline passages, such as Galatians 3-4, Romans 7:1-6, Philippians 3:2ff. and 2 Corinthians 3-5. In each of these passages Paul contrasts Judaism and the Gospel message in ways that will have been relevant to the Colossians. To be sure there are some problems with this position: (1) Paul does not use the term "law" or "commandment" here in the ways that these terms feature

prominently elsewhere. This is a complex issue but it seems likely that Paul is making an oblique reference to the Law at 2:13ff., with 1:15ff. being understood as an ascription of Christ to the position some Jews gave to the Law. The language used about Christ in 2:3 is almost certainly borrowed from terms that were used in Judaism, of the Law, so that what we have here is Paul substituting Christ for the Law. At 2:16² the regulations that are described fit the Jewish Law and nothing else. 2 Corinthians 3-5 demonstrate that Paul is quite capable of mounting a full argument about the old and new covenants without the words “law” or “commandment” appearing anywhere in the actual discussion. It is likely that Paul avoided these terms here because for him they carry both positive and negative connotations (cf. Romans 3:31; 7:12, 16; 8:4, 7). In warning the Colossians, concerning the present Jewish usage of the Law, he is not prepared to fall into the trap of denying the divine origin of the Law itself. The Law came from God and was therefore by nature something which was good. Paul was not prepared to speak negatively of this Law that

² **He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.** CEB.

originated with God. What he is criticizing is the Jewish application of that Law in ways never intended by God.

It should be noted that some of the things that Paul is attacking in Colossians do not look as if they are particularly Jewish. Practices such as angel-worship, ascetic practices, and philosophy are not normally associated with Judaism. The phrase “worship of angels” (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων - *threskeia ton angelon*) in Colossians 2:18 provides one of the most specific clues regarding the nature of the heresy addressed by Paul here. This phrase has, quite properly, been at the center of the debate over the nature of the heresy, but it has been variously interpreted. For many years, the prevalent interpretation was that the phrase represented the author’s polemic against a Gnostic-oriented cult of angels. In this interpretation, the angels were identified as *stoicheia* and regarded as the objects of veneration by those being accused of this in Colossians. The angels were perceived as either helpful mediators who assisted the ascent of the soul on the day of death, or as evil beings that could hinder the ascent of the soul.

It has traditionally been suggested that Paul was engaged in a polemic against the veneration of angels within some form of


cultic setting (such as a worship service). Many interpreters have seen this veneration to be a practice that could be attributed to Jewish groups, some have rejected such a view. In order to substantiate such a claim appeals have been made to the descriptions of Josephus of the Essenes, and to the Qumran texts. Those who do not believe that there is any clear evidence of an angel “cult” among the Jews during the Greco-Roman period have dismissed this appeal. Other scholars have tried to account for the polemic in Colossians 2:18 by attempting to link Paul’s words to specific non-Jewish influences. While maintaining that the possibility of such influences were possible as the background for Paul’s writings, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that the most likely background for the heresy here is something Jewish in nature.

In light of this, most interpreters have been content to speak of some kind of religious “syncretism” composed of certain elements of Jewish and certain pagan (most often Pre-Gnostic) elements as the background for the heresy here. The hypothesis put forward by N. T. Wright is that Paul’s polemic in Colossians is a warning against Judaism. He puts forward that it is unnecessary

for the Christians there to become Jews in order to grow into maturity. Instead, he draws out into communal life, and into the personal life of the Christians, the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He changes the focus. He believes that those theories, which seek out parallels to aspects of the Colossian situation in Gnosticism, mystery religions or other philosophies such as Stoicism and Pythagoreanism, are not necessary. These theories fall by their own weight as they fail to sufficiently explain the patently Jewish elements in Colossians such as circumcision in 2:11ff., and the extremely Jewish appearance of 2:16ff.

