



Paul's Letter to the Colossians

Radical Surgery

The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians have many similarities in theme and even language. Clearly they were written with the other in mind. What is also clear is that what Paul is addressing generally in Ephesus he is addressing specifically in Colossae. For this reason, if we called the letter to the Ephesians, "Preventative Medicine", the letter to the Colossians could be called "Radical Surgery". It would appear that the locus of concern for Paul was this congregation.

Paul's concerns pertained to a particular false teaching that was being foisted upon the Colossian Christians. There were some false teachers who were seeking to "delude" and "take captive" the church through spiritual intimidation and manipulation.

We cannot know the precise nature of the false teaching; however we can discern some sense of it from the specifics of the text. Paul's reference to Sabbath (2:16) and circumcision (2:11, 4:11) shows that the teachers were clearly promoting some form of Judaism. However, it appears that this teaching was not merely a Jewish elitism based in strict legalism of the sort that the church in Galatia and perhaps even Rome were being pressured.

This false teaching also emphasized a form of "super spirituality" that "qualified" (1:12) or "disqualified" (2:18) people from the inner circle of elite believers on the basis of their angel worship, spiritual visions, and forms of physical asceticism or "severity to the body" that had little to do with union with Jesus Christ (2:18-19).

Paul not only directly addresses the false beliefs and practices promoted by the false teachers but he reasserts and encourages faith in the uniqueness and primacy of the person of Jesus Christ - he is the embodiment of the Divine and thus wholly to be relied upon. He reminds them of their knowledge and understanding of the Gospel message which proclaims the full sufficiency of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on the cross for salvation. And practically, he reaffirms the spiritual freedom and liberty of they have as those who live by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit over the "earthly" and "of the flesh".

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Paul's Heart Prayer for the Church: The Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-14)

Paul introduces himself as an “apostle” of Christ Jesus “by the will of God”. Paul uses other titles for himself such as a “servant” or “prisoner for Christ Jesus”. The emphasis to the Colossians was on his authority as an authorized representative of Jesus Christ by God’s ordination. As with all of Paul’s opening prayers, we gain true insight into the heart concerns which occasioned the letter.

Paul’s concern is for the continued maturity of the church in the Gospel message, the word of truth, A message which they have received from Epaphras. Epaphras had likely learned the Gospel from Paul himself while Paul was teaching in Ephesus. He then brought the “word of truth” back to the Colossae and established a new congregation. The degree of separation from the apostle, could have left a vulnerability to

As was happening in other congregations, pseudo-leaders were imposing themselves into the body and teaching a false understanding of the Christian life. Paul’s purpose and prayer is that they would only become stronger in the original message they had received both in their knowledge, understanding and beliefs, but also in their manner of Christian life.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ 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. – Col. 1:9-10

For Paul, Christian beliefs and practice are intertwined. His prayer is that they would reach maturity in both. His prayer anticipates the false teaching which he will later address in that he affirms that they are already “qualified” to receive a “share of the inheritance as the saints of light.” The false teachers were using their own religious beliefs and practices as a standard to disqualify members of the church (see 2:16, 18). For Paul, according to the Gospel the only qualification necessary is a faithful relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ--because he has met the qualifications!

The Supremacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: His Person and Work (1:15-23)

Paul asserts Jesus as supreme in all things. The false teachers were asserting other things as primary: the worship of angels, festivals, Sabbath, circumcision, etc. By naming Jesus Christ as Lord, all other powers and authorities are diminished in their importance becoming secondary at the best. This is particularly relevant to the Colossians as the false teachers were asserting the primacy of mystical visions and angel worship (2:18).

By proclaiming the supremacy of Jesus Christ (1:15-23), Paul provides the foundation for his later applications regarding his own ministry and stewardship of the Gospel and the sufficiency of Christ alone



for the salvation of the people of God. Paul is reasserting first principles in Jesus Christ and encouraging the Colossians not to “shift” away from their hope in Christ lest they fall from their secure position in him:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. —Col. 1:21-23

Paul’s Stewardship of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:24-2:5)

Whenever the message of the Gospel is challenged it is often on the basis of challenging the authority of the Apostle Paul’s teaching. He now reasserts the basis of his own ministry of the Gospel. It did not originate with him. But rather, he is merely as steward of a mystery revealed from God. The language he uses intentionally challenges the false teaching.

