

Covenant History: Colossians
The Preeminence of Christ
Sunday, August 9, 2002

In the opening verses we learn that the letter is from both Paul and Timothy: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother” (v. 1). The letter was from Timothy, probably only in the sense that he served as Paul’s secretary, the one who wrote at Paul’s dictation.

Further, we learn that the letter was written to “the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” (v. 2).

The ancient city of Colossae was located in the Roman province of Asia, about 100 miles east of Ephesus.



We have no record of Paul ever visiting the city. In fact, he indicates in the letter that he had never been there (**2:1-2**). So the letter is written to a church that had not been founded by him.

So then, how was the church founded, and by whom, and why is he writing to them?

As far as how the church was founded, we are given a number of clues—several in the letter itself, and one in the book of Acts.

Colossians 1:3-8

So the Colossians had first heard the message of the gospel from this man, Epaphras. But who was this guy? We don't know a lot about him, but later in the letter Paul indicates that Epaphras was himself from Colossae (4:12). In addition, Paul calls him a "beloved fellow servant" and a "faithful minister of Christ" (1:7). And in his letter to Philemon, Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Phile. 23).

In Acts 19, we are told of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, and it says that while he was there, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

Acts 19:8-10

This is what I envision happening. Epaphras, though a native of Colossae, was in Ephesus during the time when Paul was teaching on a daily basis in the school of Tyrannus. He heard about this guy, this Jewish rabbi named Paul, whose teaching was causing quite a stir. It aroused his curiosity. He attended the lectures, came to faith in Jesus Christ, was discipled by Paul, and having a heart for his own city was sent with Paul's blessing to preach the gospel in Colossae.

As for the reason why Paul should write to the church at Colossae, it appears to be because there was a dangerous teaching threatening the church's stability. There is some debate over the precise nature of this false teaching. It used to be a commonplace to assume it had to do with an early form of Gnosticism, an early

heresy that attempted to synthesize certain elements of the Christian faith with various pagan beliefs and practices, together with some Greek philosophical notions. However, it seems to me that Paul is warning his readers not to be taken in by the claims of the Judaizers. Remember that THE controversy in the early church was this: What about the Gentiles? What are we to do with them? On what basis are they to be included or incorporated into Israel? There were those who said that it was necessary to circumcise them, and that unless they were circumcised they could not be saved (Acts 15:5). This is what the council in Jerusalem was called for, to look into this question. Those Christian Jews who were from the Pharisaic party, who had been zealous for the law of Moses and the traditions of the elders, were saying that Christian Gentiles were incomplete without circumcision, and without performing the other works of the law (keeping kosher, observing the Jewish feasts and festivals, observing the Jewish Sabbath, etc.).

Paul's argument is going to be, "Not so! A person is complete in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, because all the fullness of deity dwells in him. If you have Christ, you have everything!"

And Paul gives us a magnificent defense of his position by showing us the glory of Jesus Christ. I mentioned last week when we were talking about Philippians that Paul gives us some of the highest Christology to be found anywhere in the Bible in that letter, in 2:5-11. And if there is any passage that rivals it, it's here in the first chapter of Colossians.

1:11-23

His point in all of this is quite clear, if have so great a Savior, how is it that we can think anything is lacking in our salvation? How could you be incomplete if you are joined to Christ, who is himself the image of the invisible God?

2:6-23

In the remainder of the book, Paul tells us what it means to live in light of the redemption we have in Christ, “so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:10).

First, he gives us general instructions that apply to everyone.

3:1-17

Then he gives us some specific instructions relative to our station in life, particularly in the home. He deals with husbands and wives, fathers and children, and slaves and masters.

3:18-4:1