Loren Stuckenbruck³ would agree with this hypothesis and notes especially the issue of angel veneration found in a number of Jewish texts. In light of texts like the ones above, the notion of participating in angelic worship is regarded as dangerous not only because it is superfluous for the believer, but also, and primarily, because it posed a context in which the seer may be tempted to venerate angelic beings, which are encountered during moments of visionary ascent into the heavenly realm. Arnold would accept

³ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology*, in *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 2. Reihe 70 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), pp. 111-119.



that the group at Colossae was Jewish in nature, but he also asserts that they would have likely participated in a number of activities or traditions that would not be considered a part of mainstream Judaism by modern scholars. He would classify these things as folk practices and beliefs or as it would have often been classed in antiquity as “magic”.⁴

Many scholars will only accept the writings of the authorized wing of Judaism as a measure of what is normative for Judaism. Such a perspective conceives a monolithic, or orthodox Judaism. The fact is that it is often the case that authorized historians as well as authorized theological writers only write about what is to be found in an “idealistic” form of Judaism that never, in reality, actually existed in the real world. Very often, the actual situation is far from the ideal and can only be discerned through writings that are not authorized by the religious authorities that are in power. In seeking to ascertain the nature of the Colossian heresy surely it is incumbent on those seeking answers to explore all options that are reasonable. This would include not only the authorized beliefs of those involved in

⁴ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 90-157.

normative worship and religious practices, but also the beliefs and practices of everyday Jews whose practice of Judaism may have been far from the ideal norm. I wonder how many Christians today actually practice the ideal of Christianity that is put forward as the official line by their scholars and theological writers?

It is quite apparent that there was no such thing as a monolithic Jewish practice in the first century, nor the centuries previous to, nor after, the time of Christ. The Qumran scrolls, the writings of Philo, the writings of Josephus, the writings of many of the pagan writers, inscriptions and “magical” texts make it apparent that ideal Judaism was a myth in the first century every bit as much as it is a myth today. Judaism is splintered today into multiple forms and practices and it was certainly no different in the first century, except that there may have been even more factions and splinters at that time than there are today. In the first century, one sect of Judaism had not obtained the level of dominance that would be obtained by the Pharisees after the Bar Kokhba rebellion (A.D. 132-135).

Arnold, in his work *The Colossian Syncretism* highlights some of this, and especially the fact that Jews living in the

diaspora were not immune to the influences of the world in which they lived.⁵ They were deeply affected by Hellenistic and other cultural influences. Jews came to fear many of the same things that their pagan neighbors feared and they dealt with those fears in a variety of ways, which were not always considered acceptable to mainstream Judaism and the Jewish editors in the years that would follow. One of these departures from normative Judaism appears to have been in the direction of the veneration of “angels”. Over time, the Jews often began to perceive that God was far from them and they sought the intervention of angelic beings to reach this distant God. Traces of this may be what are to be seen in the book of Daniel (12:1; 10:13,20; 8:16) where the activities of angels are highlighted in God’s dealing not only with the Jews, but also with other nations and even in the battle against opposing spirits. Nowhere in the writings of Daniel do we find a prayer directed to an angel, nevertheless, it was only a small step for the generations that followed to direct their prayers to Michael and the other angels rather than directly to God for some things. The idea of invoking mediators would have also been reinforced by the

⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, pp. 32-60.

influence of Hellenism, especially in Asia Minor upon the Jews.

The steps beyond Daniel can be seen in the writings of the Pseudepigraphal literature. The protective angel increasingly becomes a prominent object as is seen in these Jewish writings, such as the Testament of Dan (6:1-2⁶). Learning the names of angels also became increasingly important as is indicated by the Testament of Levi (5:5-6) and the Testament of Solomon.

Stuckenbruck notes that there is little evidence of an angel cult among the Jews either in Asia Minor or anywhere else for that matter. There are however a number of texts which indicate that there was a fear of, or a venerative interest in angels among the Jews.⁷ The fact is, there was a concern that the monotheistic nature of Judaism and Christianity was under threat in some manner from an overly venerative attitude, or potential attitude toward angels. This is especially the case in Colossians where the fear is expressed, but this fear is also to be found in *Revelation* (1:12-20; 19:10; 22:8-9).

⁶ “¹And now fear the Lord, my children, be on guard against Satan and his spirits. ² Draw near to God and to the angel who intercedes for you, because he is the mediator between God and men for the peace of Israel.” H. C. Kee, trans., “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York NY: Doubleday, 1983), p. 810.

⁷ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology*.

If we place Colossians alongside other writings of Paul such as Galatians it is easy to see a number of parallels. It should be noted that there is nothing in Colossians that requires us to presuppose that Paul is opposing an actual heresy that has already infiltrated the church of Colossae. The main emphasis of this epistle is upon continuing progress toward maturity. Paul knew all too well that his footsteps had been tracked elsewhere in Asia Minor by those offering a different Gospel message and a different sort of maturity than Paul calls for in his letters. It is quite natural, in view of this pursuit of him by others, that Paul should warn the church of dangers that they either they were already facing, or they soon would face. Paul wanted those in Colossae to know where the truth was; he therefore emphasizes that truth. He emphasizes that Jesus was the Messiah, and he highlights the place of Jesus in the order of the universe.