Their claim (and it may have been just one person, see 2:18) of authority was on the basis of secret revelation given to them (an elite few) because of their special relationships with angels and because of detailed “visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind.” For Paul, the emphasis is on being a “deacon” or servant and not a “puffed up” self centered leader.

The Christian hope is not a secret given only to a select enlightened few who control a small enlightened sect. Paul points to the revelation of Jesus Christ—which is a mystery revealed to ALL the saints for EVERYONE in the world. Paul speaks of...

...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Paul points to Christ, the false teacher points to himself. Jesus holds all the “hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge”—he alone is sufficient for salvation and life (2:3).

The Sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus Christ Alone (2:6-23)

Because of their immaturity in Jesus Christ, the Colossian Christians were vulnerable to being manipulated by false leaders. Paul’s concerns proved to be well-founded. In his 2nd letter, to Timothy, he reveals that “all who are in Asia turned away from me” (1:15) Paul names specific names: Phygelus, Hermogenes (2 Tim 1:15), and Alexander the Coppersmith (2 Tim. 4:14).



We do not know whether these are the same people who Paul was concerned about in Colossae, but clearly there were fractures in teaching and practice which were troubling. Paul had not been able to visit them “face to face”(2:1). Paul’s concern is that the church might be “deluded” “plausible arguments” (2:4) and taken “captive” by “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ” (2:8)

At the heart of Paul’s concern was the sufficiency of Jesus Christ and the Gospel unto salvation. The false teachers were teaching the need for additional practices which included: circumcision, keeping particular festivals, new moons celebrations and Sabbaths. They were teaching rigorous physical asceticism. “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.” They were teaching about “hidden mysteries and knowledge” to which only the initiated and enlightened were privy.

The Colossians were losing their freedom in Christ and allowing themselves to be manipulated and controlled by “super spiritual” cult leaders who in their rigid lifestyle and secret visions and mystical talk of angels controlled those who were immature in their understanding of the Gospel. Paul reasserted that Jesus alone is sufficient. As for the other:

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. –Colossians 2:23

Seeking the Life of Jesus Christ (3:1-4:6)

In negatively rejecting the self-made religion of the false teachers, Paul now paints a clear picture of what true life in Jesus Christ is like. The Colossians were right to seek and desire more. However, they should seek to go deeper by setting their mind on Christ and not on the things that are on earth. Christ is their life (3:4). So what does life in Christ look like?

First there is an aspect of our character that needs to be “put to death”, there are practices that need to be “put away” and “taken off” he calls all of this the “old self”.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.... Col. 3:5-9

Positively, Paul encourages a putting on of the “new self”. This is the “life in Christ” it is “being renewed in the image of the Creator”. The new self is free from the social, racial, ethnic categories which create arbitrary pecking orders among human beings. In Christ, all are represented. In contrast with the “old self” the new self has its own character:



The Bible Challenge

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¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Col. 3:12-14

For Paul, the key is internal transformation through the “peace of Christ” and the “word of Christ”. With the Colossians, the emphasis remains on the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ—the Christian life should be lived in every aspect unto him as the supreme Lord of all! (3:17)

This means that all human interactions should bring him honor: wives and husbands, Children and parents, masters and servants. Christians are called to honor all even those who are unjust in their treatment—not serving them but the Lord. (3:23-25) But Christian masters should all treat their servants justly and fairly, because all are bondservants to the Lord! (4:1)

The Servants of Jesus Christ (4:7-18)

Paul concludes his letter with a long list of greetings and commendations from various people who he holds up as examples and fellow servants in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is one thing to hear the principles explained and taught, but Christianity is better caught than taught. The notable examples Paul gives provide ample accountability for the Colossian congregation. While Paul is not able to physically visit them because of his imprisonment for the Gospel, they are not without support.

The danger of heresy (false teaching) is that it leads to schism from the body. Their unity is in Jesus Christ. They should not allow these false teachers to draw them away from Jesus, his body the Church and the glorious life lived walking together with him.

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Col. 4:5-6

The Colossians need maturity in Christ, here at the end of Paul’s letter is a list of mature believers with whom they can walk.