

# Colossians

## (A Prison Epistle)

**Theme:** The Preeminence of Jesus Christ

**Author:** The Apostle Paul (1:1)

**Bearer of the Letter:** Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9)

**Written from:** Rome

**Written to:** The Church at Colosse (1:2)

**Date of Writing:** c. A.D. 60 – 63

**Occasion:** Arrival of Epaphras with the news about heretical teaching at Colosse (1:7-8). Apparently the heresy was a blending of Judaism and incipient Gnosticism.

**Key Verses:** 1:27; 2:10

# Colossians

## (Christ is Everything)

<b>Greeting</b>	<b>Prayer</b>	<b>Body</b>				<b>Closing</b>
Greetings to the Saints (1:1-2)	Thankful for the Growth of the Gospel of Grace (1:3-8)	Paul's Prayer for a Worthy Walk (1:9-12)	The Lordship of Jesus Christ (1:13-20)	Christ the Reconciler (1:21-23)	Christ in You: The Hope of Glory (1:24-29)	Christ: God's Treasure house (2:1-5)
		Christ: The Fullness of God in a Body (2:6-15)	Christ the Reality Should Result in Rejecting Regulations (2:16-23)	Hearts and Minds Seated Above with Christ our Life (3:1-4)	Christ is All so Sinful Practices Must Fall (3:5-11)	The Well-Dressed Christian (3:12-17)
		Christian Relationships (3:18-4:1)	Prayer and Proclamation (4:2-6)	Farewells from Faithful Friends (4:7-18)		
<b>Personal</b>	<b>Doctrinal</b>	<b>Polemical</b>	<b>Practical</b>	<b>Personal</b>		

### Key Verse:

**“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” (Col. 2:9-10)**

# Introduction to Colossians

## I. Authorship

This book is one of the four prison letters of Paul (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon) and was unanimously affirmed as authentic by the early church.

Church tradition is in agreement with the epistle's claim of Pauline authorship (Col. 1:1, 23).

Citations by the Church Fathers begins with Irenaeus. The letter was assumed as Pauline until 1838 when critical scholars argued for dependence on Ephesians (which was also rejected as being authentically Pauline) and alleged non-Pauline ideas.

Various views of authorship include:

1. A second century Gnostic work—F. C. Baur.
2. A shorter and genuine Colossians worked over with an anti-Gnostic polemic by a later author—Holtzmann.
3. Genuine with some later interpolations—P.N. Harrison.
4. A non-Pauline work of the Pauline school—Lohse, Schweizer, and many others (Koester).
5. Genuinely Pauline—Bruce, Moule, Guthrie, O'Brien, Martin.

Issues of Authenticity have been discussed under:

1. The language and style of the book

Concerning vocabulary and sentence structure, there are 36 Pauline *hapax legomena* (words with a one-time occurrence), excluding Ephesians and the Pastorals (which many reject), several cumbersome sentences, and the omission of key Pauline concepts.

In reply the following can be noted: the cumbersome style may result from the use of worship materials and the polemical context; the omission of key concepts is not significant since a unique heresy with a Christological problem is present; the *hapax* words are mostly in the traditional material or are compound words that in their

simple form do appear in Paul. (Even Galatians has 31 Pauline *hapax* and no one questions it.) Further, various Pauline stylistic characteristics do appear in the letter—the indicative-imperative letter structure and the use of the phrase “in Christ.”

Conclusion: Language and style are not a decisive argument against authenticity. Even Lohse, who denies Pauline authorship, acknowledges this is so.

2. Theological ideas: esp. Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and the authority of tradition

This is a key area of debate.

- a. It is argued that the form of the Gnostic heresy is too late for Paul. (This is an older argument and depends on the heresy being regarded as significantly Gnostic and a developed Gnosticism, which is unlikely. An emphasis on knowledge is possible this early [see 1 Cor. 1:18-3:5] without full-blown Gnosticism being present).
- b. The expression of Pauline Christology differs from Colossians’ Christology. Colossian Christology is cosmic (universal) and comprehensive versus Pauline Christology, which is legal and soteriological. (But cosmic Christology is present elsewhere in Paul: 1 Cor. 2:8, 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 4:3, 9; Phil. 2:10; Rom. 9:5).
- c. The expression of Pauline ecclesiology differs from Colossians’ ecclesiology. Colossian ecclesiology is universal versus Pauline ecclesiology that is local. Particularly, Christ as head of the body (1:18), is unique. (The cosmic character of ecclesiology and especially Christology is much like the early chapters of the book of Acts, and in its traditional forms it shows that these concepts were available to Paul. Christ as head of the body also has precedents in Rom. 12:4-5; I Cor. 1:13; 12:12, 14; Gal. 3:28).
- d. The expressions of Pauline eschatology differs from Colossians’ eschatology. Colossian eschatology is expressed in present terms and is more cosmic than

