

# JOIN THE JOURNEY™

*A one-year journey with the early church*



## Introduction to Dr. Tom Constable and His Bible Study (Expository) Notes

Dr. Constable is one of the most respected and beloved teachers of God's Word at Dallas Theological Seminary, and he has served as a Bible teacher and elder at Plano Bible Chapel for many years. Learn more about him at: [www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm](http://www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm). You can explore the rest of the Sonic Light website by left-clicking in the top lighthouse graphic to return to Sonic Light's homepage, or click on one of the tabs to see other pages:

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NOTES ON

## COLOSSIANS

2007 EDITION

DR. THOMAS L. CONSTABLE

## INTRODUCTION

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The city of Colosse lay in the beautiful Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It had been an important town during the Persian War of the fifth century B.C. Since then new trade routes had carried most traffic to its neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis and had left Colosse only a country village.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants were mainly Greek colonists and native Phrygians when Paul wrote this epistle, though there were many Jews living in the area as well. Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.) had relocated hundreds of Jewish families from Mesopotamia to this region. They seem to have been more liberal Jews than those in the neighboring province of Galatia to the east.

"In the bordering province of Galatia the infant faith was threatened by legalism, a Judaizing heresy; here, as in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:14, 18), the danger lay in a Jewish-Hellenistic religious syncretism."<sup>2</sup>

"Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed."<sup>3</sup>



Churches had taken root in Colosse, Laodicea (4:16), and probably Hierapolis (4:13). Paul had not visited the Lycus Valley when he wrote this epistle (1:4; 2:1), but he had learned of the spread of the gospel there through Epaphras (1:8) and probably others.<sup>4</sup>

Epaphras seems to have been the founder or one of the founders of the Colossian church (1:7; 4:12-13). He was a Colossian and had instructed the Christians there (1:7) and probably in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Perhaps Paul led him to Christ, maybe at Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10).

Epaphras may have traveled to Rome to meet with Paul to secure his help in combating the influence of false teachers that were preaching in Colosse. Archippus may have stood in for Epaphras during his absence (4:17; Phile. 2).

The only information available to help us reconstruct the heresy threatening the church comes from indirect allusions and the emphases in this epistle. We conclude that the false teachers were not giving the person and work of Christ proper interpretation or emphasis. They were distorting and minimizing these doctrines. The false teaching also contained a philosophic appeal, whether Oriental or Hellenistic we cannot be sure (2:8). Notwithstanding there was an emphasis on higher knowledge of the cosmic order. There were also elements of Judaistic ritualism and traditionalism present (2:8, 11, 16; 3:11). However, contrary to orthodox Judaism, the false teachers were encouraging the veneration of angels who they believed controlled the operations of nature to some degree (2:18-19). There was an emphasis on ascetic self-denial (2:20-23) and apparently the idea that only those with full knowledge of the truth as taught by the false teachers could understand and experience spiritual maturity (1:20, 28; 3:11). These emphases later developed into Gnosticism, though in Colosse the Jewish emphasis was more prominent than in later Greek Gnosticism.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how such a cult could develop and gain adherents in the Greek-Jewish culture of the Lycus Valley.

“... given ... various factors ... , including the probable origin of the Colossian church from within synagogue circles, the likely presence of Israelite sectarianism within the diaspora, the lack of other evidence of Jewish syncretism in Asia Minor, and the readiness of some Jews to promote their distinctive religious practices in self-confident apology ... , we need look no further than one or more of the Jewish synagogues in Colossae for the source of whatever influences were thought to threaten the young church there.”<sup>6</sup>

The primary purpose of the letter was clearly to combat this false teaching. The two main problems were the doctrine of Christ and how this doctrine affects Christian living. The primary Christological passages (1:14-23; 2:9-15) present Christ as absolutely preeminent and perfectly adequate for the Christian. The Christian life, Paul explained, flows naturally out of this revelation. The Christian life is really the life of the indwelling Christ that God manifests through the believer.

Paul probably wrote this epistle from Rome toward the middle or end of his first house arrest there between 60 and 62 A.D. He experienced confinement though he enjoyed considerable liberty there for about two years. Many of Paul's fellow workers were with him when he composed this epistle (4:7-14). This view of the letter's origin generally fits the facts better than the Caesarean and Ephesian theories of origin.

