

## **SESSION 5: Colossians**

### **Four main points**

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

#### **1. Background**

Reading: Colossians 1:1-23

#### **2. Theme**

Reading: Colossians 1:24-2:23

#### **3. Issues**

Reading: Colossians 3:1-17

#### **4. Application**

Reading: Colossians 3:18-4:18

Discussion questions:

Paul sometimes seems to quote ancient hymns – how do we evaluate what we sing?

What unchristian ideas might today's new believers bring into the church?

## 1. Background

Colossians is one of Paul's shortest letters. It is a particular letter written to a particular congregation at one point in its (very early) history but, because we believe it is God-given scripture, it addresses the church in every place and time. Colosse was a small town in the mountains about 100 miles east of Ephesus, in the Roman province of Asia (an area that is part of modern Turkey). Although it had been important in the time of the Persian and Greek empires, by the New Testament times, it was a rather insignificant market town. Even though the River Lycus passed through it, Colosse was overshadowed by Laodicea (10 miles away) and Hierapolis (16 miles away), which were neighbouring cities further up the river. Both Laodicea (2:1) and Hierapolis (4:13) had communities of believers. The church at Colosse was 'the least important to which any epistle of Paul is addressed' (Lightfoot).

There is no record of the founding of the church but it seems probable that Epaphras (1:6-7), who had become a Christian through Paul's ministry at Ephesus, founded the church. Perhaps Epaphras was responsible for the founding of churches along the course of the river. Paul says that he has heard of the Christian faith of the church at Colosse (1:4) and this implies that he had never visited the church.

The immediate occasion for the writing of Colossians seems to have been the arrival of Epaphras (1:8) with disturbing news from Colosse. The letter is apparently written to counter the heretical views of the church at Colosse, though no details of this false teaching are given. If it professed to be a 'philosophy', Paul calls it 'hollow and deceptive' (2:8). If the influence of the Judaizers, with their emphasis on circumcision (2:11), dietary laws (2:14, 16) and holy days (2:16) had become prominent, it should be noted that Paul still classed the Colossians among the uncircumcised (2:13) and seems to be referring to them as Gentiles (1:27). They were certainly people with a pagan past (1:12-13, 21, 27; 2:13; 3:5-7). It is a possibility that some members of the church at Colosse were affirming the mediation of various supernatural powers both in creation and salvation undermining the glory of Jesus Christ. Colosse was on a trade route meaning that many people would pass through. This could explain why the heresy at Colosse was a blend of Greek philosophic speculation, Jewish legalism, and possibly of Eastern Mysticism. This mixing of elements from all kinds of religious thought is termed 'syncretism'. There is also the possibility that Paul was combating an early form of 'Gnosticism', which taught that salvation is not by faith but by superior knowledge (perhaps even occult 'knowledge'). There was also a significant Jewish population in the area. Judaism was attractive to many pagans and Christianity would have made a similar impression on pagan hearers. It would be easy for young converts to become muddled, and to imagine that, having become Christians, they must complete the process by becoming Jews. Whatever Paul's reason for writing, Colossians is a strong statement of Christian orthodoxy.

Colossians is closely associated with the letter to Philemon and it seems likely that Paul wrote and sent both letters at the same time and from the same place. Piecing together information from both letters, including the fact that Luke was with Paul when Paul wrote Colossians (4:14), Paul probably wrote from Rome. Luke accompanied Paul to Rome and the themes of the letter suggest the period of Paul's Roman imprisonment (4:10, 18). The letter was probably written in about AD 62. It is difficult to say whether Colossians was written before or after Ephesians. Both were written out of an experience of imprisonment. Both were entrusted to Tychicus (4:7, Ephesians 6:21) as messenger. Many of the themes of the two letters are the same. They seem to have been written very close together. A possible solution is that the letter to the Colossians is Paul's quick response to the doctrinal problems at Colosse and that Ephesians represents Paul's calm reflection on many of the matters that have arisen.

## 2. Theme

Paul begins the letter with a customary greeting (1:1-2), a prayer of thanksgiving (1:3-8) and a particular prayer for the Colossians (1:9-23), before moving on to indicate his purpose in writing (1:24-2:5). The overall theme is Paul's desire that the Colossians move on to Christian maturity. He attacks teachings that would prevent them from coming to maturity, reminding them that they have already 'been buried and raised with Christ' (2:12). The Colossians are to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (3:17).