Colossians is written during one of the times that Paul was imprisoned (4:3). There is a considerable debate as to exactly which time it was. Three different geographical locations have been proposed as the place of Paul's imprisonment during the writing of this epistle: Caesarea, Ephesus and Rome. The presence

of Luke in 4:14 and in Philemon 24 may suggest a Caesarean origin since Luke uses the first person plural (we) to indicate his presence with Paul in Caesarea (Acts 27:1-2). Despite this, Caesarea does not appear in Paul's prison epistles, and this theory receives no support from ancient sources. An Ephesian origin for this letter builds on one reading (1 Corinthians 15:32⁸) even though a specific mention of Paul's imprisonment is not given there. Despite this evidence, and more, it is likely that Rome was the city of origin for this epistle to have been composed. This would make the date for this letter sometime between A.D. 60-62. Colossae is a city located 125 miles from the western coast of Asia Minor in the Lycus valley and it is eleven miles from the major city of the region, which is Laodicea.

Colossae had once been a great city, but by the time of Paul its glory lay in the past. The city had suffered significant damage after the earthquake of A.D. 60 or 61 (cf. Tacitus, Annals 14:27). It has often been noted that Colossae was one of the least important places that any epistle of the New Testament was ever sent.

Colossians is a letter that is typically Pauline in structure, which

⁸ **From a human point of view, what good does it do me if I fought wild animals in Ephesus? If the dead aren't raised, let's eat and drink because tomorrow we'll die.** CEB.

means it has an opening (1:1-8), closing (4:7-18), its thematic statement (2:6-7), a fully developed body with theological argument (2:8-23) and a parenthesis (exhortatory composition) (3:1-4:6).

Verse 1 - When we write letters today we normally put the senders name at the end of the letter, but in Paul's day it came at the beginning, and was followed by a greeting to the recipients. Paul identifies himself further with the designation "apostle of Christ Jesus". We could take this simply as some form of designation, as a messenger, but here it carries with it more weight than that. For Paul this is an indication that he is the "divinely" commissioned messenger of the Messiah, Jesus. Note he gives Jesus his proper title here, which would have carried a tremendous history, and expectation, especially, among the Jewish people. Paul is in this position by the divine will of God. In stating this up front, not only who he is, but also his credentials for authority, he lays the foundation for much of the admonition that follows. He speaks not in his own authority, but on behalf of Christ Jesus, by the will of God. The linking of this supporting claim to his apostleship is not only him claiming divine authority,

but linking his task to the over-arching divine plan of salvation, which is previewed in the Old Testament and brought to a climax in the life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus Christ. Paul understood his role in this divine plan of salvation. Paul indicates an understanding of the role of Christ as foretold by the Old Testament scriptures and of his role as a messenger for the Messiah.

He also notes the name of his traveling companion Timothy with whom he appears to have shared a close bond. It appears that he lists Timothy here as co-author as one also bearing this level of authority that Paul had. It has been suggested by some that Timothy wrote Colossians and then got Paul to sign it. There is nothing at all to validate this theory. First person plural verbs occur only at 1:1-9, 28 and 4:3. There are also a number of personal references that could only apply to Paul (1:23-27, 29; 2:1-5; 4:3-4, 7-15, 18). Paul also refers to Timothy in the openings of other letters, which are patently written by Paul. In each of those instances, it appears that Timothy had some involvement with the church to which the letter was addressed. No such ministry association can be documented with the church at

Colossae. We do however know that Timothy was with Paul for at least some of his three year Ephesian ministry (Acts 19:22). It is possible that Timothy came to know Epaphras and perhaps others at Colossae during this time. It is also possible, though only theoretically possible, that Timothy served as Paul's secretary in the writing of this letter.

