

# *Colossians:* *The All-Sufficiency of Christ*

## TITLE

This letter is named for those to whom the letter is addressed: “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae” (1:2).

## BACKGROUND

Colossae was located eighty or more miles east of Ephesus, in the Lycus Valley, near Laodicea (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16) and Hierapolis (4:13). While Paul had apparently never visited that area (2:1), he had an intense interest in the cause of Christ there. The congregations in that region were probably established when Paul was preaching in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), perhaps by Epaphras (1:7; 4:12, 13).

Colossians is a sister letter to Ephesians. Both were written from Rome by Paul at about the same time (A.D. 60-62; see background in the article “Ephesians: Christ and His Church”), and they cover many of the same topics, using similar language. The Colossian letter contains about one-fourth of the instruction given in Ephesians (cf. 1:18 and Eph. 1:22, 23; 1:20, 21 and Eph. 2:12ff.; 1:25-27 and Eph. 3:1ff.). There are, however, different emphases in the two epistles. Ephesians emphasizes the *church* of Christ; Colossians emphasizes the *Christ* of the church.

Word came to Paul (probably by Epaphras; see 1:7-9) that heresy had crept into the churches in the Lycus Valley. The false teaching was probably an early form of “Gnosticism,” which became rampant in the second and third centuries. The word “gnosticism” comes from the Greek word *gnosis* (pronounced “KNOW-sis”), which means “knowledge.” The “Gnostics” (“NOS-tics”) claimed *special knowledge*, special spiritual insight, available only to a select few. “Gnosticism” was a noxious brew of many beliefs: a little Christianity, some Judaism, much Greek philosophy. Some of the peculiarities of “the Colossian heresy” can be seen in the letter: false philosophy that claimed special wisdom and knowledge available to a few elite “mature ones” (1:27, 28; 2:3, 8); the imposition of ritual feasts and festivals (mainly from Judaism) blended with Greek ascetic practices (2:14-17, 20-23); and the worship of angels, probably as mediators to reach a supposedly distant God (2:18, 23).

Paul was concerned about the teaching of error, but most of all he was concerned because the error struck at the heart of Christianity: the nature of

Christ (see background in the article “John: Christ, the Son of God”) and the all-sufficiency of Christ. Paul is pointing out that we do *not* need Christ *plus* man’s wisdom and philosophy, but rather that Christ and His way are *all* we need.

There is a special relationship between this epistle and the one to Philemon. Philemon was a member at Colossae; the letters were apparently delivered at the same time (see notes in the article “Titus and Philemon: Putting Things in Order”).

## OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION (1:1-14).

- I. CHRIST’S ALL-SUFFICIENCY ASSERTED (1:15—2:5).
  - A. Made manifest by God (1:15-23).
  - B. Proclaimed by Paul (1:24—2:5).
- II. CHRIST’S ALL-SUFFICIENCY ATTACKED (2:6-23).
  - A. An attack on the sufficiency of Christ’s teachings (vv. 6-9).
  - B. An attack on the sufficiency of Christ’s baptism (vv. 10-13).
  - C. An attack on the sufficiency of Christ’s covenant (vv. 14-17).
  - D. An attack on the sufficiency of Christ’s worship (vv. 18-23).
- III. CHRIST’S ALL-SUFFICIENCY APPLIED (3:1—4:6).
  - A. All-sufficient for the Christian life (3:1-17).
  - B. All-sufficient for relationships (3:18—4:6).
    1. Relationships in the home (3:18—4:1).
    2. Relationship with God (4:2, 3).
    3. Relationship with unbelievers (4:5, 6).

CONCLUSION (4:7-18).

## LESSONS FROM COLOSSIANS

Some worry about “the lost letters of the New Testament.” They refer to 4:16 and the epistle to Laodicea, among others. There are no “lost letters of the New Testament.” Yes, there were probably other letters written that have not been preserved (1 Cor. 5:9), but these were never a part of the New Testa-

ment. God providentially preserved all we need to become Christians, live the Christian life, and go to heaven (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

Compare Col. 3:21 and Eph. 6:4 on the challenge of being a parent, especially being a father. "Do not provoke . . . to anger" does not mean a parent should not discipline his children lest they become upset (note Heb. 12:11). Rather, it is speaking of *the way* parents discipline. The next phrase is the key: "that

they may not lose heart." Overly harsh punishment discourages, as does neglect. Children interpret a failure to discipline as a sign that parents do not care. All discipline should be done *in love*.

Col. 1:28 is a good summary of what every preacher or teacher should strive to do: preach, warn, and teach—with divine wisdom—to help people *grow up* into Christ. "Perfect" (KJV) means "full-grown, mature" in this context (see 4:12).

