

Colossians - Introduction & Background

Authorship

External evidence for Pauline authorship can be found in early church tradition and the Muratorian Canon. It is also found in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Marcion, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Barnabas. The view of Pauline authorship was virtually unanimous until the 19th century.

Internal evidence also supports Pauline authorship. Paul is named as the author three times (1:1,23; 4:18). The writer also identifies himself as an apostle and a minister (1:1,23,25). The writer also gives his own handwritten salutation (4:18), which is a typical Pauline practice (2 Thess 3:17; 1 Cor 16:21). Moreover, several of Paul's associates that are mentioned in Philemon are also mentioned throughout Colossians. They include Timothy, Aristarchus, Onesimus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (Col 1:1; 4:9-14; Philemon 1, 23-24). Archippus is also mentioned in both letters (Col 4:17; Philemon 2). Tychicus is mentioned in both Colossians and Ephesians (Col 4:7; Eph 6:21). In addition, numerous similarities between Colossians and Ephesians are also discernible. Others have noticed similar parallels between Colossians and Philemon.

Despite the persuasiveness of these internal evidence arguments, many rely upon other internal evidence arguments to refute Pauline authorship. However, most of these other arguments can be rebutted. Some contend that the style and content of Colossians is different in comparison to Paul's other letters. For example, unusual genitival combinations are evident. In addition, Colossians contains 55 words that do not appear in Paul's other writings. However, these dissimilarities can be explained in terms of the fact that Paul had a wide vocabulary, he may have employed an amanuensis, and different circumstances require different literary styles. A comparison of Romans and 2 Corinthians shows that Paul's style can vary depending upon the circumstances. The gravity of the Colossian heresy may have been responsible for producing this different style. Others attack Pauline authorship because the Gnostic heresy confronted in the letter is from the second century. However, it is possible that the heresy spoken of in the epistle represents an incipient form of Gnosticism in its initial stages. Still others argue that the letter's Christology is too far advanced to have been penned early in the first century. However, according to Phil 2:5-11, Paul was aware of Christ's work as creator.

Destination

The letter is addressed to the believers at Colosse (1:2). This name may be derived from the word Colossus, which refers to the usual shape of the stony deposits found in this area. The city overlooked the Lycus River. Colosse was located in the Lycus Valley on the road

from Ephesus. The city was located 100 miles East of Ephesus and 12 miles North of Laodecia and Hierapolis. This is the same area where the seven churches of Asia Minor were located. (Rev 2–3). The city played an important role during the 5th century Persian Wars. However, the city declined as its companion cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis grew. Consequently, except for the canonical letter Colossians, the city exerted almost no influence upon early church history. The city was a stop on the trade route to the East. With rich pasture lands nearby, the city provided black wool for the sheep industry. The city was also rich in minerals. The area was known for frequent earthquakes. Although an earthquake during the reign of Nero destroyed the city, it was quickly rebuilt.

The founding of the church is not mentioned in Acts. It is evident that Paul did not found the church because his knowledge of the Colossians was second hand (1:4,7,8; 2:1; 4:12). However, the founding of the church was somehow indirectly related to Paul's effective ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10,20; 20:31). Two alternatives are possible. First, Timothy founded the church. This may explain why Timothy's name is contained in the greeting (1:1). Second, residents of Laodicea and Colosse who were converted during Paul's Ephesian ministry returned home and started churches. Epaphras (1:7-8; 2:1; 4:12-13), Nymphas (4:15), and Philemon (Philemon 1-2) have been named as possibilities for the founder of the Colossian church. The church was comprised almost exclusively of Gentiles (1:27). Paul's reference to the "uncircumscision" (2:13) typically refers to Gentiles whenever this identical expression is employed elsewhere (Rom 2:24-27; Eph 2:11). In addition, Paul's identification of his audience as alienated and enemies of God in their minds (1:21) is typically used elsewhere by him in reference to Gentiles (Eph 4:17-18). The nature of the Colossian heresy can only be deduced from the way Paul reacts to it in his letter. It seems to have been a combination of Jewish legalism, Oriental mysticism, and incipient Gnosticism. All of these ingredients were woven together rather than representing different groups.

Thus, the proper way of viewing the heresy is Judaistic Gnosticism or Gnostic Judaism rather than separate groups comprising Judaism and Gnosticism. The Jewish aspect may have been the result of Jews being forced to migrate to the region under Antiochus III. These Jews strayed away from Orthodox Judaism instead opting to embrace Greek philosophy. The combination of Gnosticism and Judaism naturally leads to the conclusion that it was an early form of Gnosticism since second century Gnosticism was far more philosophical than it was Jewish. Although Paul warned of internal and external heresies (Acts 20:29-30), the Colossian heresy was most probably external given the youth of the church as well as its able leadership.