Verse 2 – Paul continues his introduction addressing his audience, “those in Colossae the holy ones (saints), and the faithful brothers in Christ.” Paul uses his very familiar form of address, designating his audience as “saints”. This terminology derives from the cultic idea of holiness as “set apart” from everyday usage, as one *dedicated* to God. The idea of holiness will have been familiar to the Hellenistic members of the audience, but it is very much a Jewish concept too. In Judaism, it most obviously applies to individuals who served as priests and Levites (cf. Leviticus 21:7-8; Numbers 16:5-7; 2 Chronicles 35:3; Psalm 106:16), though it was also possible for Nazirites (Numbers 6:5-8) and prophets (2 Kings 4:9) to be designated in this manner and sometimes even the ground (Exodus 3:5). This is a designation

used for the people of Israel in Jewish literature (Psalm 16:3⁹; 34:9¹⁰; Daniel 7:18¹¹; 8:24¹²; Wisdom 18:9¹³; also in the Qumran literature 1QSb 3:2¹⁴ and 1QM 3:5¹⁵). Paul applies this same terminology to Christians.

The important inference here is that Paul understood these Gentiles to have been incorporated into the people of God, through faith, in baptism, into the name of Christ Jesus. They are full-members of His people. This all happened without the need to be circumcised or to observe all the intricacies and details of the Law. Jesus Christ is all-sufficient and able to bring believers to salvation without anything further being needed. Paul continues with his

⁹ **Now as for the “holy ones” in the land, the “magnificent ones” that I was so happy about; ...** CEB.

¹⁰ **You who are the LORD’s holy ones, honor him, because those who honor him don’t lack a thing.** CEB.

¹¹ **... but the holy ones of the Most High will receive the kingship. They will hold the kingship securely forever and always.”** CEB.

¹² **At the height of his power, he will wreak unbelievable destructions. He will succeed in all he does. He will destroy both the mighty and the people of the holy ones.** CEB.

¹³ **Your holy children offered secret sacrifice of the very best that they had. They were all of one mind as they carried out the Law, which had come from God, that the holy people were to share good things as well as experience dangers together, while already singing the praises of their ancestors.** CEB.

¹⁴ **... may he choose. And may he visit all your holy one(s), and in [...] all your descendants. [May he lift....** Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Study Edition, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 104-105.

¹⁵ **... they shall write: «Peace of God in the camps of his holy ones». And on the trumpets of pulling them out they shall write: «God’s mighty deeds to scatter the enemy and force all those who hate** Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Study Edition, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 116-117.

designation of his audience as “faithful brothers in Christ”. You will note that most of the modern translations render this designation to include “sisters”. This designation is not in the text but it is surely the intent of Paul here as a designation for all those who believe the Gospel message not just the males. He then resorts to his very standard greeting of: “grace to you and peace from God our Father”. God the Father is the source of both of these great blessings of grace and peace.

Verse 3 – Paul now begins a lengthy thanksgiving section using the verbal phrase “We always give thanks” (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν ... πάντοτε - *eucharisoumen ... pantote*), which is the main verb of the sentence followed by the participle “when we pray” (προσευχόμενοι - *proseuchomenoi*) “for you”. The plural “we” that is used here could simply be stylistic referring to Paul, but the switch back to the singular at 1:23 suggests otherwise. At this point in the letter most commentators see the “we” as referring to Paul and Timothy, but that still leaves the puzzle as to why the singular form of the verb is used elsewhere in the letter. With Paul’s use of this verb it is at least possible that Paul intends

to include his co-workers as witnesses to the work that God is doing among the believers at Colossae in what he is saying here.

Though many of the translations take “always” (*πάντοτε - pantote*) to go with to “thank God,” it much more naturally goes with “when we pray for you”. Paul is continually praying for the church at Colossae and whenever he does so he thanks God. It is most probable that “always” represents regularity rather than continuity. Paul regularly prays to God. By praying to God as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” Paul is indicating a subtle, but far-reaching development in his understanding of the fact that the Jesus, who he had once persecuted, is indeed the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament.


Verses 4 and 5 - As he does in various other passages Paul draws together the three virtues of faith, hope, and love. It is for these things that Paul gives thanks in the Colossian church. Through these things Paul can see evidence of the hand of God at work in Colossae. These things are fine and lovely in and of themselves, but they are also signs of that new life which is growing in the Colossian church through the power of God. The faith spoken of here by Paul is not just any religious belief; it is

“faith” in Christ Jesus. Paul is thanking God for their Christian faith. For Paul, faith encompasses not only personal trust and commitment, but also the belief that certain things are true (cf. Romans 10:9). The present context places emphasis on the truth of the gospel as something to be heard and to be acknowledged with the mind (5-6), placing an emphasis on the belief aspect of faith, but without taking anything away from the commitment aspect. When belief is genuine it is more than mere intellectual assent to truth, it illicit transformation, change: a response in the heart and soul of the believer.