Paul's earlier letters have been dominated by the Judaizing controversy. Jewish legalism had a way of creeping into the New Testament churches, not least because Jews were the first converts and in every important city there would be a Jewish community and perhaps a synagogue. Jews would also have been travelling through Colosse as traders but although Colossians undoubtedly touches on related issues the major theme of the letter is a statement of orthodox Christian belief against the ideas that had become popular in Colosse. Whether these had been a particular philosophy or 'superior knowledge', Paul says that apart from the divine revelation this is nothing more than empty speculation. Orthodox Jews did not, however, worship angels neither did they regard the physical nature of the universe (matter) as evil. Paul's teaching against the worship of angels and his remarks about the nature of the universe are a firm rebuttal of these pagan ideas.

As with all heresy an area under significant attack was the person and nature of Christ. The way that Paul chooses to refute the error of the false teaching that was threatening the Colossian church was to teach the truth about Jesus Christ. He confronted the false representation of Christ by a positive setting forth of the Lord's exalted nature and unmatched glory. In Colossians, we have a 'full-length portrait of Christ' (Robertson).

*'He is God's Son (1:14), the object of the Christian's faith (1:4), the Redeemer (1:14), the image of God (1:15), Lord of creation (1:15), head of the church (1:18), reconciler of all things (1:20). In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead (2:9) and under him every power and authority of the universe is subjected (2:10). He is the essence of the mystery of God and in him all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden (2:2-3). He is the standard by which all religious teaching is to be measured (2:8) and the reality of the truth foreshadowed by the regulations and rituals of the old covenant (2:17). By his cross he conquered the cosmic powers of evil (2:15) and following his resurrection he was enthroned at the right hand of God (3:1). Our life now lies hidden with God in Christ, but one day both he and we will be gloriously manifested (3:3-4).'*

(Gæbelein, ed.: *Expositors' Bible Commentary*)

There is a possibility that Paul quotes from an early hymn of praise (1:13-18). Paul tells of Christ's kingdom, redeeming work ('he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness', i.e. ignorance, falsehood and sin) and forgiveness. Though redemption and forgiveness do not mean the same, by putting the two together Paul teaches that the central feature of redemption is the forgiveness of sins. Paul proclaims the unqualified Lordship of the Christ the Redeemer. Paul's description reaches its climax in the telling phrase, 'So that in everything he might have the supremacy'. 'Supremacy' (NIV), or 'pre-eminence' (KJV), literally means 'have the first place' or 'come first'. A good translation would therefore be, 'that he might be alone supreme among all' (C. Moule). Christ has an unshared supremacy. In the face of all manner of false teaching, Paul clearly stresses the supremacy or pre-eminence of Christ (1:18). There can be no negotiation on this for the Christian.

### 3. Issues

One of the challenges presented by the letter to the Colossians is to identify the false teachers against whom Paul is writing. Were they inside the church, were they outside the church or does Paul simply anticipate that this teaching will somehow influence new Christians without any particular false teachers in mind? On the one hand there appear to be Jewish elements that Paul is opposing but on the other hand some elements look more pagan than Jewish. Paul refers to circumcision (2:11) which was a Jewish practice but he also refers to the worship of angels (2:18) which is a practice that looks more pagan than Jewish.

The main issues that Paul deals with in the letter to the Colossians are the centrality of Christ and the dispute about circumcision. Paul undoubtedly believed that Jesus was the Messiah (or promised Saviour) for whom the Jews had been waiting and that with Jesus' death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit the new covenant had been inaugurated, so that the people of Jesus Christ were the true people of God, and the inheritors of the promises made to Abraham (Wright). Jews and Gentiles find salvation in Christ because Christ is the only Saviour. There is no justification to persecute Jews in the name of the Jewish Messiah. Judaism is incomplete as the way of salvation but it is not the enemy of a Christian state, an erroneous idea that has fuelled anti-Semitism throughout the ages.

Paul would not accept the Greek idea that it was impossible for Jesus to be both fully divine and fully human. Christ has always been God and always will be God. He is the one and only Mediator. His death provided the way for all to come to God. In our sinful state we are enemies of God and alienated from him and his way of thinking. For salvation we must rely totally on the grace of God, who in Christ reconciles us, that is changes from enmity to friendship, to him. The message for the respectable person and the criminal is the same. The general aspect of the reconciling work of Christ has to be applied personally. Before this saving reconciliation the Colossians were estranged from God inwardly and outwardly (in their minds and by their behaviour). By the grace of God such people are now reconciled to him through Christ.