According to the Colossian heresy, special knowledge was only available to a select few of elites. These elites evidently possessed superior intellectual capabilities. Thus, such special knowledge was not available to the average Christian. Common faith absent such

special knowledge was frowned upon. The Colossian heresy also advocated a type of dualism where matter was considered evil and the soul and mind were considered good. Such dualism had the propensity of marginalizing those aspects of Christology dealing with Christ's body, such as His incarnation, resurrection, bodily return, humanity, and death. Furthermore, because the body was looked upon as evil, certain practices were promoted in order to curtail its negative influence. These practices included asceticism and legalism. Consequently, adherence to some aspects of the Mosaic Law, such as the dietary laws and the feast days, were emphasized in order to curb the sin nature.

The Colossian heresy also taught a concept known as the "ladder of emanations." According to this concept, God created an angel who in turn created another angel. This process went on ad infinitum. Finally, the last angel in the chain created the physical world. Dualism made it necessary for God to create in this manner. Because God as a spirit is good, He had to separate Himself from the created physical world, which was considered bad. Such a view wreaks havoc upon one's understanding of God. It denies His direct involvement in creation as well as His sustaining of creation. It emphasizes God's transcendence to the exclusion of his immanence. Because God does not directly intervene in history, divine miracles are de-emphasized. In addition, because miracles are not possible, there is no sense in petitioning God in prayer for a miracle. The "ladder of emanations" also fostered angel worship. To get to God, a person had to work his way backward through the chain of angels. Thus, it was necessary for him to pay proper obeisance to each angel in the chain. The "ladder of emanations" also damages Christology. Christ was viewed as simply one of the many angels on the ladder. Thus, he was seen as merely a created being. In sum, when reinterpreted through the lens of the Colossian heresy, Christ was stripped of His divine essence (1:19; 2:9).

Place of Writing and Date

Paul wrote Colossians during his house arrest in Roman prison (Acts 28:16-31). In Ephesians, Paul not only describes himself as a prisoner (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20) but he also mentions Tychicus (Eph 6:21). Paul also mentions Tychicus in Colossians (4:7). Thus, it seems that Paul also wrote Colossians while in prison. Colossians was written during the same time as Paul's other prison letters. Common themes and names can be seen when comparing these letters (Col 4:9-17; Philemon 2,23-24). Thus, Colossians represents one of Paul's "prison letters."⁴ Because neither Colossians nor Ephesians hint at the hopeful outcome of Paul's trial as do some of his other prison letters (Phil 1:19-21,25,27; 2:24; Philemon 22), it is likely that Colossians and Ephesians were written before Philemon and Philippians. Thus, a date of 61 AD for the composition of Colossians would not be far from wrong.

Occasion for Writing

In Paul's absence from Asia, the Colossian heresy began to flourish. Fortunately, the Colossian believers had not yet succumbed to this heresy (2:1-5). Yet, the imminent prospect of apostasy amongst his church forced Epaphras, the pastor of the church, to make a special trip to Rome in order to inquire of Paul regarding how to cope in the midst of the heresy's encroachment (Col 1:7; 4:12-13; Philemon 23). Archippus most probably assumed leadership of the church in Epaphras' absence (Col 4:17; Philemon 2). However, Epaphras also became imprisoned with Paul (Philemon 23). Thus, Paul was forced to send a response to the Colossians via Tychicus (Col 4:7; Eph 6:21).

Purpose

Paul's main purpose in writing the letter was to refute the Colossian heresy. However, rather than doing this through a point-by-point rebuttal, Paul refutes the heresy by focusing upon truth. Paul's logic seems to be that proper Christology is the best antidote for heresy. Interestingly, Paul takes terms commonly espoused by advocates of the heresy, such as "fullness" (*pleroma*) and "knowledge" (*gnosis*) and refills them with orthodox meaning.

In addition to this main purpose, Paul had several other sub purposes for writing the letter. First, he wanted to see the Colossian believers mature (1:28). Second, he wanted them to understand the truth about who Christ is (1:15-29). Third, he wanted his readers to live holy lives (3:1—4:6). Fourth, he wanted to inform them of his circumstances as well as request prayer on his behalf (4:2-8). Fifth, he wanted to explain to them the upcoming ministries that Tychicus and Onesimus would perform on their behalf (4:7-9). Sixth, he wanted to send (4:10-14) and extend greetings (4:15). Seventh, he wanted to explain that Epaphras was laboring in prayer on their behalf (4:12). Eighth, he wanted to make sure that the letter was also read among the Laodicians and that the Laodician letter (probably Ephesians) was read amongst them (4:16). Ninth, he wanted to encourage Archippus in his new role of spiritual leadership (4:17).

