

INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS (AND PHILEMON)

October 18, 1988

I. Origin of the church.

- A. The city of Colossae lay in the Lycus Valley, a tributary of the Meander in a mountainous district (of beauty) about 100 miles inland from Ephesus.
 - 1. It was overshadowed in importance by neighboring Laodicea and Hierapolis, both of which had church's, Col.4:13.
 - 2. Paul never visited this church, Col.1:4; 2:1.
- B. Epaphras organized the church as seen in the references to him throughout the epistle, Col.1:7; 4:12; 1:3.
 - 1. Epaphras was probably converted to Christianity as a result of Paul's ministry at Ephesus, Act.19:10.
 - 2. Colossae was in Paul's apostolic canon, as he assumes a position of authority over them.
 - 3. Paul acknowledges that the church has been well instructed in doctrine, Col.2:6, and has every confidence in Epaphras as a faithful minister of Christ, Col.1:7.

II. Occasion.

- A. Epaphras traveled to Rome and was willing to share Paul's imprisonment for a time (Philm.23) so as to acquaint Paul with the progress of Christianity in the Lycus Valley.
 - 1. The main reason was to solicit advice about a dangerous heresy which had arisen in Colossae.
 - 2. Epaphras probably wanted Paul's advice and greater wisdom.
 - 3. Archippus was left in charge of the work at Colossae as mentioned in Col.4:17 and Philm.2.

III. The heresy (there is always a challenge to reconstruct the precise tenets of a heresy when the only data available are indirect allusions to it in the course of a positive statement of doctrine intended to counteract it).

A. Its Christology.

- 1. It is clear that the false teaching was in some way detracting from the person of Christ, for Paul places great stress upon His preeminence, Col.1:15-19.
- 2. This was a tendency which became fully developed in the gnosticism of the second century (gnosticism refers to a variety of religious movements in the early Christian centuries which stressed salvation through a secret *gnosis* or "knowledge").

B. Its philosophic character.

- 1. Paul specifically warns against philosophy and vain deceit, Col.2:8.
- 2. Hellenistic elements were present as the expressions "*fullness*" (Col.1:19), "*knowledge*" (Col.2:3), and "*neglect of the body*" (Col.2:23) suggest.

C. Its Jewish environment.

- 1. The most conclusive evidence is the reference to circumcision, Col.2:11; 3:11.
- 2. The warning against human tradition, Col.2:8, refers to the Jewish tendency to superimpose the traditions of the elders upon the Law.
- 3. The ritual tendencies found in Col.2:16, enjoining the readers not to allow anyone to judge them with respect to meat, drink, feasts, new moons or Sabbaths, is predominantly, if not exclusively, Jewish.

D. Its angelic worship.

- 1. In Scripture, angels performed a mediator function in relation to the Law.
- 2. However, there was no tendency to worship them.
- 3. It is possible that some Jewish teacher(s) may have developed these angels into objects of worship.

E. The elements of the world.

1. These elements or στοιχία, stoicheia may be understood in two ways, either as:
 - a. elementary spirits
 - b. elementary teaching
2. In the former case, it would be a reference to the powerful spirit world operating in the affairs of the natural world.
3. In the latter, it would presumably describe a purely materialistic/humanistic doctrine of the world.

F. Exclusivism.

1. From the above evidence, it may be safely deduced that the heresy was of a syncretistic Jewish gnosticizing type (syncretism: the combination of different forms of belief).
2. Such a combination of ideas would have found ready acceptance in Asia with its cults and considerable Jewish population.
3. In Colossae, the worship of the goddess Cybele was deeply rooted and promoted a tendency to a love of the extravagant.
4. Oriental speculation traveled along the trade routes of the Lycus Valley (bringing in a variety of ideas).
5. Bishop Lightfoot identified the heresy as a form of Essenism, which was fundamentally Jewish, but nevertheless contained many extraneous features; some at least were similar to those prevalent among the Colossians.
6. There may have been some form of sun worship linked with an esoteric doctrine of angels (no evidence of angel worship among the Essenes but the sect shows a tendency to intermix extraneous elements).
7. There is evidence of a contemporary nonconformist Judaism in the first century AD and it may have spread from Palestine to the nearby province of Asia Minor.
8. Exclusivism seems to be the tendency of the false teachers, versus Paul's emphasis on the all inclusiveness of Christianity.
9. The heresy in question is closer to Essenism than to developed second century gnosticism (there is an absence of a reference to elaborate systems of intermediaries which later gnosticism espoused).

