



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

“To the Colossians” An Introduction to the Church and Letter

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Introduction

1. After looking at Colossae’s history and religious environment, we will now look broadly at the church and letter (1,581 Greek words divided into 4 chapters and 95 verses).
2. We note first the letter’s connections with other writings.
 - a. It highlights the Colossians’ connection to churches in neighboring cities: (1) Epaphras was praying for them “and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis”; (2) “brothers and sisters who are in Laodicea”; (3) telling them to exchange letters with the Laodicean church (Col 4.13, 15–16).
 - b. Besides Epaphras (Col 1.7; 4.12; Phlm 23), there are references to Archippus (Col 4.17; Phlm 2), Aristarchus (Col 4.10; Phlm 24), and Onesimus (Col 4.9; Phlm 10) in Colossians and Philemon, showing the connection between those writings; there is also mention of an ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) in the house of Nympha (Col 4.15), providing insight into the life of the church in the region.

Origin of the Church in Colossae

3. From Colossians and related texts in Acts, we infer information about the church’s origin.
 - a. Colossians 2.1 suggests that Paul had not been to Colossae or Laodicea.¹
 - b. Colossians 1.7; 4.9; and Philemon 23 suggest that Epaphras, a fellow slave and prisoner with Paul, had been responsible for founding the church.
 - 1) Colossians 1.7 says they had “learned the gospel from Epaphras.”
 - 2) Colossians 4.12 supports this by calling attention to his habit of struggling in prayer on their behalf, suggesting he had a vested interest in them.
 - c. Paul’s ministry in nearby Ephesus presents us with a reasonable scenario for how the church was founded and why Paul wrote as if Colossae was one of his churches.
 - 1) For two years, he was “reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus ... so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19.9–10).²

¹ The translation, “have not seen me face to face” (ESV) is literally, “have not seen me in the flesh” (οὐχ ἑώρακαν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ἐν σαρκί, *ouch eorakan to prosōpon you en sarki*; cf. NKJV).

² See the footnote in the ESV that cites the textual variant here: “Some manuscripts add *from the fifth hour to the tenth* (that is, from 11 A.M. to 4 P.M.)”

- 2) It is plausible that Paul used Ephesus as a base, dispatched others to go out to the surrounding region, and that Epaphras, who was apparently from Colossae, taught them.
- 3) It is likely that Paul's daily discourses in Tyrannus's lecture hall included more than "the plan of salvation."

Origin and Occasion of the Letter

4. Paul is in prison where Epaphras has come to visit, or is imprisoned with him (Col 4.3, 12; Phlm 23).
 - a. Although some have argued that the imprisonment in question is in either Caesarea (cf. Acts 24.22–26.32) or Ephesus (an attractive suggestion because of its proximity to Colossae and the smaller travel times required for the visits the letters describe; on an Ephesian imprisonment, cf. inferences from 2 Cor 1.8; 1 Cor 15.32), the traditional Roman imprisonment (Acts 28) is the best option;³ the date of writing is probably around 60–62 AD⁴ (for more information, consult the "For Further Reading" sources below).
 - b. It appears that Epaphras had given Paul a report on conditions at Colossae (Col 1.8; 2.5) which, though generally encouraging, included some problems revolving around false views of Jesus and the practice of the faith (Col 2.6–23).
 - c. Paul wrote to encourage them to maintain their allegiance to Christ and to expose the failings of the teachings of those trying to convince them to follow other practices (Col 1.10, 13, 15–20, 23, 28–29; 2.6–15, 17, 20; 3.1–4, 16–17).
 - 1) His personal aim and commitment are stated in Colossians 1.28–29.
 - 2) A summary of what he wanted them to do is found in 2.6–8.
5. In the interest of being aware of challenges, the necessary first step in preparing to make a defense (1 Pet 3.15) to those who venture alternative views, we should know that some dispute the traditional view that Paul is the author of this letter.⁵
 - a. He was accepted as the author in early church history, and the letter was included in early canonical lists by Christians who would have rejected it if they had thought Paul was not the author.
 - b. But for the last century and a half:
 - 1) Some have argued that the style in Colossians is so different from the uncontested letters that the author had to be someone else.
 - 2) Others contend that the letter's theology is more developed than what Paul wrote elsewhere, or than would have been needed in the mid-first century (see Arnold 2008, 2289).
 - c. Weaknesses in these arguments and a case for Pauline authorship have been articulated by multiple scholars.⁶

³ For discussion of these options and the date of the writing, see Carson and Moo 2005, 521–522; Wright 1986, 34–39.

⁴ The date of the earthquake that hit the region in the early 60s suggests that this is the latest the letter could have been written. See the previous study, "[Colossae: The City and Its Religions](#)."

⁵ Scholars generally agree that Paul wrote seven of the letters ascribed to him—Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon—sometime between the late 40s and early 60s AD. Granting, for sake of argument, the view of critics that the other six are not genuinely Pauline, we are still left with teaching from Paul that conveys a high estimation of Jesus as Messiah and how to live faithfully (see Hurtado 2005, 32–38).

⁶ For an example of arguments against Pauline authorship, see Furnish 1992, 1092–1094. For defenses of Pauline authorship, see Arnold 2008, 2289; Carson and Moo 2005, 517–521; Garland 1998, 17–22; O'Brien 1992, 150–152; or Wright 1986, 31–34.

Value of Colossians

6. It is best to wait for a discussion of the so-called “Colossian heresy” until we come to that section of the letter, but we can say at this point that by examining it, we gain insight into challenges we may face and how to respond to them.⁷
7. We can, however, identify some important themes we need to study today.
 - a. The nature and preeminence of Jesus Christ over all creation; he is Lord of all human rulers and cosmic powers (1.15–20; 2.9–10; 3.1).
 - b. God’s work through Christ to secure redemption and reconciliation for all who put their faith in him (1.13–14, 21–23).
 - c. The appeal to and need for believers to actively seek growth in maturity in Christ (1.9–14; 1.28–2.5).
 - d. The need to identify, resist, and respond to deceitful, human-tradition based worldviews (2.8–9, 16–23).
 - e. The call to get rid of sinful practices and seek to cultivate Christian virtues and lifestyles (1.10–12, 28; 3.1–4.6).

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For Further Reading

- Arnold. 2002. “Colossians.” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. ed. Clinton E. Arnold. vol. 3. Zondervan.
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- Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. 2005. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Zondervan.
- Furnish, Victor Paul. 1992. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 1, 1090–1096. Doubleday.
- Garland, David E. 1998. *Colossians and Philemon*. The NIV Application Commentary. ed. Terry Muck. Zondervan Publishing House.
- Hurtado, Larry W. 2005. *How on Earth Did Jesus Become God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2010. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. 3rd ed. Fortress Press.
- O’Brien, P. T. 1992. “Colossians, Letter to the.” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. ed. Gerald L. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, 147–153. InterVarsity Press.
- Wright, N. T. 1986. *The Epistles of Paul to Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁷ For an example of some things we can learn that are of value for responding to a resistant culture, see my *Berea Page* teaching newsletter, “[Learning from Paul’s Method in Colossians](#),” (vol. 7, no. 12; April 21, 2026).