Paul chooses to further expand on the content of “hope”, not on the act of hoping. The aorist verb “you have heard” (*προηκούσατε - proekousate*) points to their hearing beforehand, probably hearing the gospel from Epaphras (verse 7) previously. “The truth of the gospel”, is a phrase that is loaded with meaning. It contains the eschatological overtones of Greek ideas about the unveiling, or revealing of the “real” truth. It was the truth of this Gospel to which Paul dedicated the whole of his life. Within this context there is the implication that just as this is the true gospel there is a false gospel that must be guarded against. Paul seeks to

prepare the hearts and minds of the Colossian Christians to be able to guard against this false gospel message. They must pursue the true Gospel.

Verse 6 – Paul will now elaborate on the Colossian experience of the gospel by also comparing it with the affect that it had, and continues to have in the “whole world” (έν παντί τῷ κόσμῳ - *en panti to kosmo*). It is bearing fruit in a manner that is reminiscent of the world at the initial creation as recounted in the early part of the Genesis account. In the gospel, God has initiated a new creative phase in the world and allowed us to participate with him in this “new” act of creation. The gospel message did not lay dormant with the Colossians; from the day that they heard it the transformation, the creation, began: not only the internal change, but the breaking in of eternity upon the old world. False teachers may have been trying to, or would try to, convince them that now they needed something in addition to the gospel or at least some fuller form. Paul’s argument is that it began working in them on the day that they heard it and it continues to be effective and nothing additional is needed, not circumcision, not esoteric experiences, not additional teaching. Just keep trusting in the



Gospel that initiated the changes that they experienced and let it continue its action of transformation.

There is the clear acknowledgement that all of this is built upon the foundation of the gracious action of God. An understanding of grace is essential in fighting the false doctrines that would come to lead people away from this gospel, which was preached, to them. A comprehension of the “grace of God” is a central element and the bearing of fruit is an acknowledgement from God that He is indeed working in them. We need to approach this whole topic of grace with caution as there is tremendous misunderstanding in the world today regarding the meaning of “grace.” There is the mythical understanding that grace that is pure and holy is completely one-way, unconditional and unconditioned. This is patently false. Only in the modern era has such a perspective become fashionable and considered to be what Paul is talking about when he uses this term. Grace, like the grace that Paul writes about, expects, and in fact, demands a response. Such grace changes and transforms the recipient in a fashion that

makes it impossible for the recipient not to respond, because they are forever changed by God.¹⁶

Verses 7-8 – The source of the Gospel that they learned was Epaphras, whom Paul declares as a “fellow servant” (συνδούλου - *sundoulou*). Not only was the gospel that the Colossian church received authentic and effective, but one who was faithful and authentic also brought this Gospel to them. Epaphras was described as a “faithful minister of Christ” (πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ - *pistos huper humon diakonos tou Christou*). Calling Epaphras a “fellow servant” and a “faithful minister of Christ” in relationship to himself highlights the significance Epaphras held in Paul’s eyes. Paul only applies the term co-worker one other time to someone (Tychicus 4:7). He rarely uses the simple term slave (δουλος - *doulos*) to refer to co-workers. When Paul speaks of Epaphras as being a “minister” this translates the Greek word *diakonos*, which is where we get our word English word “deacon”. The word “deacon” is in some sense a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which is often translated as minister or servant. Epaphras is a “minister” or a

¹⁶ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

“servant” on behalf of the Colossians. This was a word that could also be used of one who waited on tables.

This section represents the congratulatory thanksgiving that Paul uses as a special note to end this part of this letter. This is the only direct reference to the Spirit in the letter to the Colossians.


Paul ends his introductory remarks and he will move on to address a great many concerns. He does this only after making it clear that he speaks with an authority that is plainly delineated.

He intends for his audience to hear his words as if they come directly from God.

Synopsis

It is important to make an effort to try and identify the nature of the teachings and concerns that Paul seeks to address with his Epistle to the Colossians despite this being a notoriously difficult task. If this is not done the words that Paul uses are ripped from their moorings and can be used in almost any context to say almost anything. It appears that Paul sought to protect the Colossian Christians either from actual syncretistic teachings, or the prospect of such teachings that were in some sense Jewish in nature. The objections to these teachings being Jewish in nature most often take the ideals of Judaism as they have been handed down through the official Jewish sources as the standard of comparison. This does not reflect the reality of first century Judaism, just as such ideals do not reflect the reality of a monolithic Judaism in our own time.