Structure

Colossians follows a similar pattern to Ephesians. The first half of the book represents doctrine (Col 1-2). The specific doctrine focused upon in this section is the preeminence of Christ. The second section of the book focuses upon the believer's practice (Col 3-4). Thus, a high Christology should affect one's daily life. In other words, first doctrine and then behavior. First supremacy and then submission. First position and then practice.

Theme and Message

The theme of Colossians is the preeminence of Christ over all things. The message of Colossians is that since Christ is supreme over both the physical and spiritual world, believers are complete in Him. Thus, believers need not supplement their knowledge of Christ with any philosophy that devalues Him or marginalizes His attributes. Knowledge of the believer's completed status in Christ should influence his daily life both inside and

outside the home. Therefore, adherence to pagan philosophy is not necessary to curtail the sin nature. All that is necessary is that the believer live in accordance with the knowledge of his position in Christ.

Unique Characteristics

Colossians boasts several unique characteristics. First, it represents one of the most Christological books of the NT. It shows Christ as preeminent in creating, sustaining, and redeeming. Second, the letter gives one of the firmest warnings against the use of unaided reason. Believers should not adopt a philosophy that is not built upon divine revelation (2:8-10). Third, the letter is different from Paul's other letters in that it contains no Old Testament citations. Fourth, the letter is unique by exhibiting numerous similarities and differences with another canonical letter by the same author. Numerous parallels exist between Colossians and Ephesians.

Outline

I. Supremacy of Christ (Col 1:1—2:23)

(1) Introduction

(A) Greeting (1:1-2)

(a) Writer (1:1)

(b) Recipients (1:2a)

(c) Greeting (1:2b)

(B) Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

(a) General expression of thanks (1:3)

(b) Reason for Thanksgiving (1:4-5a)

(i) Their faith (1:4a)

(ii) Their love (1:4b)

(iii) Their hope (1:5a)

(c) How the realities were produced (1:5b-8)

(i) Word of truth of the gospel (1:5b-6a)

(ii) Grace of God in truth (1:6b-8)

(C) Prayer (1:9-14)

(a) Prayer that believers are filled with knowledge (1:9)

(b) Knowledge leads to a fourfold walk (1:10-12a)

(i) Bearing fruit for every good work (1:10a)

(ii) Increasing in the knowledge of God (1:10b)

(iii) Being strengthened (1:11)

(iv) Giving thanks (1:12a)

(c) Five reasons for thanking the Father (1:12b-14)

(i) Qualified us to share in the inheritance of the Saints (1:12b)

(ii) Delivered us from the dominion of darkness (1:13a)

- (iii) Transferred us to the kingdom of his dear son (1:13b)
- (iv) Given us redemption (1:14a)
- (v) Given us forgiveness (1:14b)
- (2) Exaltation of Christ (Col 1:15—2:7)
 - (A) Preeminence (1:15-19)
 - (a) Image of the invisible God (1:15a)
 - (b) First born over all creation (1:15b)
 - (c) Creator of all (1:16)
 - (d) Sustainer of all (1:17)
 - (e) Head of the church through his death and resurrection (1:18)
 - (f) Fullness of deity (1:19)
 - (B) Redemption (1:20-23)
 - (a) Christ's death (1:20)
 - (b) Our former position (1:21)
 - (c) Our present position (1:22)
 - (d) Promised reward for continued progress (1:23)
 - (C) Revelation of the mystery of Christ (1:24-29)
 - (a) Paul's sufferings (1:24)
 - (b) Paul's stewardship (1:25)
 - (c) Paul's content (1:26-27)
 - (i) General mystery (1:26)
 - (ii) Specific mystery (1:27)
 - (d) Paul's ministry (1:28)
 - (e) Paul's labor (1:29)
 - (D) Education in Christ (2:1-5)
 - (a) Paul's sufferings (2:1)
 - (b) Full wisdom available in Christ (2:2-3)
 - (c) Christ's wisdom is superior to alternative sources (2:4)
 - (d) Paul rejoices that the Colossians have faith in Christ (2:5)
 - (E) Exhortation to live in Christ (2:6-7)
 - (a) Walk by faith (2:6)
 - (b) Remain steadfast (2:7a)
 - (c) Be doctrinally established (2:7b)
 - (d) Be grateful (2:7c)
- (3) Direct polemic against the Colossian heresy (2:8-23)
 - (A) Philosophy (2:8-10)
 - (a) Warning against competing philosophies (2:8)
 - (b) Christ is full deity (2:9)

