

Exposing Enemies Within the Church: A 7-Session Bible Study Series

Introduction: The Biblical Foundation for Exposing and Refuting Enemies Within the Church Information from Paul About His Letter to the Colossian Christians

An Introduction to Colossians A Letter from Paul to Believers Today

On October 2, 1986, the single adult Bible study group I was leading began its study of Paul's Letter to the Colossians. I introduced this book of the Bible to the group with the following letter from Paul to 20th-century Christians, which I created using sources from well-known scholars. You'll readily notice that some of the elements in the letter I wrote on Paul's behalf reflect the date of the study (I'm reproducing the text of the letter here with only very slight changes). Even so, the information the letter presents about Colosse (alternate spelling: Colossae), the church at Colosse, and the circumstances surrounding Paul's writing his epistle still are accurate and relevant for believers today, more than 35 years later. — B. Nathaniel Sullivan

Dear friends in the twentieth century,

When I wrote to the Colossian Christians around 62 AD during my first imprisonment in Rome, I had no idea the letter would become a part of Scripture and be read and studied by the Church all these many centuries. But, as my letter indicates in verse sixteen of chapter 4, the widespread reading of the letters we apostles wrote was encouraged. (It was the best we could do since we didn't have tape ministries in our day.) Anyway, had I known the Colossian letter would be so widely read, I would have included more information in it to help you in reading and understanding it. But why worry about what I didn't do when I can make up for it now, right? As Paul Harvey says, "You are about to hear THE REST OF THE STORY."

Colosse was a small town situated about a hundred miles east of Ephesus. Colosse and two cities nearby, Laodicea and Hierapolis, were a part of a larger area of significant wealth and prominence. The wool industry there made it so, as did a trade route that passed through. Merchandise, however, was not the only thing that was traded there — so were various philosophies and religious ideas. Even strange ideas — and heresies — flourished and spread. It was almost another California!

I grew concerned when I heard that some of these heresies were influencing the Church at Colosse. No, I had never been there, but while I was in Ephesus (AD 53-55) on my third missionary journey, two men from Colosse, Epaphras and

Philemon, became Christians under my ministry. Epaphras became influential in founding the Colossian Church (see Col. 1:7), and Philemon's home became a place where Christians met, worshipped, and fellowshiped together (see Philemon 1-2).

Acts 19 tells about my ministry in Ephesus. God was so good; He blessed the preaching of His gospel so much that "all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). Colosse (remember — a hundred miles east of Ephesus) was located in the province of Asia. This spreading of the Good News, along with the work of Epaphras after he returned to Colosse, gave birth to the church there. It was a church made up mostly of Gentile believers.

While I was in prison in Rome seven or eight years after the founding of the church, I met Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. I shared Christ with him and was overjoyed to see him become a Christian. At about the same time, Epaphras arrived in Rome, seeking my help. It was then that I heard about the trouble the church was experiencing.

A number of false teachings were beginning to captivate the Christians in Colosse and to lure them away from the truth about Christ. The heresy was a mixture of teachings from several sources. There was first a Jewish element in it, an element that contended that one must observe certain rituals, rules and regulations, and holy days to get to God. It said, too, that one must obey the Jewish dietary laws and be circumcised. Secondly, the

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heresy had pagan teachings in it. Gnosticism, a religion that stressed that one must come to God through knowledge, was just beginning to spread as a religion. The knowledge it advocated was an occult knowledge, not merely an intellectual kind, and it was closely related to magic and astrology. Especially characteristic of Gnosticism was the teaching that all matter is inherently evil and only the spiritual is good. Based on this false presupposition was the equally false conclusion that Jesus Christ could not have come in a physical, human body. Now, that idea has some very frightening implications! Thirdly, there was a Christian element to the heresy that made it sound and look good. The heresy claimed that it didn't deny Christ, but it failed to acknowledge His supremacy and His being God. It wore the cloak of Christianity, and this made it all the more dangerous.

So I knew I had to write to my brothers and sisters in Colosse, expose this error for what it really was, and remind the Christians there of the truth about Christ in order that they would be able to combat these false teachings. I wrote a letter to the Ephesians as well, and I also wrote to my friend Philemon about Onesimus and his conversion. I gave the letters to Onesimus and Tychicus, another brother in Christ, and they delivered them for me (see Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7-9; Philemon). In

some ways it would have been nice if Federal Express could have delivered them for us, but personal contact made personal encouragement possible. Also, Onesimus really needed to give Philemon's letter to his master in person. Epaphras wanted to stay with me to assist me, so he remained with me in Rome.

So that's the background of the letter you are about to read and study. You know, the more I see of what's occurring in your day, the more grateful I am that God preserved the Colossian letter. The heresies you must deal with may not be identical to those that confronted the Colossian Christians, but they are similar, and only truth — the truth about Christ — is effective against them. It may look like a different world from that of the first century, but really it is not. As someone has well stated — and as you'll see as you read the letter I wrote and apply it to your lives — “the more things change, the more they remain the same.”

God bless you as you study!

Sincerely

Παῦλος

Paul

This account is based on the majority opinion of scholars, as there are certain details of which we are not fully certain. Sources used: Curtis Vaughan's *Colossians and Philemon*. Zondervan, 1980. Also Warren Wiersbe's *Be Complete*. Victor Books, 1981.