Pauline eschatology, which is more future looking and more imminent in emphasis. This emphasis is largely absent in Colossians. An example of this eschatology is Colossians' treatment of hope. (But this idea of "hope" is found in Rom. 5:1-3, 8:24 and Phil. 3:21. Christ as "mystery" is found in 1 Cor. 2:7, 10. Raised with Christ is found in Rom. 6:8. Imminence is a characteristic mainly of the Thessalonian epistles, though it is mentioned elsewhere in Paul. But the issue in this heresy was not its eschatology, but the way it took present attention away from Christ in realized knowledge, so a present eschatology was needed to deal with it.)

- e. The letter shows excessive dependence on tradition and on apostolic authority, which is unlike Paul. The author uses his opponent's terms rather than rejecting them. He uses tradition without giving Pauline exposition to it as is his style. (Paul is capable of using traditional material without comment: Rom. 1:3-4, Phil. 2:5-11. Paul's focus on his ministry has adequate antecedents in Gal. 1:12-22 and 2 Corinthians. Also, this church was not founded by an apostle, so apostolic endorsement of its message would be important, much like Romans, with its introduction to Paul through an authoritative introduction of the Gospel.)
- f. Treatment of baptism is more comprehensive in Colossians than in Paul (1 Cor. 12:13, Rom. 6:3-5, and Phil. 1:20-21 all have concepts that are parallel to the Colossian ideas).

3. Colossians relationship to both Ephesians and Philemon

It is generally regarded that Colossians preceded Ephesians. This is because within the parallelism between the two letters (which are quite extensive), Ephesians is more expanded and developed in its treatment of parallel themes (e.g. the discussion of husband-wives, parents-children, and developed ideas of the church as the body). The exception is the slave-master discussion, but this is because of the Philemon controversy in Colosse. However, no definite

conclusion can be made as to which letter preceded the other. Colossians also is closely connected to Philemon. Many of the figures mentioned in Colossians are mentioned in Philemon. Compare Philemon 23 with Col. 1:7, 4:12-19. This close connection to Philemon is one of the strongest arguments for the letter's authenticity. In contrast, many of the names tied to Philippians are different suggesting some distance between those letters.

Conclusion: The evidence supports the view that the letter is authentic, and that Paul wrote this letter during his first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31).

## **II. Place of Writing**

Rome is the traditional location. Caesarea and Ephesus also are suggested as possible origins of the letter. The evidence for an Ephesian imprisonment does not really exist and the size of Caesarea makes it unlikely as a missionary center while Paul is in prison, or the center of activity such as Paul's companions undertook while he was imprisoned (Col. 4:3-4). Against Rome is the supposed problem of the 1,200 miles Onesimus must travel to get back to (and escape from) Philemon. The visit to Colosse (Philemon 22) is said to contradict plans to go to Rome (Rom. 15:28). But change in travel plans do occur with Paul (note: 1 Cor. 16:7-9 with 2 Cor. 1:15, 24). The Rome hypothesis is still the best view in light of all the factors that must be considered.

## **III. Date of Writing**

This may be the first of the Prison Epistles: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians (See above on the relation of this letter to Ephesians and Philemon). It would have been written early or in the middle of Paul's Roman imprisonment in A.D. 60-61.

## **IV. The City of Colosse**

Colosse was a comparatively unimportant city; in fact, it was the least significant of the cities to which Paul addressed any of his letters. It was located near two other cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. All three cities were on the Lycus River in Phrygia, which is in modern South Central

Turkey. On a highway leading east to the Euphrates area, the cities were approximately 100 miles east of Ephesus. Colosse was once an important city, but by the first century it was a market town smaller than both Laodicea and Hierapolis. Wealthy Jewish merchants living in the area would have some impact on the thinking of religious people in the area.