IV. Purpose.

- A. The main purpose was to correct the false teaching.
- B. Paul has two main issues to settle, one concerning the person of Christ, the other respecting the Christian way of life.
- C. The epistle contains a high Christology, as contrasted with the inadequate presentation of Him by the heretics.
- D. Paul refutes the practical error of their ascetic tendencies by presenting the true doctrine of the "putting off the old man" versus the "putting on the new man".

V. Authenticity.

- A. The great majority of scholars accept it as genuine.
- B. Those who do reject it, do so on literary and doctrinal grounds.
- C. Among the literary features considered non-Pauline are:
 1. The unusual number of genitival combinations, Col.3:24; 2:11,19; 1:27.
 2. The style is more labored and there are more subsidiary clauses than in his earlier epistles.
 3. Many new words are used, while many well-known Pauline ideas are missing (55 words do not occur in Paul's other writings and 34 are hapaxes).
- D. Stylistic differences are generally attributable to changing circumstances of subject matter.
- E. The doctrinal problem related to the Gnostic ideas and is only present where critics insist on a fully developed second century type of gnosticism.
- F. However, when it is recognized that the gnosticism of the Colossians was an incipient type, not a fully developed form, the objection weakens.

- G. It is unreasonable to expect a writer to express all his beliefs in every letter that he writes.
- H. The important criterion is his new ideas are not out of harmony with his earlier thoughts, but are natural developments from them.
- I. The strongest arguments in support of its authenticity are:
 - 1. That it was never disputed until the 19th century.
 - 2. Its inseparable connection with Philemon. Only the most negative of critics have questioned that epistle.
- J. Both Epistles are linked in the following:
 - 1. Timothy, in the opening greeting, Col.1:1; Philm.1.
 - 2. Greetings in both are sent from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, Col.4:10-14; Philm.23,24.
 - 3. Archippus is mentioned in both regarding the ministry, Philm.2; Col.4:17.
 - 4. Onesimus, the slave, concerning whom the letter to Philemon is written, is mentioned in Col.4:9.
- K. In light of this data, it is impossible to imagine that the two epistles were sent at different times.
- L. Since Philemon is generally considered genuine, it carries with it the certainty that Colossians is a genuine work of Paul.

VI. Place and date of dispatch.

- A. Three rival hypotheses contend for the place of dispatch.
 - 1. Rome.
 - 2. Caesarea.
 - 3. Ephesus.
- B. The Caesarean hypothesis is improbable for two reasons.
 - 1. A runaway slave would not have fled to Caesarea to escape detection and would not have had access to Paul. (At Rome, Paul was under house arrest and was allowed visitors.)
 - 2. Paul clearly expects to be released in the near future since he asks Philemon to prepare lodging for him (Philm.22). A situation not compatible with his Caesarean imprisonment where Paul's only hope of release was an appeal to Caesar.
- C. The Ephesian hypothesis has no proof Paul was imprisoned there for a prolonged period; a runaway slave, his pockets lined with his master's money, would desire a place further from Colossae than Ephesus.
- D. The date is in the middle or latter half of the first Roman imprisonment (61AD).

VII. The letter from Laodicea.

- A. Paul directed that the Colossian letter be exchanged with a letter sent to Laodicea.
- B. The Laodicean epistle was noncanonical and has been lost.