It is because of his belief in the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ that Paul warns the Colossians not to give in to the claims of Judaism, which would contend that Christianity was somehow incomplete. Paul maintains that faith in Christ is sufficient. In Christ we have everything we need for salvation. It is unnecessary to seek God by any other means than Christ. The believer is already spiritually circumcised in Christ and set free from any claims of the Jewish law. As far as Paul is concerned, for believers to embrace Judaism would be to return to the kind of religion that they had left behind. Paul teaches that the way to maturity for the people of God does not lie in their becoming Jews, but rather in their drawing out, and applying to personal and communal life, the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

While Paul's instruction, 'wives, submit to your husbands' (3:18) would have fitted the culture of the time, it sits more uncomfortably in today's culture. However, the word 'submit' (Gk *hypostasso*) does not imply inferiority but expresses a modest, cooperative demeanour that puts others first. There are obligations for wives and husbands to live as responsible partners, 'as is fitting in the Lord'. For Paul, the wife's relationship with her husband is part of her allegiance to Christ. Husbands are commanded to love their wives and not to be harsh with them. While in Colossians to love as Christ loved is implied, in Ephesians Paul explicitly commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:22-24). No doubt, in this kind of relationship it would be easier for wives to live in a spirit of submission. 'If a wife is asked to submit, it is to the husband's *love*, not to his tyranny' (Caird).

#### 4. Application

Paul's main aim is that believers should progress and grow into spiritual maturity. He defends the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ and shows the error of trusting in any other kind of philosophy, even the practices of Judaism. Paul intended his letters to be read out in church (4:16). This should remind us that they are letters to churches and not simply to individuals. Today's context is very different from the context at Colosse, in so far as angel-worship and claims to hidden knowledge revealed through ascetic practices are not common. That said, there are still things that the Christian can learn and apply from this letter. In a society that seems to value materialism and entertainment above everything else, Paul's reminder that believers are citizens of heaven is important.

Paul's contention that Christ alone is sufficient for salvation was set against the background of the teachings of the Judaizers, those who maintained that the Christian faith was incomplete without embracing the Judaism, for which the rite of initiation was circumcision. While such views are not common today, there is nevertheless the constant temptation wittingly or unwittingly to add something to the Gospel message. Whether the addition be baptism, a particular spiritual blessing or experience, or the Victorian nonconformist emphases, among which total abstinence and vigorous Sabbath observance were two characteristics of former generations of Methodists, such additions must be resisted because they become denials of the Gospel and of the uniqueness of Christ and faith in his all sufficiency.

Modern Britain is now home for people of many world religions and faiths. An increasingly common view is that the same god is revealed in all the different religions, but this is not Paul's position. John Stott spoke of a vision of heaven having a throne and not a platform. In some modern thinking, the platform in heaven may be occupied by Muhammad, Buddha, Guru Nanak, Mahavira and others, among whom Jesus Christ might take his place. Christ is not one deity among many. There is one God and one Lord. If Jesus Christ is truly divine then in everything he must have the supremacy, which means that there is a throne for one in heaven and not a platform.

A major thrust of Colossians is against syncretism. The temptation to introduce ideas from other philosophies and religions on a level with Christian truth is very much with us today. People, then as much as now, wanted to cling to their cherished ideas and incorporate them into Christianity. It was a practice that seemed harmless enough but Paul knew it struck at the very root of Christian faith. The Colossians needed to take a hold on Christ, his supremacy and sufficiency - so do we.

The modern desire to be inclusive and tolerant must not cloud the issue of the importance of the uniqueness of Christ both in his person (fully God, fully man) and in his work (of salvation). Paul and the New Testament Christians lived in a cosmopolitan society but the supremacy of his Christ and work could not be compromised. Whatever else people may think we need - we need nothing other than Christ, not circumcision, not the law, not angels or intermediaries, not ritual or tradition. Outward observances are not important - there are many forms of worship, traditions and ceremonies but what matters is drawing close to God in Christ.

We need a right balance in Christian teaching between doctrinal teaching and practical Christianity. Practical Christianity without doctrinal teaching is a house without a firm foundation. Doctrinal teaching without practical Christianity is merely another system of philosophies that are not lived out. Paul discussed what the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus should mean to all believers. Our love for Christ should spill over into love for others. The Christian should be in constant, open communion with God in prayer and should take every opportunity to share the gospel. In Christ, Christians have all they need for salvation and living the Christian life.