## **V. The Church at Colosse**

The church was not founded by Paul. He writes after hearing of their faith in Christ (1:4, 9). In 2:1 he says they have not seen his face. Evidently the church was founded during Paul's stay at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It is likely that Epaphras was the founder of the church (cf. 1:7; 4:12-13). It seems that the church was primarily Gentile. Several passages give this impression. In 1:21 Paul refers to them as "formerly alienated and hostile in mind" (cf. Eph. 2:11-19). In 1:27 he speaks of ministering the mystery to Gentiles, evidently an allusion to the Colossians themselves. The sins that are listed in 3:5-7 fit particularly those of pagan Gentiles. There are no OT quotations in this letter.

## **VI. The Heresy at Colosse**

It seems Epaphras had brought a report of the heresy that was threatening the health of the church (cf. 1:7; 4:12-13).

The false doctrine seemed to have two convergent streams: Judaism and incipient Gnosticism. There are a number of allusions to the first of these. There are the references to circumcision in 2:11 and 3:11 (cf. 4:11). Paul also discusses dietary regulations and Jewish holidays in 2:16 (a shadow of coming things). The reference to angel worship also indicates a possible Jewish emphasis (2:18). However, the more prominent false doctrine was incipient Gnosticism. The whole book breathes this heresy.

Gnosticism had two basic premises—(1) matter is intrinsically and essentially inferior or evil, and (2) salvation comes through mystic knowledge. Good is found only in the spirit world. This basic premise led to all sorts of teachings. (1) If matter is evil, the supreme and good God could not have created it. How then did matter come into being? This was explained by saying that God put out a series of emanations. The more distant these were from God, the less they were connected to (or knew about) Him until finally a distant evil emanation created matter and the world. This is the god of the OT. (2) If matter is evil, then "the Christ" did

not have a physical body. He was only a phantom, or the Christ spirit may have come upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left Him at the cross. Of course, this means Jesus Christ ultimately could not save mankind because He did not become flesh and blood. (3) This doctrine also has implications in the realm of morality and ethics. It took its course in two opposite extremes. One side said because matter is evil and our bodies are made of matter, we must be ascetics. The only way to deal with our bodies is to starve, beat and deny them. The opposite view was held by libertines who say the body is evil no matter what we do. Therefore, it does not matter how much we sin. Of course, this led to all sorts of sensual practices.

There also was great stress on mystic knowledge. There was much speculation and philosophizing about such things as emanations and secret knowledge. Salvation became a matter of knowledge and not faith.

Strangely, the rituals of Judaism and the esoteric knowledge of incipient Gnosticism joined forces to produce this bizarre heresy that Paul combats in this epistle. Providentially, this crucially important letter was written to a group of believers in an insignificant town, but it was necessary to check this false doctrine that has much in common with modern New Age teachings.

## **VII. The Occasion of the Epistle**

Evidently while Paul was in prison in Rome, Epaphras brought him news concerning the church at Colosse (4:12-13).

## **VIII. The Bearer of the Letter**

Tychicus carried this letter (Col. 4:7-9) along with Onesimus, and Paul's private letter to Philemon (Col. 4:9).

# **“The Lordship of Jesus Christ”**

## **Colossians 1:13-20**

- |      |   |                |
|------|---|----------------|
| I.   | <b><u>Jesus is Lord of the Cross (Savior)</u></b><br><b>(This denies universalism/deism/fatalism)</b>       | <b>1:13-14</b> |
|      | 1. God has delivered us from the power of Satan.  | 1:13           |
|      | 2. God has transferred us into the principality of His sovereignty.   | 1:13           |
|      | 3. God has redeemed us through the payment of His Son.  | 1:14           |
| II.  | <b><u>Jesus is Lord of Communication (Revealer)</u></b><br><b>(This denies cultism/atheism/agnosticism)</b> | <b>1:15</b>    |
|      | 1. He is the representation of God (His reflection).  |                |
|      | 2. He is the manifestation of God (His revelation).   |                |
| III. | <b><u>Jesus is Lord of Creation (Creator)</u></b><br><b>(This denies evolution/naturalism)</b>              | <b>1:15-17</b> |
|      | 1. He is Lord because of His sovereignty.   | 1:15           |
|      | 2. He is Lord because of His agency.  | 1:16           |
|      | 3. He is Lord because of His priority.  | 1:17           |
|      | 4. He is Lord because of His consistency.   | 1:17           |
| IV.  | <b><u>Jesus is Lord of the Church (Leader)</u></b><br><b>(This denies individualism)</b>                    | <b>1:18-20</b> |
|      | 1. He is first.   | 1:18           |
|      | a. In position  |                |
|      | b. By resurrection  |                |
|      | 2. He has fullness.   | 1:19           |
|      | 3. He provides forgiveness.   | 1:20           |