There are many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. The major distinction between them is that in Ephesians the emphasis is on the church as the body of Christ. In Colossians the emphasis is on Christ as the head of the body. Stylistically Colossians is somewhat tense and abrupt whereas Ephesians is more diffuse and flowing. Colossians tends to be more specific, concrete, and elliptical while Ephesians is more abstract, didactic, and general. The mood of Colossians is argumentative and polemical, but that of Ephesians is calm and irenic. The former is a letter of discussion; the latter is a letter of reflection.<sup>7</sup> Paul evidently wrote both letters about the same time. These two epistles, along with Philippians and Philemon, constitute the Prison Epistles of Paul.<sup>8</sup>

## PURPOSE

Three purposes emerge from the contents of the epistle. Paul wanted to express his personal interest in this church, which he had evidently not visited. He wrote to warn the Colossians of the danger of returning to their former beliefs and practices. He also refuted the false teaching that was threatening this congregation. The outstanding Christian doctrine that this letter deals with is Christology. Paul's great purpose was to set forth the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

“The church today desperately needs the message

of Colossians. We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean 'one religion is just as good as another.' Some people try to take the best from various religious systems and manufacture their own private religion. To many people, Jesus Christ is only one of several great religious teachers, with no more authority than they. He may be prominent, but He is definitely not preeminent.

"This is an age of 'syncretism.' People are trying to harmonize and unite many different schools of thought and come up with a superior religion. Our evangelical churches are in danger of diluting the faith in their loving attempt to understand the beliefs of others. Mysticism, legalism, Eastern religions, asceticism, and man-made philosophies are secretly creeping into churches. They are not denying Christ, but they are dethroning Him and robbing Him of His rightful place of preeminence."<sup>9</sup>

## OUTLINE

- I. Introduction 1:1-14
  - A. Salutation 1:1-2
  - B. Thanksgiving 1:3-8
  - C. Prayer 1:9-14
- II. Explanation of the person and work of Christ 1:15-29
  - A. The preeminent person of Christ 1:15-20
    - 1. In relation to God the Father 1:15a
    - 2. In relation to all creation 1:15b-17
    - 3. In relation to the church 1:18-20
  - B. The reconciling work of Christ 1:21-29
    - 1. As experienced by the Colossians 1:21-23
    - 2. As ministered by Paul 1:24-29
- III. Warnings against the philosophies of men ch. 2
  - A. Exhortation to persevere in the truth 2:1-7
    - 1. Paul's concern 2:1-5
    - 2. Paul's exhortation 2:6-7
  - B. The true doctrine of Christ 2:8-15
  - C. The false doctrines of men 2:16-23
- IV. Exhortations to practical Christian living 3:1—4:6
  - A. The basic principle 3:1-4
  - B. The proper method 3:5-17
    - 1. Things to put off 3:5-11
    - 2. Things to put on 3:12-17

C. The fundamental relationships 3:18—4:1

- 1. Wives and husbands 3:18-19
- 2. Children and parents 3:20-21
- 3. Slaves and masters 3:22—4:1

D. The essential practice 4:2-6

V. Conclusion 4:7-18

- A. The bearers of this epistle 4:7-9
- B. Greetings from Paul's companions 4:10-14
- C. Greetings to others 4:15-17
- D. Paul's personal conclusion 4:18

Norman Geisler's outline of Colossians is also helpful.<sup>10</sup>

- I. Doctrinal: Deeper life in Christ 1:1—2:7
- II. Polemical: Higher life in Christ 2:8-23
- III. Spiritual: Inner life in Christ 3:1-17
- IV. Practical: Outer life in Christ 3:18—4:18

## FOOTNOTES

- 1** Unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis, archaeologists have never excavated the site of Colosse. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 21.
- 2** E. Earle Ellis, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1333.
- 3** J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 16.
- 4** For a fuller history of Judaism and Christianity in the Lycus Valley, see F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141:561 (January-March 1984):3-15; William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, pp. 111-14.
- 5** See Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 166-68; Roy Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (June 1986):49-68; H. Wayne House, "Heresies in the Colossian Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:593 (January-March 1992):45-59; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. xxx-xxxviii; Barclay, pp. 118-21.
- 6** Dunn, p. 34.
- 7** Vaughan, p. 169.
- 8** See S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118:470 (July-September 1961):239-50, for a brief discussion of introductory matters including the theology of the epistle.
- 9** Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:105.
- 10** Norman L. Geisler, "Colossians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 668-69.