

Colossians

1. Christ, our all in all

9/1/2005

Many times I hear some Christians talk about the first century churches with some sort of envies and thinking that they were the models of the church. Because they had teachers like Peter, Paul, John, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas and Apollos.

That would be far from the truth. Yes, they had a great line up of teachers and evangelists. But the churches themselves were riddled with problems just like now: Strife, heresy, extremism, personality conflicts, jealousy, misunderstanding, compromise, immorality, defection, hypocrisy, legalism and spiritual bullying. If that is not bad enough, the believers of the first century were the objects of persecution and martyrdom from the governments and the people around their homes.

The New Testament era was not nearly as attractive as some would make it out to be. I'd rather live in the time of the return of Jesus than the first century.

The first century religious environment was much like our own. It was a time of religious mixing, with people borrowing a little from this and a little from that. The only difference is that in the first century, you joined a group who did the borrowing. In our culture you do the borrowing yourself. Yes, you can be the founder of your own cult.

Whatever the problem was precisely, Paul dwells on the solution: a better understanding of Jesus. Knowing the real Jesus helps us to stay away from the counterfeit, no matter how it comes packaged.

A. AUTHOR

Colossians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

The author of the letter to Colossians is apostle Paul obviously. Many scholars believe that he wrote this sometime between 60-62 A.D. while he was in a Roman prison six years before his death.

B. ABOUT COLOSSE

Colossians 1:2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was written to the people living in what was called the Lycus Valley, consisting of three communities: Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colosse. This area was an intersection of Eastern and Western culture because an important trade route passed through there.

Colosse was located about 100 miles inland from Ephesus. Though once a leading city in Asia Minor, Colosse became somewhat a second-rate market town in latter days.

All kinds of philosophies mingled in this cosmopolitan area. There was a large Jewish colony in Colosse, and there was also a constant influx of new ideas and doctrines from the East. It was fertile ground for religious speculations and heresies!

Actually, the city of Colosse is not even mentioned in the book of Acts. All our biblical information about the church there comes from this letter and a few comments in the letter to Philemon. Paul had never been in Colosse during his missionary journeys.

C. THE FORMAT OF THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

As with most of Paul's letters, this epistle combines profound doctrinal teachings with practical applications.

The first two chapters contain some of Paul's most eloquent writing about the supremacy of Jesus Christ, reconciliation to God, folly of following man-made rules. Last two chapter shows practical applications that we can get from the foundation the Holy Spirit laid down through apostle Paul.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians was written and sent about the same time as his Colossian letter. Keeping this in mind, we can discover many parallels between these two letters. However, the emphasis in Ephesians is on the church, the body of Christ. But the emphasis in Colossians is on Christ, the Head of the body.

In this letter, Paul used the vocabulary of the false teachers, but he did not use their definitions. He used these words in their true Christian meaning. As we study Colossians, we will find words such as 'fullness', 'perfect', 'complete' and 'wisdom' all of which were used by the gnostic heretics.

D. FALSE TEACHING BY GNOSTICS

The Colossians had become the target of a mix of religious philosophies that had the potential to lead them into disaster as a church. The false teachings seemed to be a combination of Jewish legalism and a dangerous heresy called "Gnosticism." The impact was so severe that Paul took time to write a letter to these people in Colosse.

The word is derived 'gnosis', the Greek word for 'knowledge'. In Greek and Latin language, if you add 'a' in front of a word, it becomes an opposite meaning of the original word. So an 'agnostic' is 'one who does not know' or 'ignorant'.

Gnostics claimed that they had a secret knowledge that was necessary in order to gain salvation. It was secret information available only to an exclusive group of people. The net results was a message that enticed the vulnerable with this message: "There is something much deeper than Jesus Christ. Jesus is good. You need him. But you need more than that. You need this special knowledge. It will give you much deeper meaning to your life - and it give you salvation to boot." That is the garbage doctrine they were selling to the people of Colosse.

Notice how that arrogant message cunningly tried to undermine Jesus Christ and attacked His adequacy to be all we need for salvation. That's why Paul stressed the supremacy of Jesus Christ in the strongest terms.

The gnostic people also held to a form of astrology, believing that angelic beings ruled stars and influenced affairs on earth.

Added to these Eastern speculations was a form of Jewish legalism. The teachers believed that the rite of circumcision was helpful in spiritual development. They taught that the Old Testament Law, especially the dietary laws, was also useful in attaining spiritual perfection.

Do we have any of this heresy today? Yes, we do. When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only part of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for "spiritual perfection" or "spiritual fullness" by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals instead of learning from the Word of God and being led by the Holy spirit, we go backward instead of forward.

Sad to say, there are many Christians who actually believe that some person, religious system, or discipline can add something to their spiritual experience. But they already have everything they ever will need in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

E. GREETINGS

Colossians 1:3-8 We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; 5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; 7 as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

Apostle Paul is thankful for their faith in Christ Jesus and their love for all the saints. Because genuine faith in Jesus will always have a true love for God's people as a companion.

The Colossians believers had been taught well - not by Paul, but by a man named Epaphras who found a church in Colosse.

Epaphras was responsible for bringing the Gospel to the Colossians. He was a native of the city, and also got the message out to neighboring towns in the Lycus Valley like Hierapolis and Laodicea.

Paul did not begin by attacking the false teachers and their doctrines in v13. He began by exalting Jesus Christ and showing His preeminence in five areas: the Gospel message, redemption, Creation, the church, and his own ministry.

The church today desperately needs the message of Colossians. We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean "one religion is just as good as another." Christian believers must beware of mixing their Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of "deeper life" teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Knowing the real Jesus helps us to stay away from the counterfeit, no matter how it comes packaged.