- (c) We are complete in Christ (2:10a)
- (d) Christ his head over all (2:10b)
- (B) Legalism (2:11-17)
 - (a) Believers have experienced the spiritual circumcision (2:11)
 - (b) Believers are identified with Christ's death, burial and resurrection (2:12)
 - (c) Believers have been made alive (2:13a)
 - (d) Believers have been forgiven (2:13b)
 - (e) The condemnation of the Law has been canceled (2:14)
 - (f) The power of the demonic world has been canceled (2:15)
 - (g) Believers are not to be judged according to feast and food laws (2:16)
 - (h) The law is only a shadow (2:17)
- (C) Mysticism (2:18-19)
 - (a) The warning (2:18a)
 - (b) The false doctrine: angel worship (2:18b)
 - (c) Problems with angel worship (2:18c-19)
 - (i) Pride (2:18c)
 - (ii) Devaluation of Christ's headship (2:19)
- (D) Asceticism (2:20-23)
 - (a) If believers have already died with Christ then why submit to asceticism? (2:20)
 - (b) Description of asceticism (2:21-22)
 - (c) Despite having the appearance of wisdom asceticism has no power to curb the sin nature (2:23)

II. Submission to Christ (Col 3:1—4:18)

- (1) Conduct (3:1—4:6)
 - (A) Spiritual conduct (3:1-17)
 - (a) Seek heavenly values (3:1-4)
 - (b) Put off the old man (3:5-9)
 - (i) Why believers should put off the old self (3:5-7)
 - (a) Believers have died to the old way of life (3:5)
 - (b) The wrath of God will come upon those who practice the old way of life (3:6)
 - (c) Believers are changed people (3:7)
 - (ii) How believers should put off the old self (3:8-9)
 - (a) Avoid attitudinal sins (3:8a)
 - (b) Avoid sins related to speech (3:8b)
 - (c) Do not lie (3:9)
 - (c) Put on the new man (3:10-17)

- (i) Exhortation to put on the new self (3:10)
 - (ii) No distinction (3:11)
 - (iii) How to put on the new self (3:12-17)
 - (a) Practice fruit of the Spirit (3:12)
 - (b) Forgive (3:13)
 - (c) Love (3:14)
 - (d) Experience God's peace (3:15a)
 - (e) Be thankful (3:15b)
 - (f) Experience God's Word (3:16a)
 - (g) Worship (3:16b)
 - (h) Glorify God (3:17)
- (B) Practical conduct (3:18—4:6)
 - (a) Relationships (3:18—4:1)
 - (i) Husbands and wives (3:18-19)
 - (a) Wife's duty to submit (3:18)
 - (b) Husbands duty to love (3:19)
 - (ii) Parents and children (3:20-21)
 - (a) Child's duty to obey (3:20)
 - (b) Parents duty not to exasperate (3:21)
 - (iii) Slaves and masters (3:22—4:1)
 - (a) Slaves duty to obey as unto the Lord (3:22-25)
 - (b) Master's duty not to mistreat because he is accountable to the Lord (4:1)
 - (b) Four additional commands (4:2-6)
 - (i) Continue in prayer (4:2a)
 - (ii) Watch in prayer and thanksgiving (4:2b-4)
 - (iii) Walk in wisdom (4:5)
 - (iv) Let your speech be tempered with grace (4:6)
- (2) Personal greetings and exhortations (4:7-18)
 - (A) Ministry of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9)
 - (B) Paul sends greetings (4:10-14)
 - (a) Aristarcus (4:10a)
 - (b) Mark (4:10b)
 - (c) Justus (4:11)
 - (d) Epaphras (4:12-13)
 - (e) Luke (4:14a)
 - (f) Demas (4:14b)
 - (C) Paul asks readers to extend his greeting (4:15)

- (a) Laodecians (4:15a)
- (b) Nympha (4:15b)
- (c) Nympha's house church (4:15c)
- (D) Final exhortations (4:16-18)
 - (a) Exchange letters with the Laodecians (4:16)
 - (b) Exhortation to Archippus (4:17)
 - (c) Paul's signature (4:18a)
 - (d) Remember Paul in prison (4:18b)
- (E) Benediction (4:18c)