

## 18. The Epistle to the Colossians

**I. The epistolary format of the letter:** The Letter opening (1:1-2): the peculiarity of the addressee. Although this is a "captivity epistle" (cf. 4:10, 18), the letter opening doesn't identify the author as a prisoner (cf. Philemon 1).

"The saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ" 3) In Colossae. Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in 60-61, so if it were written by Paul, it would have been written during the time of his house arrest in Rome. Colossae had not been evangelized by Paul. The Colossians hadn't even met him (2:1). Paul was dead-set against intruding on another's missionary territory (Rom 15:20-22; 2 Cor 10:13-16). Epaphras had evangelized the city and had told Paul about the Colossians (1:7-10; cf. 1:4). In the closing greetings, Epaphras, one of a series of people, but not the first, is commended by Paul (4:12-13).

There is no indication that Epaphras had invited Paul to write to the Colossians nor that they had written to or sent a delegation to the apostle seeking his advice. The epistle makes no mention of any desire of Paul to visit the city.

The Letter Closing (4:7-18) Commendation of Tychicus and Onesiphorus, the letter-carriers (4:7-8) Third person greetings from Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (4:10-13). All these persons are known from the brief note to Philemon (Philemon 2, 23) with the exception of Jesus Justus. Second person greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea and the church in Nympha's house (4:15) An exchange of letters with Laodicea (4:16) A word to be given to Archippus (v. 17), also known to us from Philemon. The appended first person greeting (v. 18)

**II. Written by Paul?** Questions raised by the epistle's opening and closing A vocabulary and style that differs from the vocabulary and style of the undisputed Pauline letters. Even some theological differences. The epistle seems to be a juncture between Paul's understanding of the local church (4:5, 16) and Ephesians' understanding of a universal church (18:24). A spatial framework (cf. 3:1-3) rather than a temporal framework Hence, some scholars refer to it as a "second generation" text, and I call it an "epistle."

**III. The Situation:** Not a crisis, but some concerns: an empty seductive philosophy (2:8) and regulations (2:20) Angel worship, asceticism, calendar-related festivals (2:16-18) Scholars debate about the nature of the problem

Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge) Gnosticizing

syncretism. A form of Judaism prone to angel worship (cf. Philo, *Flight and Finding* 212; *Dreams* 1, 232, 238) Angel Worship. Difficult to determine since the author takes issue directly only with false asceticism (2:14-22-23)

**IV. A two-part letter:** A doctrinal, expository part (1:15-2:23), which includes an important christological hymn (1:15-20) A moral, paraenetic part (3:1-4:6), which includes: Two catalogues of vices (3:5-10) A household code (3:18-4:1)

### **Review Questions**

1. Why do most scholars believe that Colossians was not written by Paul? Does this make any difference?
2. Does the christological hymn of Col 1:15-20 help you to appreciate Christ more fully?
3. What do you think about the Colossians' household code in church?