



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Sermons

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## “To the Saints at Colossae”

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### *Introduction*

What must it have been like to have been among the first or second generations of Christians? You may ask that as you read the New Testament and find out more about them.

In some ways, it would have been different. They were the first believers, the pioneers; there is something special about occupying that place in any movement. Since it was new everywhere, they had to establish a foothold for the faith. This not only affected the way they were received by those around them, but also how they lived out their faith. They did not have the luxury of building on previously established ways of doing things.

In other ways, however, living as a disciple then would not have been much different than living as one now. People are people in any age; when confronted with a new belief system, their reactions would have ranged across the same kind of spectrum we see today. So, if we reflect on their world, understand what they did, and think constructively about how to apply it, we can learn much about being the church and doing its work in our world.

The New Testament letters to the churches are especially helpful for seeing the issues they faced and how they were expected to deal with them. In this series, we’re looking at Colossians, a short letter, only 95 verses long, and one of my favorites to study. My approach will be to cover its main argument and sub-arguments in broad strokes. In this introductory sermon, I want us to get a feel for the letter in its entirety in the context of the first century world and church.

### *From Paul ... and Timothy*

Though both Paul and Timothy are named as the authors in Colossians 1.1, the singular is typically used when the first person is employed and Paul is explicitly named in 1.23 and 4.18. It is probable that Timothy was Paul’s amanuensis.

As a matter of information and being “ready to make a defense” in our world (1 Pet 3.15), we should know that some dispute the view that Paul wrote Colossians.<sup>1</sup> He was accepted as the author in early church history, and the letter was included in early canonical lists that would have rejected it those deciding which books to include had thought Paul was not its author. But

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<sup>1</sup> P. T. O’Brien, “Colossians, Letter to the,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 150-152.

over the last 150 years, Paul's authorship has been challenged. Some argue that the style of writing is so different from the uncontested Pauline letters that the author had to be someone else. Others contend that the theology of the book is more developed than what Paul wrote in previous letters, or than what would have been needed in a church in the mid-first century.<sup>2</sup> Weaknesses in these arguments and a case for Pauline authorship have been elaborated by multiple scholars.<sup>3</sup>

The letter itself provides information that is useful for determining its occasion and date. Epaphras, who probably was the one who had taken the gospel to Colossae (Col 1.7), was, at the time Colossians and Philemon were written, visiting Paul in prison (Col 4.3, 12; Phlm 23). It appears that he had given Paul a report on conditions at Colossae (Col 1.8; 2.5) which, though generally encouraging, told of some problems revolving around false views about Jesus and the faith (see 2.6-23). Though some have argued for alternatives in Caesarea or even Ephesus, the traditional setting of Paul's Roman imprisonment (cf. Acts 27-28) seems to be the best context for determining the writing's date, somewhere around 60-62 AD.

### *To the Saints and Faithful Brothers at Colossae*

Located in what is now the nation of Turkey, Colossae was 100 miles east of Ephesus in Phrygia, on the southern bank of the Lycus River. It was situated on the main road from Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates in a fertile valley that produced large crops of figs and olives. According to Peter O'Brien, "in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., it was described as populous, large and wealthy, its commercial significance being due to its wool industry" (O'Brien, 147). By the time of the Roman empire, however, it had declined in importance and was described as a small town, surpassed by the neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis that were six miles apart from each other and twelve miles from Colossae. By the time of Paul, "the commercial and social importance of the town was already on the wane, though coins and inscriptions attest to the civic life of the town in the second and third centuries A.D." (O'Brien, 147).

The city, which was in the proconsular province of Asia,<sup>4</sup> was cosmopolitan in character.

Colossae's population consisted mainly of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers, but in the early part of the second century B.C. two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia were settled in Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III (Josephus *Ant.* 12.3.4 §§147-53). According to grave inscriptions in the area Jews had become part of the Asian culture by the first century B.C. So the Colossae of Paul's day seems to have been a cosmopolitan place in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled" (O'Brien, 147).

The diversity in Colossae included prominent pagan religions, not least the cults devoted to the goddess Artemis, whose temple was in Ephesus, and Cybele, an earth goddess associated with Phrygia. Mystery religions with secret rituals brought from Persia, were popular among many of the populace. Greek philosophies, such as Stocism and Epicureanism, also had a presence, as did Judaism.

<sup>2</sup> See the "Introduction to Colossians" by Clinton E. Arnold in Lane T. Dennis, ed., *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2289.

<sup>3</sup> See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 517-521; N. T. Wright, *Colossians, and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 31-34.

<sup>4</sup> Provinces like Asia that were governed by a senate-appointed proconsul were typically more peaceful than provinces governed by emperor-appointed procurator (e.g., Judea).

From Colossians 2.1, it appears that Paul had not been to the city, and the statement that they had “learned [the gospel] from Epaphras” in 1.7 is thus best understood to mean that he had planted the church there, as well as in Laodicea and Hierapolis (4.13). The proximity of Colossae to Ephesus and the reference in Acts 19.10 to “all the residents of Asia” hearing God’s word during Paul’s two-year residency there makes it likely that the Colossian church was founded at that time. That Epaphras was “one of [them]” (Col. 4.12) suggests a special interest in Colossae on his part, lending credibility to the perception that he was the one who had taught them after he had heard the gospel during the time Paul was reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19.8-10).

When we think about the nature of the Colossian church, the knowledge that a sizable colony of Jews had been relocated to Colossae, and the apostolic preaching practice of going first to the Jews (see Rom 1.16; Acts 13.46-47), we conclude that there was a significant Jewish presence in the church. This is confirmed by references to conditions and themes in the letter that are best explained if several of the addressees were Jews (cf. 2.11, 16, 21).

At the same time, there is also evidence of a Gentile presence. As summarized by O’Brien (148), “they had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, being hostile to God in mind and godless in their actions (Col. 1:21; cf. 1:12, 27).” They had also been “dead in [their] trespasses and *the uncircumcision of [their] flesh*” (2.13; my emphasis). In other words, their former lives had been characterized by the kind of immoral and amoral behavior that was typical of so many in the Greco-Roman world.

Both the Jewish and Gentile saints needed to grow in their knowledge of God and pursuit of the ways of Christ (Col 1.9-14; 3.1-4, 5-17).

Because we also need to keep growing and seeking Christ’s ways, Paul’s teaching to them then remains important for us today.

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