

June 25 Colossians (50% disputed)

## Intro

The congregation at Colossae was Gentile. Colossae was a world-renowned haven for spiritual mystery religions, and some of this mystery religion influence was creeping into the faith and practice of the church. It is uncertain where this letter was written (Rome? Ephesus?), though it does mention that it was written during Paul's imprisonment. There is no written evidence that Paul ever visited Colossae, the church was likely established by Epaphras (a local). It's believed that the letter to the Ephesians is a commentary on this letter to the Colossians (100 miles away from Ephesus). Most scholars believe that either Colossians was one of the last letters written by Paul, or one of the first letters written in the post-Pauline period. Despite similarities to other letters Paul did write, some points of style suggest that Colossians was written in the Post-Pauline era. It expression hope as something we achieve in heaven, but never once mentions the second coming of Christ (which is an important theological theme and basis for our hope in all of Paul's undisputed writings). Regardless of who wrote this letter, their goal seems to be clear: to fight heresy that was gaining traction in Turkey at the time (worship of angels, cultural rules and regulations around food and drink and pagan festivals). The author asserts that all believers need is found in Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 1

Vs. 1-14, Note the similarity in opening between this letter and the letter to Philemon (also believed to live in Colossae). Paul commends the church because of their faith, and because of the hope that (their faith has) stored up for them in heaven. This is a different theological perspective than most of Paul's writings which assert that our hope is assured by the promised, imminent return of Jesus Christ. This is moving hope from the immediate, into a future reality. The word of truth is described as a seed, growing fruit in the community of believers all over the world, and particularly in Colossae because of Epaphras' faithful preaching and teaching. "Paul's" prayer for the church is knowledge of God's will and spiritual wisdom and understanding (compare to Ephesians chapter 1). Right spiritual knowledge begets righteous behavior (bearing fruit), which helps us to lead lives worthy of the Lord. Our good works are not for our own salvation, but they're to bring glory to God. "Paul" prays for strength and patient endurance for the community, reminding them that it is Christ's work that has assured their salvation (sharing the inheritance with all the saints in

light), not our own. This teaching directly rejects heresy which downplays Christ's role in salvation.

Vs. 1: 15-29, Vs. 15-23 are an ancient hymn text, which was likely adapted from a pre-Christian tradition (Greek Mystery religion, Jewish Mysticism, a Jewish text about the Son of Man at the end times). The content of this hymn speaks to Christ's role as the cosmic agent of creation who reconciles creation's warring elements. Christ is creator and reconciler.... Very reminiscent of Proverbs 8 and the passage on Lady Wisdom's role in creation. ALL of creation has been created THROUGH him and FOR him. This hymn illustrates the mystery of the incarnation: that Christ is the embodiment of the invisible, omnipotent, omnipresent God. Through his full humanity and divinity, God has reconciled creation to God's self. God reconciled even the worst of the worst, even the evil, through Christ's work on the cross. No one is beyond redemption. Christ makes us holy as we continue to be steadfast in the faith.

Paul next gives his own testimony, how he became a servant to the gospel for the sake of the individual members of the church. In spite of the sufferings he's endured and sacrifices he's made, God has given Paul all of the strength and energy he needs to continue proclaiming the gospel and helping baby Christians to grow into mature people of faith.

## Chapter 2

Paul states that he is writing to churches that he's never before visited so that he may encourage them, build them up in love, and grant them the riches of understanding the mystery of the gospel (Christ) and the treasure of wisdom. Paul uses his letters to build relationships between himself and people, people and Christ. Laodicea was a wealthy city near Colossae (see Revelation 3:14-22). Faith in Jesus Christ is not a one time conversion experience, but a whole life reorientation that lasts a lifetime. "Continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in faith." This lifestyle enables us to abound in thanksgiving, in spite of hardships. Paul urges the church to be on guard against the philosophies (heresies) that are prevalent in society, which are contrary to the gospel. Christ, and Christ alone, is all a believer needs, as Christ contains the whole fullness of our God, who created the entire universe. We died with Christ in baptism and we are totally forgiven of our trespasses, for Christ has nailed our sins to his own cross. They would always put the a plaque with the charges against a person on their cross (Christ's cross said "king of the Jews" as the charge of sedition was leveled against him). Paul is saying that Christ has

put the sins of the world on his own cross. Christ not only wiped our slate clean, but he also claimed public victory over the rulers of this world who perpetuate this system of punitive justice. All of this is to say that Christians claim ultimate freedom, because Christ has set us free of all charges. Therefore, no one should make us feel less than because we don't observe the world's festivals and cultural expectations (food and drink and festivals). Worse yet, don't let other, more restrictive Christian groups make you feel less than or like your faith is of lower value, because Christ (and not restrictive human expectations) is the head of our faith and the only source of our life and object of our worship.

### Chapter 3

Paul urges the church to focus on the things that really matter to God, not trivial rituals and displays of piety. Hellenistic teachers often used vice and virtue lists as a teaching tool for their students, this is what Paul is doing in his lists. He says put to death (nail it to the cross) all of the cultural expectations that would have been destructive to a growing Christian: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (idolizing money and stuff), anger, malice, slander abusive language, lying. As Lutherans we talk about "drowning the old Adam" in the waters of baptism every day. Every day we die to sin and rise up from those baptismal waters anew to live for Christ. In Christ there are no longer any divisions among peoples, for we are all one body in Christ, equally loved by God, equally saved by Christ in the waters of baptism. Colossians expands Paul's list of divisions from Galatians, by including barbarians (non-Greeks) and Scythians (worse than non-Greeks, wild people). However, the author of this passage leaves out Galatians' point about the equality of the sexes in this list. As time moved forward in Church history, Paul's early egalitarian model of men and women serving as ministers side by side was replaced by heightened restrictions on women's roles within the leadership of the church, which can be seen in many of the later epistles.

Vs. 12-17 provides a snapshot of Christian living. This passage details what it looks like, what are the most important things one must embody to live as a Christian in the world: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, thanksgiving, devoting oneself to studying, learning, and teaching the word of Christ, singing worship songs with joyful hearts, and doing EVERYTHING in the name of Jesus Christ.

Vs. 18-25 is an example of an ancient household code, which would have been a common way of governing behavior within the extended family. Household vocations are sanctified, as love of neighbor begins at home.

#### Chapter 4

Most radically, “Paul” concludes the household code by reminding masters that they are truly slaves to their master in heaven, and as such they must treat their household slaves the way they hope God treats them.

The author urges believers to be steadfast in prayer and thanksgiving, and to use wisdom and discretion and gracious in their speech and conduct toward unbelievers.

“Paul” is sending Tychicus and Onesimus (from Colossae) to bring news to the church and to encourage them. He sends his greetings, prayers, and love from all of those who are with him. The letter to Laodicea has been lost to history, though some early church fathers thought it could have been the letter to the Ephesians.