

Colossians 1 pt. 1 v1-8

About this book Richard Melick writes, “One theme predominates: the centrality of Christ. No other epistle is as Christocentric as this one.”¹

That is a good place for us to start as we begin our introduction to Colossians.

Some scholars believe that because of Paul’s advanced development of Christological themes that he didn’t actually write this letter. The problem I have with that view is really two fold. First, it ignores the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. Second, it demands that scholarship hold Biblical authors in a state of stasis with regards to their writing; arguing that the Apostles couldn’t have matured in their theological understanding by way of the Holy Spirit or further study.

What if we applied the same standard to ourselves? What if we were expected to maintain the same level of spiritual/theological understanding based on one snapshot of our spiritual life? I

¹ Richard R. Melick, Jr. “Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.” *The New American Commentary*, vol. 32. Ed. David Dockery, et al. (Broadman & Holman Publishers: Nashville, TN) 1991, p. 162.

shudder to think of what madness I would still be espousing in my ignorance.

My prayer is that we will continue to grow in understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ along with the Father and the Spirit as the Lord continues to shape our understanding.

What I propose in regards to Paul's advancement of a more refined Christological understanding, is that as inspired by the Holy Spirit and for the instruction of the church both in that time and in our time, God revealed things to Paul through the Scriptures and divine revelation that demonstrate a high-view of the person and work of Jesus -- more than just a man, God with us.

What would we do without some of the bold assertions of Christ's deity that are found in Colossians?

Such as the lyrical passage found in Col 1:15-20:

[Col 1:15-20 NKJV] "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible,

whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. 19 For it pleased [the Father that] in Him all the fullness should dwell, 20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

AND--

[Col 2:9-10 NKJV] 9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; 10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Paul's presentation of Christ's God-hood adds to the overwhelming evidence that is presented many places in the Scriptures (Isa 9:6; Jer 23:5-6; Jhn 1:1; Rom 9:5; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:5,8).

Paul's letter to the Colossians is remarkable exactly BECAUSE OF its treatment of Christ. As Paul sets forth this grand theological treatise in the first part of the book, one that

apparently is so strong that it challenges theologians, he also presents to the Colossians the practical implications of or the “so what” of Christ’s God-hood. Namely, a changed life bearing fruit worthy of Christ’s calling.

This is one of the letters (along with Romans) that Paul wrote to a fellowship of Christians who were unknown to him personally. This church is believed to have been established by a man mentioned within the epistle, Epaphras.

The town of Colossae was not that big of a deal during this time period. It was overshadowed by two larger towns - Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were nearby. Colossae was situated next to the Lycus River and positioned about 120 miles east of that other famous New Testament town - Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians, while invoking many of the same themes as Ephesians, and other of his letters, is unique in several ways.

Along with being uniquely Christ-centered, one source asserts that, “many Greek phrases occur here, found nowhere else.”²

These singularly used terms are academically referred to as

² Robert Jamieson, Fausset, A.R., Brown, David. “Colossians,” *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. (1871) Vol.2, 370.

hapax legomena (once said).³ Another points out that there are no direct OT Scriptural quotations found within the letter.

This has led scholars to conclude that what Paul was refuting within the Colossians church was not the “basic Judaism” propagated by what are termed “Judaizers” but what Douglas Moo refers to as a syncretistic amalgamation of “[local] Phrygian folk belief [paganism], local folk Judaism, and Christianity.”⁴

So then Paul is not confronting straight laced Judaism in its most direct form but a mish-mash of local customs, beliefs, veneration of angels, ritualistic customs, appeals to spiritual beings, and “various practices to ward off evil.”⁵

It seems to me then that what Paul had heard reported in Colosse fairly represents some aspects of our society today - this mash-up of spiritual or religious beliefs that are grounded more in local folk tradition than in any real truth.

Paul does much to correct this thinking - refocusing the Colossian saints on the centrality of Jesus Christ.

³ Melick, 166.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo. *The Letters to Colossians and to Philemon*. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.) 2008, 57.

⁵ Moo, 57.

This would no doubt be a challenge for them, but also a joy as they learned to divest themselves of the baggage they had brought along with them and attached to the gospel and learn to live within the gospel fixed upon Christ alone.

It is within this context that Paul's letter takes shape.

V.1-2 We begin with Paul's common introduction to the churches.

Although Paul was unknown to the Colossians personally, by this time he would have had quite a reputation among the churches based on his work for the gospel.

From our perspective Paul was a champion of the faith, a committed evangelist, a skilled teacher of the Scriptures, and an effective apologist of the freedom found within the gospel.

Viewed from the perspective of those outside of the church Paul may very well have been viewed quite differently. Perhaps as a trouble-maker, a contrarian, a crazy-person, and (likely by the Jews) a heretic.

We find in v.1 Paul's own assessment of his ministerial calling --
"an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God..."

This frames our understanding of Paul's ministry and who exactly is responsible for drafting Paul into the ministry. It is God who is responsible for Paul's apostolic role and Christ is the message that Paul bears in his holy office.

We also see in these opening verses that Paul is not a lone-ranger. He works alongside others - a point that is further developed toward the close of the letter. In particular Paul mentions a man named Timothy who is familiar to us from other portions of Scripture (1&2 Tim; Acts 16; 2 Cor 1:19).

BDAG records that Timothy "...is named as the 'co-writer' of six letters (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Th 1:1; 2 Th 1:1; Phlm 1)."⁶

This letter is addressed "To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse..."

