

Mount Pisgah A.M.E Church

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Bible Study, Wednesday, November 11, 2015

Survey of the Bible

Lesson 53: Colossians

The Book of Colossians

The book of Colossians is a letter written to a group of believers in a city in eastern Asia Minor known as Colosse (also spelled Colossae). Colosse was not physically far from the group of seven cities (churches) that John addresses in the book of Revelation. Although the letter was intended for the members of the Colossian church, the writer also intended for it to be read in the nearby city of Laodicea (4:16), one of the Revelation churches (Rev. 3:14-22). The purpose is to combat a set of false teachings that was creeping into the church by presenting an exalted view of Jesus Christ, and to motivate faithfulness to the unadulterated gospel.

Author

Although there is evidence from within the letter and from external (non-biblical) writings that Paul the Apostle wrote Colossians, there have been arguments to the contrary. On the positive side:

- The letter is consistent with Paul's other writings (particularly Ephesians and Philemon, and to some extent, Philippians) in terms of theme and structure. In fact, some passages seem almost identical to passages found in Ephesians.
- The basic format of "theology, then practice" is similar to Ephesians.
- The author gives many personal greetings, which is consistent with Paul's style.

The primary arguments against Paul's authorship are:

- Some of the language (in Greek) that he uses is not found anywhere else in Paul's writings. However this can be explained by Paul seeking to speak specifically to the issues in that local context.
- The heresy that some say he is addressing (called Gnosticism) doesn't surface until long after Paul lived (2nd Century AD). However, this can be explained by the fact that there may have been early, unnamed forms of this system of beliefs during Paul's day. As Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun."

The arguments against can be explained, so therefore the view that Paul wrote the letter can still be supported.

The Times and context of Colossians

Colosse was a city in the Roman province of Asia about 100 miles east of Ephesus. During the 5th Century BC, Colosse was an important trading center on the Lycus River, famous for its wool industry. By New Testament times however, the city had declined to become more of a small town (while nearby cities Laodicea and Hierapolis had grown to be the regional trading centers). After the middle of the first century (perhaps between 61 and 63 AD) the city suffered a devastating earthquake. Although it was rebuilt it never recovered its former prominence. Today no city stands in its place.

Paul indicates in the letter that he never actually visited the city (2:1), but the church there seems to have been founded by one of Paul's associates named Epaphras. It seems that Epaphras was one of Paul's

mentees, converted under his ministry while Paul was spending his three years in Ephesus. Apparently he was sent out to establish churches in Colosse and Laodicea. The church at Colosse was made up of predominantly Gentile (but some Jewish) believers. Several years after its founding, while Paul was in prison in Rome, Epaphras came to him with news that a new popular belief system was creeping into Colosse. This belief system seems to have combined elements from Greek mythology, Jewish legalism and oriental mysticism, and emphasized a low opinion of the body and a high view of spirituality. The believers there were attempting to blend Christianity with these new beliefs, and Paul writes this letter to caution against that.

Given that the letter was written around the same time as Ephesians and Philippians (from the Roman prison cell, it would have been written between 60 and 62 AD.

Overview

If Ephesians portrays “The Church of Christ,” Colossians portrays “The Christ of The Church.” Ephesians focuses on The Body of Christ, while Colossians focuses on Christ as The Head. It is perhaps the most Christ-centered book in the Bible. Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ and the completeness of salvation in order to combat what has become known as the “Colossian Error”. This set of beliefs presented a lesser view of Christ and lifted up philosophies and traditions, mysticism (a focus on visions and worship of angels) and asceticism (extreme abstinence and self-denial, contempt for the body). Paul emphasizes the Jesus, the head of the Body *of Christ*, is completely sufficient for every spiritual and practical need of the believer. The book is divided into a section on doctrinal truth (chapters 1 and 2) and a section on practical conduct (chapters 3 and 4)

Outline

- I. Doctrinal Truth: The Supremacy of Christ (1:1-2:23)**
 - A. Introduction (1:1-1:14)
 1. Greetings to “holy and faithful” ones (1:1-1:2)
 2. Thanksgiving for Their Faith and testimony (1:3-1:8)
 3. Prayers For Faithfulness Based on Transformation and Translation (1:9-1:14)
 - B. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-1:23)
 1. Supremacy in Creation (1:15-1:19)
 2. The Source of Your Redemption(1:20-1:23)
 - C. Paul’s Service In Light of Christ’s Lordship (1:24-2:7)
 1. A Ministry of Suffering (1:24)
 2. A Ministry of Preaching (1:25-29)
 3. A Ministry of Intercession (2:1-2:5)
 4. A Ministry of Encouragement (2:6-2:7)
 - D. Freedom In Christ (2:8-2:23)
 1. Freedom from False Philosophy (2:8-2:15)
 - a) Warning to not Replace Christ (2:8)
 - b) Freedom Because of Deity, Humanity and Adequacy of Christ (2:9-2:15)
 2. Freedom from Legalism (2:16-2:17)
 3. Freedom from Improper Worship (2:18-2:19)
 4. Freedom from Asceticism (2:20-2:23)
- II. Practical Conduct: Submission to Christ (3:1-4:6)**
 - A. The Position of The Believer (3:1-3:4)
 - B. The Practice of the Believer (3:5-4:6)
 1. Put Off The Old You (3:5-3:11)
 2. Put On The New You (3:12-3:17)