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## *When a Cult Comes to Town (Colossians)*

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The cult shoot-out and subsequent standoff in Waco, Texas, beginning in March, 1993, captured the attention of the world; but the Branch Davidians are just a tip of the cultic iceberg. Cults flourish around the world. In America alone, an estimated three million Americans, mostly between ages 18 and 28, are involved in cultic activity. Cults have special appeal to the lonely, to those disoriented by personal crisis, and to those who have a difficult time getting a grip on their lives.

It is hard to define a cult, but generally the following characteristics are seen: Although they claim to be Christian, usually they incorporate elements from other world views. Although they give lip-service to the Bible, usually their first allegiance is to some other authority, often a powerful personality who tells them what to believe about the Bible. Invariably there is some means of mental (and sometimes physical) control, subtle or overt.

When Paul was imprisoned at Rome, word came of cultic teachings permeating the church at Colossae. Paul's response teaches us what to do "when a cult comes to town."

### I. PAUL RESPONDED IMMEDIATELY.

- A. Paul did not ignore the situation and hope it would go away. Paul could not travel to Colossae, but he could write. This letter is his prompt response to the problem.
- B. Cultism is an insidious thing that, unchecked, can quickly gain adherents, undermine the truth of the gospel, and disrupt the peace and harmony of the church.
  - 1. Paul said to "mark" such and avoid them (Rom. 16:17; KJV). "Mark" means "to be aware of, pay attention to." The NASB has "keep your eye on." It is the opposite of "ignore."
  - 2. The leaders of the church should take the lead in this (Acts 20:28-31; Tit. 1:9-11).

### II. PAUL EXPOSED THE CULTIC ERROR.

- A. The error that had crept into Colossae was apparently an early form of Gnosticism that attempted to blend elements of Christianity with Greek philosophy and Jewish ritualism (see notes on Colossians in this article). He did not hesitate to condemn their error.
  - 1. Paul warned the congregation generally against the false teachers (1:23; 2:4, 8).
  - 2. Paul *specified* many errors of which they were guilty. In answering them, he cleverly used their cultic terminology.
    - a. They claimed they had special "wisdom" and

"knowledge" and were thus able to understand "mysteries."

- (1) Paul said true wisdom was in Christ (1:28; 2:3; 4:5).
- (2) Paul said the "mystery" had been *revealed* in Christ (1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; see notes in the article "Ephesians: Christ and His Church").
- b. They claimed that to be wise, in addition to Christianity one needed elements of Judaism and Greek philosophy.
  - (1) Paul noted that the old law and its ordinances were nailed to the cross (2:14, 16). The "circumcision" of the New Testament was spiritual, not fleshly (2:11).
  - (2) One does not need *human* philosophy and traditions (2:8, 9, 20-22).
- c. They had their own system of worship ("self-made religion," 2:23) which encouraged the superstitious fear of spiritual entities (2:15) and the worship of angels (probably as intermediaries to reach God, 2:18).
  - (1) Paul said all of this was "show" (2:23); it had no *substance*.
  - (2) Jesus defeated all "rulers and authorities" (2:15) when He died on the cross (2:14; Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12:11); there was no need to fear them—and certainly no need to worship them (Rev. 19:10).
  - (3) *Christ* was all-sufficient to reach God (2:9; see also 1 Tim. 2:5!)
- d. They claimed that Christian ordinances, such as baptism, were ineffectual; they recommended *their* special rites and rituals to attain a "maturity" and superiority.
  - (1) Paul said that when one is raised from the watery grave of baptism, he has a *new life* in Jesus (2:12, 13).
  - (2) Maturity is not gained by human philosophy, but rather *through Christ*, by living the life Christ wants one to live (1:28; 2:10; 3:1ff.; 4:12).
- B. Some say our preaching and teaching should always be positive, never negative. Such a concept goes against common sense and biblical teaching (2 Tim. 4:1-4). We need always to be positive in our approach and preach "in love" (Eph. 4:15), but sometimes we have no choice but to expose error. Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Mt. 7:15; cf. Eph. 5:6; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Jn. 4:1).

### III. PAUL EXALTED CHRIST.

- A. Above all, in meeting the cultic error, Paul exalted Christ, stressing that the false teachers offered nothing that Christ could not give. Christ was “all-sufficient” for their needs and is sufficient for ours. Some of the most profound Christological statements in the New Testament are here (1:15-19; 2:9, 10).
- B. Let us keep Christ at the center of our teaching, our thinking, and our lives (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14)!

### CONCLUSION

- A. We should keep abreast of spiritual threats, but new cults can spring up like mushrooms. How can we *always* be ready to meet any threat to the gospel? We must saturate our minds with the truths in the New Testament, especially the truths about Jesus. Those who are trained to spot counterfeit bills are first indoctrinated in the characteristics of *genuine* bills; then they can detect any differences.
- B. May God help us to stay true to Him, His Son, and His Word!

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