

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

9th March 2008

Colossians - Introduction Christ Supreme

So tonight we are starting the book of Colossians, with an introduction to the book as a whole. Inevitably this will be a bit like the news headlines, followed in the next weeks by detailed reports from each passage. But as we will see, the themes are so important to our Christian lives that they certainly bear some repetition.

Colossae location & history

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Colossae itself was a bit like Royston, described by some as a “second rate market town”. 500 years BC, it had been an important and populous city in the region, a key stop-off on the East-West trade route running from Ephesus to Tarsus and the Euphrates. It was famous for a dark-red wool which fittingly enough was called Colossinum.

It was quite close to Pamukkale, which some of us have visited in modern Turkey, being famous for hot springs.

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Things began to decline when the road was upgraded to dual carriageway and Colossae was bypassed, or at least when the ancient equivalent happened: the trade road was re-routed to go through Laodicea instead. That had a similar impact on the town to the opening of Tesco’s, in that the passing trade dried up and the travellers spent their money in Laodicea instead. By the time this letter was written, Colossae had dwindled in importance compared to its now dominant neighbour; this despite the fact that Colossae had fresh cool water from the river Lycus, whereas Laodicea was dependent on water arriving through an aqueduct – where, as you may remember from Revelation, it arrived tepid and not good to drink!

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The town was devastated by a large earthquake in AD 60 – shortly after this letter was written – and although it wasn’t completely destroyed at that time, it was abandoned entirely a few centuries later. Unlike other cities that gave their name to books of the New Testament, there are no impressive archaeological remains to visit – all that is there to reveal its location is a large “tell”, a mound showing where it had stood.

If the town itself was hardly worthy of comment, its famous sons were not entirely household names either. Just like with Belgians, it is difficult to name three famous Colossians; probably the most famous is Onesimus, the slave who ran away from Philemon, became a Christian, and was sent back to his master by Paul probably along with this letter. Epaphras might count too, although he isn’t mentioned anywhere else in the Bible outside of this book. It seems likely that he was from Colossae, and was converted during Paul’s time in Ephesus. He returned home with the Gospel and helped found the church there.

Now the early church was, in a human sense, in a precarious condition in the first century. While apostles like Paul could be relied upon to provide sound teaching and guidance, they could only focus their attention on key locations. So it seems that Colossae, like many towns, had never had a visit from Paul or any other apostle. With little to guide them other than word of mouth and strength of character in their leaders, it was inevitable that strange and often dangerous ideas and practices would begin to take hold.

With Christianity's close historic, cultural and theological links to Judaism, the pressure to conform to Jewish norms was sure to be felt. As with most if not all churches of the period, Colossae had a fair percentage of Jews in its number, so issues like circumcision, food regulations and observances of Sabbath and festivals would often arise. This is quite understandable, when you consider that these Jewish Christians had been brought up to believe that these things were what God required; after coming to Christ, their desire to please God would hardly be any the less!

Another major influence on the early Church, both in Colossae and in general, was Greek philosophy. No doubt many of the Gentiles who responded to the Gospel would have been educated with Greek ideas such as the separation of and even opposition between Body and Spirit. They too would view their new faith in the light of their background, and without thinking would bring in these ideas and suppositions to the Church.

These sorts of problems were faced by the Church as it was established in un-Christian territory. For the last centuries, the Church in the UK has not had this problem, as our historic culture has been Christian. In our generation though, this has changed and we should again expect to see the same sorts of issues emerging, as people who have been raised to think in a post-modern, humanist or materialistic way start to interpret Christianity in that light. The challenge now, as then, is to ensure on the one hand that the true Gospel is not watered down or distorted by these things; and on the other that what we ourselves may hold as precious traditions, but in reality are our human inventions, are not placed as obstacles to others coming to faith.

Anyway, it seems that the situation in Colossae developed in a way that Epaphrus did not feel qualified to rebut. So he set off to discuss the matter with Paul, who at this time was in "open prison" in Rome. The result is this letter: Paul's response to what Epaphrus had reported. We don't have that original report, so in order to deduce what the problems in Colossae were, we have to think what Paul might be countering in the statements he makes.

Interestingly, it is clear from 4:16 that Laodecia had received a letter from Paul too around this time; yet it is the letter to the insignificant Colossae that is preserved in scripture – illustrating perhaps that what the world judges important is of no consequence to God! There is no such thing as a back-water in His kingdom!

Paul's preferred style in rebutting ideas which threaten the Gospel is not to tackle them point by point, thus focusing attention on the heresy, but to refocus attention on the true Gospel, and in particular in the Person and Work of Christ. He rightly figured that, if the church were to spend more time studying, emulating and worshipping Christ, then no heresy could get a foot-hold.