3. Family Relationships To Be Strengthened (3:18-4:1)
 - a) Family Life (3:18-3:21)
 - b) Work Life (3:22-4:1)
 4. Spiritual Stewardship (4:2-4:6)
 - a) Prayer (4:2-4:4)
 - b) Your Witness (4:5-4:6)
- III. Greetings (4:7-4:18)
- A. Commending Tychicus (4:7-4:9)
 - B. Greetings from Paul's Friends (4:10-4:14)
 - C. Instructions to Greet and Share with Laodicea (4:15-4:17)
 - D. Benediction (4:18)

Some Keys to understanding The Book of Colossians

- The practice of syncretism, or blending different religious and cultural traditions with the gospel of Christ, was one of the reasons why the scriptures were “canonized,” (i.e., compiled into a closed set of writings believed to be inspired), and also why Christian creeds were developed, such as The Nicene Creed (from which we get The Apostles Creed). These helped to articulate what Christians believed over against other teachings.
- A *heresy* is a set of beliefs that contradicts orthodox (or commonly accepted) doctrine. Those who brought *heretical* teachings (known as *heretics*) considered dangerous.
- The Colossian Heresy
 - Professed to be a “philosophy” (Paul called it a “hollow and deceptive philosophy”). There seemed to be a *pagan element* to it.
 - Placed a lot of emphasis on religious rites, special days, dietary laws and circumcision. Thus there seemed to be a *Jewish element* to it.
 - Named the name of Jesus, thus there was a *Christian element* to it. However, while it gave Christ a place, it did not declare Him as Lord. It did not *deny* Christ, but it did *dethrone* him.
- The Colossian Error seems to have been a for-runner to the later heresy known as Gnosticism, which taught that:
 - Spirit is good and matter (anything physical – including the body) is bad (a literal view of the word “flesh”). So harsh self-denial is a good thing. If the body is bad, then the incarnation of God through Christ was unacceptable.
 - Christ was not *really* human, so he could not have risen bodily. It must have been a ghost!
 - The way to salvation from the physical was through enlightenment and knowledge, not faith
 - Angels were spiritual beings (no “flesh”) so therefore worthy of worship.

Some Lessons from Colossians

- Right doctrine (teaching/understanding) leads to right practice. Much of the disturbing behavior that we see around us among Christians, even in the church, comes from lack of understanding of our position in Christ. This is not the same as “enlightenment,” but rather faith in the promises of God.
- You have been qualified by faith in Christ. Our salvation is not dependent upon our past or our circumstances – Christ has qualified us to share in a glorious inheritance that awaits us.
- The Christ through whom all things were created, and by whom all things are held together, has come to live inside of YOU (by the Holy Spirit), and has taken a personal interest in your redemption and destiny. He is superior to any power that could even attempt to destroy/disturb you.
- Philosophy can be a fascinating discipline that can be studied in order for us to better understand human behavior and motives. However any philosophy that attempts to take the place of an allegiance to God or God's Word must be called for what it is. When we start “blending” we can get ourselves confused.

- Many religions name the name of Christ, but we must always examine to what extent they EXALT Christ. Religions that deny the deity of Christ are not CHRISTIAN religions.
- The true Christ is superior to any practices or traditions that people may embrace. Traditions in the church are meant to point us to Christ. However when they become the focus, they are merely distractions from the true Christ, who is alive and not stuck in a ritual. When rituals cease to point us to Christ (or help us to remember Christ), they should be abandoned.
- With all of the distractions around us, it's easy to lose FOCUS on our goal. We must live in the world, participate in the world, but not be OF the world – i.e., not lose our focus on “things above.” “Things above” must be evident in our motives, our goals, and the way we treat people.
- While in the inner, spiritual realm our old selves are dead and buried with Christ, and our new selves are eternally united with Christ, the actual “working out” of our salvation requires a willful, intentional *laying down* of old tendencies, and *putting on* the character of Christ. Without this intentionality, our vision will always be stuck on distractions that will keep us earth bound. *“My soul be on thy guard, ten thousand foes arise...and hosts of sin are pressing hard to draw thee from the skies.”*
- Christians have a responsibility to stay alert, make the most of spiritual opportunities, and not waste our words on trivial matters. Every encounter that we have with people has the potential of being a divine opportunity