Paul seems to include Judaism of the first century under the same understanding that would also include pagan philosophies of that same era. They are human in origin, not that the Jewish law was human in origin, but the practice and interpretation used



by those practicing Judaism was human in origin. As such, this Judaism was of no greater value than the other human philosophies in bringing about salvation, or true reconciliation with God. This reconciliation was only possible through Jesus Christ. The faith, hope, and love of the Colossians are a demonstration of the creative power of God at work in them. They are a new creation in a way that is very much reminiscent of the original creation of Genesis one and two.

The Jews living in Asia Minor, during the first century, were subject to the same pressures and temptations as the pagans living around them. There are a number of indications that at least some had succumbed to these temptations and become syncretistic in their beliefs and practices or that there was this potential. They had blended Judaism with other philosophies and with the traditions of men. There was pressure from these people, and perhaps even from those that were more orthodox, to accept additional beliefs and practices, beyond what was clearly stated in the Law. Paul rejects such claims with considerable fervor. There is no need to supplement the truth with anything. The results of the gospel, that they heard through Epaphras, are plain to observe

and by adding other things to the truth, the truth is thereby obscured.

Paul leads into the full argument of his Epistle by introducing himself and laying out his credentials as the authoritative messenger of God and the Messiah Jesus Christ. He introduces along-side himself Timothy and then greets the Colossians and informs them of his prayers on their behalf; and he prays based on the reports he has heard of their faith, hope, and love in the Spirit. He praises them for the fruit that is being borne in them as it has been in the other places where the Gospel has been heard and comprehended.

Main Points

- ◆ Context is crucial to the meaning and must be carefully considered.
- ◆ Paul writes in order to counter false teaching either realized or potential.
- ◆ Paul speaks as the official representative of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- ◆ Paul emphasizes the reality of their faith and its results.

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- ◆ Paul emphasizes the truth of the Gospel proclaimed to them by Ephaphras.

Questions

1. Why is having the context so important when recounting an event or a conversation?
2. If you have visited other Churches of Christ, how have their worship services differed?
3. Do you think there is such a thing as absolute truth? Why or why not?
4. How can you tell today if someone truly understands the Gospel message?
5. What do you think Paul intends to convey with his words in verse 2 to the Colossian brothers and sisters?
6. Why do you think Paul thanks God for the things he has heard of the Colossians?
7. Why does Paul link the Gospel message so powerfully to Epaphras?
8. How do you evaluate whether you are being told the truth?
9. What is the result of the truth on the Colossians?
10. How should the truth impact us today? Why?
11. What are some ways that the City of Lubbock exerts influence on the wider culture of Texas?
12. How would meeting for church in a house make the experience of church different from meeting in a church building?
13. How does being thankful change people?
14. How would you define “grace?”



15.How is “grace” foundational to being a follower of Jesus?

16.What are some ways “grace” promotes unity?

17.What are some ways that you seek to make “grace” a hallmark of you dealings with others?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that the Gospel initiates a transformation process in the one who accepts it. This process will ultimately bear fruit that will look very much like the fruit of Jesus. It is in this way that a person can be assured that they have received the truth of God. The creative power of God will create change and transformation. This change will be powerful, apparent, and ongoing. What are some ways that you have seen the Gospel change people?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words challenging his Holy Ones to follow the truth and to live as followers of Christ in ways that manifest His truth. Sometimes what seems to simple, in truth, may sound easy, but actually is incredibly difficult. Without the inbreaking of God into our world, and into our lives, the type of transformation that Paul indicates is the result of accepting the Gospel is not possible. God is acting in His followers to initiate an act of new-creation. What images come to your mind when you hear the words “new-creation?”

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The words of Paul here challenge his readers to understand that accepting the truth and trusting in God is what links the believer to the power of God. It is not through following empty philosophies, through cleverly devised techniques, or strategies, that the new-creation takes place, but through the power of the Good News and through the power of God’s Spirit working in the heart and soul of the one believing in Jesus. What are some ways that the Good News challenges you to change your behavior each day?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to recognize what God has done for us. As we express our understanding and our gratitude to God this will become apparent in the changes that take place in the core of our being. Our concerns will shift so that our focus is not on what pleases me, not what men say is right or correct, but upon what pleases God and what He says is correct. Where do you look in order to decide the direction of your life?