

THE SUPREMACY AND FULLNESS OF CHRIST

“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him....” (Col 1:18-19)

Author, Date and Place of Writing

Apostle Paul wrote Colossians. Paul included Timothy as a sender, but his repeated use of “I” indicates that Paul was the author of this letter (1:1,24,25; 2:1; 4:18). It was written about AD 60-62, at the beginning of Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome.

Recipients

The Cities of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. This letter was addressed to the church at Colossae and was intended to be circulated to the churches of Laodicea and Hierapolis as well (2:1; 4:13-16). We need to understand the background of these cities. These three cities formed a triangle around the Lycus River, in close proximity to each other. On the north side of the river was Hierapolis (12 miles from Colossae), on the south side was Laodicea (9 miles from Hierapolis), and to the east was Colossae. Colossae was located about 100 miles east of Ephesus (see the map).

Laodicea was famous for banking, medicine and textiles. It was a very wealthy city. Laodicea experienced a serious earthquake in A.D. 60, and was rebuilt from their own wealth, refusing the Roman Emperor’s help. So Revelation 3:17 describes their mindset as such: “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” It had the best clothes at that time. Roman Senators shopped there.

Hierapolis was at a high altitude and was famous for its hot springs. Its water contained lime and was used for dyeing, so it developed a dyeing industry. Waste water from the dyeing process flowed down to Laodicea, so its people suffered from eye diseases, and they developed medications for them. So in Revelation 3:18 the Laodiceans are told to buy “salve to put on their eyes.”

Colossae was once the capital of Phrygia and the center of transportation, but as Laodicea and Hierapolis prospered, Colossae was reduced to a small town in the New Testament period. The town was known for its fusion of religious

influences (syncretism), which included Jewish, Gnostic, and pagan influences. There was also an angel worship cult which venerated the archangel Michael, who is said to have caused a curative spring to gush from a fissure in the Earth.¹

In the region of the three cities, there were Greeks, Romans, Jews and immigrants from other parts of the Roman Empire. There were slaves and free, rich and poor, educated and illiterate people (3:11). There were worldly-wise business people. Godlessness dominated the culture and immorality, darkness, violence and cruelty were rampant. Asia Minor had many kinds of religions. They worshipped various gods and goddesses. Each city seemed to think that its god or goddess was superior to all the others. Mystery religions were becoming especially popular. These religions didn't focus so much on a god or goddess, but on having some kind of mysterious knowledge. The kingdom of Christ's light began to shine into this dominion of darkness through the ministry of Paul (1:12-13).

The Churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul did not directly pioneer the three churches; his "fellow servant" Epaphras did (1:7; 4:12-13). Paul stayed in Ephesus and had daily discussions for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Through this, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Ac 19:10). During this time Epaphras heard Paul's message, and then planted a new church at Colossae in Philemon's house, as well as in Laodicea at Nympha's house (4:15; Phm 2).

Heresies in the Three Cities

In the book of Colossians we see that false teachers were the uniqueness of Christ's supremacy and fullness. They were denying the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and that he alone is enough for salvation. These false teachings were: a) hollow and deceptive philosophies (2:8), b) Judaistic legalism (2:16-17), c) the worship of angels (2:18), d) man-made traditions (2:20-22), and e) asceticism (2:23).

A. Hollow and deceptive philosophy, based on the elemental spiritual forces (or principles) of this world rather than on Christ

Paul was not writing against philosophy in general, but against "hollow and deceptive philosophy." This kind of philosophy is based on the elemental spiritual forces of this world, which is related to evil spirits. At that time people followed a certain basic worldview. They thought the world was ruled by earth, wind, fire and water and by the signs of the

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colossae>

zodiac. Astrology evolved from simple celestial observation, onto which was laid a theological base of interpretation. The movements of celestial objects were used as portents of the future—a methodology to predict the rise of kings, the fate of empires, and other issues critical to the continuation of power by the ruling priestly class.² Some people tried to change their fate determined by the stars through the occult. Others became fatalistic. In those days false teachers traveled from city to city advocating their “philosophies.” They used many sophisticated words and expressions. But their teachings were hollow and deceptive theories designed to take people captive.

B. Judaistic legalism

In 2:16, “eat or drink” refers to the Jewish laws of clean and unclean foods. “A religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” refers to all the sacred days of the Jews. Religious festivals were held almost every month. Among them, Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles were the major ones that all Jews had to keep. Of course, they also kept the Sabbath day. They believed they could please God by keeping these rules meticulously. But these festivals and rules were only a shadow of the things to come; the reality was Christ (2:17). After Christ had come, these things became obsolete. Nevertheless Judaizers insisted that even Gentile Christians keep these rules; otherwise, they could not be saved. Paul, on the other hand, had taught the gospel faith: believing in Jesus alone is enough.

C. Worship of angels

Those who worshipped angels claimed that man could not approach God, who is holy and the Almighty Creator; man needed angels to mediate for him. These people were nullifying Christ’s unique role as the Mediator (1Ti 2:5). It seemed that they were humble, but it was false humility.

D. Man-made Traditions

Some people took Jewish rules about purity to an exaggerated extreme saying, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21). They demanded submission to these rules. They were like those who followed the tradition of the elders in Jesus’ time (Mk 7:3-4). They nullified God’s command for the sake of human traditions (Mk 7:9-13).

² <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/astrology-and-astronomy-ancient-world>

E. Asceticism

Ascetics took drastic measures to control their bodily desires. Their teaching had the appearance of wisdom because of its strict moralizing, rigorous self-denial, and severe self-mortification. But it offers no cure for sensual indulgence. It does not get the heart of the matter, which is sin within the human heart. Such asceticism may appear to be spiritual, but it actually promotes nothing more than confidence in self rather than in Christ.