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So the structure of the book centres on Christ and our relationship with him:

- After the obligatory introduction, Paul gets straight into a marvellous description of the supremacy of Christ as Creator, Sustainer, Head, Redeemer and Saviour
- Then in the section most commentators label Paul's labour for the church, Paul actually continues to extol the marvels of Christ, as the mystery of God revealed in us
- Then comes the passage which is presumably addressing the specific errors in Colossae, but in a way which focuses on Christ and the new life he gives, rather than the heresies themselves
- And lastly (before the equally obligatory closing greetings) Paul sets out how we are to live as Christians, based of course on our new relationship with Christ

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Throughout the history of the Church, from Paul's day through ours and on into the future, the touch-stone for evaluating whether a teaching is genuine or not has been the place Christ holds in it. Some heresies, including the JW's today, deny the divinity of Christ, and so cannot give Christ the pre-eminent position which Paul sets out here in this book. Others seek to add something to Christ, so for instance the Mormons and their "Book of Mormon" which has the final authority.

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Unsurprisingly then, it seems the nub of the heresy in Colossae was that Christ alone was not sufficient for our Spiritual life. They were seeking to add to him a dependence on ceremonial observances, the denial of physical pleasures (Asceticism), the worship of Angels as intermediaries between God and man, some sort of secret esoteric knowledge which only the devout and initiated follower could find, and in general a reliance on human wisdom – fine sounding arguments – rather than on divine revelation.

All this we deduce from the arguments Paul puts up to counter these errors.

We are going to be looking at these things in detail over the next couple of months, so tonight I want to give an overview of three issues which span the portions we will be considering; namely:

- Asceticism, and the relationship between living by a list of do's and don'ts, and living to please God
- Secret knowledge, and how God reveals what we need to know
- Christ-centred living in the real world

Asceticism

Now asceticism, which is the practice of self-denial of physical pleasures, may not seem too much of a threat today, but back in the first century it was a surprisingly popular idea. It stemmed from the Greek worldview where Body and Spirit are quite separate – hence those who wanted to live a “spiritual” life had to deal with the “problem” of the physical in some way. This went to two extremes – either they deemed the body of no importance whatsoever, so they were free to do whatever they wished with their bodies so long as they were pure spiritually; or they viewed the body as inherently bad and thus its desires had to be suppressed at every opportunity. The latter extreme hooked up nicely with the much of the Jewish lobby, which advocated close following of not just the Mosaic law, but all the other traditions around it – which were, in effect, a large list of do’s and don’t to keep the body in check.

It is perhaps a measure of the lasting impact of this heresy that, in the view of many people today, being a Christian is to follow a list of “don’ts” which appear to suppress the physical pleasures – don’t get drunk, don’t smoke or do drugs, don’t have sex (at least not outside of marriage). This in part is because there is a fine distinction to be made in the purpose and intent of these rules, as well as in the extent to which they govern our lives.

Paul seeks to guide the Colossians on this point, and his guidance is useful for us today – we see this particularly in the last section of Chapter 2 and the first of Chapter 3. He describes these regulations as “basic principles of this world”, which are temporary in nature and human in perspective. But we have died to those principles, and have been raised with Christ so that we have a new focus on heavenly things with Christ, a new perspective on life which means our real existence is “hidden” from the world, until Christ returns in glory.

The key here is the new life which is part of the transaction of becoming a Christian. In coming to Christ, we acknowledge our sin and give up our self-reliance and self-focus, consciously deciding to trust in Christ alone and to accept his death for us. From that point on, we have died to our old life and are born again into a new life.

Not surprisingly, this radically alters everything, for our perspective has – or should have – completely changed. Rather than having our focus on the old life, which one way or another is bound up with the sinful world and all its temptations, our focus is in our new life, where we have an intimate relationship with God himself that will never end from now to eternity.

It is true that many of the things which the legalists forbid will be off-limits for us – Paul lists some of them in Chapter 3. But the motivation for avoiding them is because we want to please God, and so are seeking to put into practice the death-to-the-world that has already happened in principal when we accepted Christ. The bigger focus of our attention should be on the positive virtues that come from Christ – compassion, kindness, humility and the likes. Following these virtues will mean we “naturally” avoid the sorts of acts and behaviours that Paul prohibits, quite simply because we have something much better to do!

So we will avoid some of the things the world wrongly calls pleasures, not because the physical world itself is evil, and certainly not because genuine pleasure is to be avoided; but because we see these things from a different perspective now, and know not just that they can be harmful for us or that we have better things to do, but we know that they displease God and go against his character. Being alive to God, having a born-again relationship with him, we can see this, whereas before we could not.

This is why it is so important to safeguard the truth of the Gospel. Water it down, remove the need for repentance and new birth, let it just become another system of beliefs, and we are trapped in the same old world where we can never free ourselves from sin and truly become spiritually alive.