We must always bear in mind that these letters are written to a believing audience. They were not written with the primary objective of converting unbelievers (though one could argue that

⁶ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1006.

perhaps they can serve in that capacity) but they are written specifically to saints, holy ones, who *are* faithful as the natural result of being made holy by Christ.

These letters inform, instruct, shape understanding, and build up the saints -- this holds true in our age as well.

Paul commends to the Colossians that much needed blessing: Grace and peace.

We must never lose sight of the sheer immensity of these two gifts -- grace and peace.

I was recently speaking with an unbeliever who had never heard of the doctrine of grace -- that God's favor abounds to humanity in our wretchedness. That is the grace of God.

Peace is just as elusive and confused as it ever has been. Peace is that resolved certainty of rest -- "a state of concord, peace, harmony"⁷

⁷ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 287.

Never lose sight of the importance of grace and peace as Paul introduces himself to the saints and may our hearts be set likewise to extend grace and peace to those that we come into contact with.

V.3-8 Is one long sentence -- in classic Pauline style.

In our endeavor to study the Bible expositorially we must ensure that we don't "miss the forest for the trees." It makes sense to take a moment to read through the whole passage so that we grasp the overall idea that Paul is presenting.

The main thrust of this passage is Paul's gratitude toward God because of the way that the Colossians were impacted by the gospel.

Paul's expression of thanksgiving is rich with theological truth. It appears that even as Paul is expressing his gratitude for their coming to Christ he is also turning about in his mind how all of this theology works together practically in the real world.

First and foremost, the fruit of the Colossians' conversion has manifested itself in faith in Jesus and love for all the saints (v.4).

This reminds us of Jesus' instruction to the Disciples, "[Jhn 13:35 NKJV] 35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."" (Jhn 13:35, NKJV)

Bear in mind that Paul and his companions have not visited Colosse. The reputation that they have earned for loving all the saints is reported abroad - other people have communicated to Paul, and probably others, just how loving this church was.

We also see in Paul's declaration of thanksgiving for the Colossians, this understanding of just how impactful the gospel is. It is the entire basis for their conversion, their affection for others, and their fruitfulness as believers.

The spread of the gospel, which Paul describes as moving "in all the world," (v.6) has found purchase in Colossae and has resulted in a very real observable change in that community. That doesn't mean that everything is perfect. As we go on in this letter Paul has quite a lot to say in order to ensure that the Colossians stay headed in the right direction, doctrinally speaking, but it is so beautiful to see just how moved Paul is by the change that they have experienced so far...and all because of Jesus.

That should be our heart too! Whenever we come upon a newly converted family, a new baby Christian, a recommitted believer, a refugee from the world, we need to take time to give thanks to God for the mighty work that He demonstrates in those moments.

We also need to extend grace, peace and our affection to them and ensure that we communicate just how grateful we are to welcome them into the heavenly family - as they learn to embrace their new heavenly citizenship, their new hope laid up in heaven for them. (v.5)

We need to make sure that we don't automatically jump to the minor controversial topics of the faith -- denominationalism, theological trick-questions, or any other -isms. While there are portions of Paul's letters that challenge us (God's word challenges us! We are sinners!) we don't see an overwhelming pattern of Paul "majoring in the minors."

And we don't see that in Colossians. We see his great joy over learning about a body of believers who were united around the fundamental core of our shared faith -- the gospel. AND, Paul also

indicates that he is aware that coming into contact with the gospel and being grasped by the gospel will bear fruit in their lives.

There is no indication here that the Colossians were instructed in modifying their behaviors, or “cleaning themselves up” before embracing the gospel; but rather that they embraced the gospel and began to bloom, to unfold beautifully at the word of the Lord.

And what is it that they KNEW, that they gained knowledge of, that they were influenced by? The grace of God.

Even though Paul was not the planter of this particular church, Epaphras (v.7) had faithfully communicated the gospel and the grace of God to these people.

Epaphras is described here in positive terms as a servant, a FAITHFUL servant of Christ who was dedicated to serving the Colossians as he served Jesus. AND, blessedly what I think is remarkable about Epaphras, is that what he communicated to Paul and Timothy and their team was just how loving the Colossians were -- a love that was unique because of its relation to the Holy Spirit.

Henry Alford writes about this, “This love is emphatically a gift, and in its full reference the chief gift of the Spirit, --as distinct from those unspiritual states of mind which are ἐν σαρκί [in the flesh - translation mine]. This love of the Colossians he lays stress on, as grounds for thankfulness, a fruit of the hope laid up for them, --as being that side of their Christian character where he had no fault...to find with them.”⁸

That is a fortuitous place to pause our study -- considering the love of the saints. We have been exhorted over and over in our journey with Jesus to love -- to love God, and to love others, even as we are loved.

The sense we get from the text this morning, considering the remarkable love demonstrated by the Colossians in the Holy Spirit, is that this isn't something we can conjure. Sure, we can (AND DO) fabricate cheap substitutes, papier mache versions of tenderness and affection that we sometimes keep in reserve for a moment when we need to appear Christian-ly. But we cannot fabricate the ability to love that is gifted to the saints by the Holy Spirit.

⁸ Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, 1976), 199.

Rather, as we are held by the gospel, and moved by the Spirit, that love is the result of our pressing into the person and work of Jesus Christ. In some sense that requires a bit of abandonment on our part - tossing away our cheap imitations of love for the real thing and then...giving it away.

This is the result of the gospel -- and so we pray -- Help us to love oh Lord, as you love us.