Purpose of Writing

When the Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome, Epaphras visited him and told him how the church in Colossae was suffering from heresies, and he asked Paul's help (1:8; 2:1,2; 4:12,13). For this reason Paul wrote Colossians to reveal the true person of Christ so that they know Jesus better and grow in him. As a result, they could discern the gospel truth from deceptive heresies and be strengthened in their faith, being rooted and built up in Christ (2:6-7). Paul makes his purpose in writing explicit in 2:2-3: "My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Genre

Colossians is a typical epistle, opening with the identification of the sender and recipients, greeting, thanksgiving and prayer, body of the letter, and final greetings or benediction. It adheres to Paul's pattern of presenting doctrinal teachings followed by practical application. It is one of four "prison epistles," along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon. It is apologetic in nature, with a polemic undertone, written to defend the truth about the person of Jesus.

Main Theme

The theme of this letter is the supremacy and fullness of Christ (1:18-19; 2:9). Paul describes Christ's person and his works. Christ is supreme in all things. He rules in every realm in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Christ alone is fully sufficient for every believer; we need nothing more.

Characteristics

Mystery. The word “mystery” is repeated four times (1:26,27; 2:2; 4:3). The glorious riches of this mystery had been kept hidden for ages and generations, but now is disclosed to believers. This mystery is Christ in us, the hope of glory (1:27; 2:2). This mystery is different from other “mystery religions,” which had secret rituals and knowledge, given only to special people. The mystery of Christ is now made available to all people through the gospel. Human minds cannot discover this mystery through reason or by their own effort. It can be known and understood only when revealed by God to those who believe in Jesus.

Who Christ Is. Colossians tells us who Christ is: he is the Son of God, the image of the invisible God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things in heaven and on earth, the head of the church, the firstborn from among the dead, the reconciler of all things through his death (1:15-20). He is also our Redeemer (1:14). In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (1:19; 2:9). He is the head over every power and authority (2:10).

Christ and the church/believers. As Christ is the head of the church, the church is the body of Christ. God rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (1:13-14). Christ set us free from the elemental spiritual forces of this world (2:20). In Christ we have been brought to fullness (2:10). Christ’s body, the church, is held together and nurtured by Christ, who causes it to grow so that everyone becomes fully mature in him (1:28; 2:19). Moreover, Christ has raised us with him; we will appear with him in glory when he comes again (3:1-4).

Christ-centered Application of the Gospel. We should set our hearts on things above where Christ is (3:1). Our life is hidden with Christ. When Christ appears, we will appear with him in glory (3:4). There is no favoritism based on human distinctives because Christ is all (3:11). Christ is the center of personal life (3:5-10), church life (3:12-17), family life (3:18-25), and socioeconomic life (4:1-6).

Colossians related to Ephesians and Philemon. Colossians and Ephesians are similar in doctrinal teaching and application, but different in emphasis. While Ephesians highlights ecclesiology (what the church is), Colossians stresses Christology (who Christ is). Colossians is also closely associated with the letter to Philemon, which was Paul’s very personal appeal. The church in Colossae met in Philemon’s home, and Onesimus, mentioned in Colossians, was Philemon’s slave (Phm 3,16; Col 4:9).

Purpose of Our Study

We are living in the postmodern era. Postmodernism claims that there is no absolute truth, and it tries to make all truth relative. So today, many religious forms have become popular, including secular humanism, scientism, the occult, “New Age” philosophy, positive thinking based on psychology, and so on. Many people develop a kind of “smorgasbord” religion, combining ideas they like from various places and calling the end product their own. For example, contemporary American religion has been called a “moralistic, therapeutic deism” that preaches a “me-centered” message about a distant, therapeutic god, who wants us to feel good.³ In this environment it is okay to believe in Jesus as long as it makes you happy and there is no claim that Jesus is the Supreme Deity. Many people are confused and wandering. Even many Christians become confused, wondering if Jesus really is the only way of salvation. Some think that Jesus reigns only in the church--not in the family, workplace or society. They treat Jesus like a household god with no great power. The book of Colossians proclaims clearly that Christ is supreme over everything and that all the fullness of God dwells in him. Christ is sovereign over all realms and all history. Christ can fill us with everything we need. We receive redemption, eternal life and the kingdom of God. We can now enjoy love, joy, peace, and wisdom, along with everything that truly satisfies our souls. Through this study we pray to know Christ better and to be rooted in him and to grow maturity as individuals and as a church.

Outline

Introduction:

1:1-8—Greeting and thanks

1:9-12—prayer

Christology:

1:13,14—Redeemer

1:15—Image of God

1:15b-17—Creator

1:18—Head of the Church

1:19—Fullness of God

1:20-23—Reconciler

Paul, a servant of Christ:

1:24-29—Paul’s servanthship of the church

2:1-5—Paul’s purpose in struggling

³ “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism: Not Just a Problem with Youth Ministry,” by the Gospel Coalition, based on the book “Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Living in Christ:

- 2:6,7—continue to live in him
- 2:8—warning against false teaching
- 2:9—Christ's Deity
- 2:10—believer's fullness in Christ
- 2:11—circumcision by Christ
- 2:12—baptism with Christ
- 2:13—alive with Christ
- 2:14,15—triumph of the cross

Heresies:

- 2:16,17—Jewish legalism
- 2:18,19—angel worship
- 2:20-23—asceticism

Christian lifestyle:

- 3:1-4—new life in Christ
- 3:5-11—put to death the earthly nature
- 3:12-17—Christian virtues
- 3:18-21—Christian households
- 3:22-4:1—Christian work ethics
- 4:2-4—Christian prayer life
- 4:5,6—attitude toward outsiders

Conclusion:

- 4:7-9—introduction of messengers
- 4:10-18—greetings and benediction