Secret knowledge

Now everyone likes to know a secret, either because in keeping it secret you feel special in being one of the few to know it, or by being the first in your social circle to know it you can take delight in letting others know!

There is also something appealing about the idea that the real answer to life the universe and everything is out there, and can be found by those who are dedicated enough to find it.

Add all of that together, and it is inevitable that various sects would sprout up which claim to possess some unique knowledge which is the key to life. Christianity has had its fair share of such sects, right from the early days until now.

For Paul, the suggestion that there was some secret knowledge apart from the Gospel was highly dangerous and had to be quashed. Yes, before Christ the plan God had to bring salvation to mankind was secret, but that had now been revealed. Everything people needed to know to be saved was freely available in the Gospel.

So Paul is at pains to point out to them that the mystery is simple yet profound: Christ in us, the hope of glory ! There was no complex set of rituals or intermediaries to work through to get to God: through Christ he lives in us! This was (from a human perspective) a radical departure from the God of the Old Testament, who could only be approached by the High Priest following strict rituals, whose face could not be seen, who dwelt in heaven on high. This very same God came in bodily form in Christ, and through his death on the cross reconciled all things to himself.

There was, and is, no need of anyone or anything else. Christ has saved us through his death on the cross, and Christ now dwells in us, giving us new life and the hope of glory.

This knowledge is not something to be kept secret for the select few, but to be made as public as possible – as indeed it has been through the preaching of the Gospel all over the world. This is the very essence of Christianity, not to hide the secret of the way to God, but to make it as public as possible.

Now this is not to say that, having accepted Christ as Saviour, that there is nothing left to learn. Of course, there is much more about Christ that we can know, and it is Paul's prayer for the Colossians and the other churches that they should grow in that knowledge. There will always be scope to know him more, as he is infinite and we have but finite minds. But this does not mean that there are several classes of Christian, or that those who know Christ more should think themselves better than others; for if they allow that sort of pride into their hearts, then they don't really *know* Christ as they claim!

Christ centred living – in the real world

What Paul wanted to make abundantly clear to the Colossians and to everyone else is that Christ is all we need. We are utterly dependent on Christ for our life, even for our existence; and there is nothing and no-one that we need in addition to him.

We might feel quite smug about this given that we don't have any truck with heretical teaching, and are happy to sign up each year to the EFCC basis of faith which encapsulates this and other points. But I wonder how this works out in practice in our lives outside of this building, and even in the relationships that we have with one another inside it!

It's one thing to give intellectual assent to the idea – to say yes this is what we believe – but it is quite another to put it into practice. I think in our day and age it is very difficult to set our hearts and minds on things above, rather than earthly things. While on the one hand life is so much easier now than it was 2000 years ago – we have no struggle for food, shelter and health-care – there are so many things which vie for our time and attention, distracting us from the real spiritual world that we have been born into.

Just as our consumer society has made it difficult for people to see their need of Christ in the first place – such that most people out there are completely apathetic about him and about thoughts of heaven and hell - so it is difficult for us to have our treasure in heaven when there is so much stuff for us to have here.

Of course, there are things in this world which need our attention – our children, for instance, and the need to earn money to live. Paul was not arguing that we should live as recluses from the world around us. Yet the challenge for us remains to have Christ in such a high position in our hearts and minds that we are conscious of his presence with us at all times, and act accordingly.

This focus we are to have on things above does not mean that we are so heavenly minded we are no earthly use!

There is a progression in Paul's instructions to the Colossians through Chapter 3 and into Chapter 4, starting of course with being raised with Christ (i.e. being born-again):

- First, make sure that your heart and mind are in the right place (which is another way of saying we must love with Christ above all else)
- then, ensure your actions and motives are based on your new life with Christ, and not the old life you have died to – this will start to heal relationships as our lives are marked increasingly by Christ's love
- then, our fellowship will be meaningful as we help and encourage one-another, and are increasingly thankful as we realise how much Christ has done for us
- With this foundation in place, Paul sets out some guides for how our various core relationships should work out, in the various generations of our families, and in our work-places.
- And finally, this Christ-centred approach to life will mean that our behaviour and conversation will be a strong witness to those on the outside

Far from being some esoteric or monastic existence, this vision for holy living is intensely practical and impacts very much on the here and now. But note that it has to start with being raised to new life in Christ, it is sustained by Christ's peace and word dwelling in us richly; and it drives us to pray before we act, as we see that only through God working in and around us will anything worthwhile be accomplished.

As we get into the details of this book over the next couple of months, we have the opportunity to grow in the knowledge and love of God, which was Paul's prayer for the Colossians – let this be our prayer too.