



A Course

*In*

**COLOSSIANS,  
STUDIES IN**

Prepared by the  
Committee on Religious Education  
of the  
**American Bible College**

Pineland, Florida 33945

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# PREFACE

As you study the Scriptures you will find that it is of the greatest importance to approach the Bible in a reverent attitude of mind, looking upon it as the inspired Word of God, and not just an ordinary piece of literature. If the Bible is studied in the same manner as one studies Shakespeare, Milton or some historical work, it may be found interesting and profitable. But by this approach, the Bible student, persistent though he may be, will never find its rich treasures. The Apostle Paul says: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) For the profitable study of the Word of God, the right spiritual attitude is indispensable.

The Scriptures should be studied as eagerly as a hungry person seeks for food. The formal reading of a portion of the Bible may have some worth as a religious exercise, but in order that the complete benefit may be obtained from its truths, they must be appropriated to personal needs. A milkman may deliver thousands of quarts of milk each day and yet go home thirsty. The Bible student may read large portions of the Bible with little benefit, unless he makes it his own by personal appropriation and feeds upon it.

In your studies of the Bible, will you appropriate the riches thereof to your own personal use, or will you read as you would read a book of fiction, a mystery, etc. In order to make full use of the pearls of wisdom contained in the Bible readings, it is suggested you re-read them. Go into its wonderful fields of truth; go down into its valleys; climb its mountain peaks of vision; follow its streams of inspiration; enter its halls of learning. Many Bible truths do not appear on the surface; they must be dug up and be brought into the light by toil and effort.

There are various methods of Bible study, such as the topical method, the study of books, the study by chapters, the study of important passages, and the biographical method. In this course we approach the text in the expository-exegetical method. In this way each verse will be interpreted by explaining the major words in their context in order to gain an over-all perspective as well as a contextual understanding.

Although the American Bible College believes the King James Version is the preserved Word of God, this method of study allows the writer to occasionally condense a passage in his own paraphrase. This should not be construed to imply that A. B. C. is correcting God's Word.

During this course the student is required to read through the entire Book of Colossians ten times and memorize the ANALYSIS TO THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS as found on page 8.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The compiler of this course study uses the book by Dr. E. Y. Mullins as the basis of this work. We wish to thank the former Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for its permission to use their material. This course study will consist mainly of this text book with the inclusion of additional notes from other sources, unless otherwise noted. The scripture texts are altered to conform with the King James Version except where the authors are using their own rendering. It is our desire that this study will be enlightening and spiritually rewarding as you understand Colossian's doctrines of the Church. All other references will be footnoted and bracketed.

Respectfully your servant in Christ Jesus,

Dr. Marvin W. Royse

# FOREWORD

## APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THIS BOOK

Colossians is one of the most profound of all the epistles of Paul. A lifetime of study would be too short to master it. The thought is deep, and the student who is not willing to do prolonged and patient thinking ought not to undertake the book. Each phrase and each verse is of value, and to get at the meat of the epistle it must be carefully broken down and analyzed into its component parts. Each part must be studied for itself and then in its relation to the other parts. Analysis is not enough. We must synthesize, or see the book as a whole. Doctor Mullins in this book has both analyzed and synthesized, carrying on these processes simultaneously, and has brought to us the fruit of his critical study.

### *Suggestions for Study*

As we undertake these studies in Colossians, our primary effort should be to familiarize ourselves with the text itself. This we may do through careful reading and rereading. Following Dr. James M. Gray in his book, *How to Master the English Bible*, we suggest the following five rules for this reading:

- (1) Read the whole book at one time, ignoring chapter and verse divisions.
- (2) Read it continuously, right through at a single sitting, without break or interruption.
- (3) Read it repeatedly, over and over again; not twice, but ten or fifteen times.
- (4) Read it independently, without consulting other people's interpretations until you have direct contact and immediate acquaintance with the book itself.
- (5) Read it prayerfully, seeking your interpretation from the Holy Spirit who is present in the subject matter and also in the heart of the devout reader.

Reading is our First step, but mere reading is not study. Having read the epistle, we study it carefully and purposefully, closing the book from time to time to summarize our study. We will use as our guide in this study the comments of Doctor Mullins. Additional books should be consulted where available, and a comparative study made of the different interpretations. When comparisons with the Epistle to the Ephesians are noted, consult *Studies in Ephesians*.

### *Some Values to Be Sought*

Closely connected with our purpose in reading and with the problems that we face are the values that we seek. First, we want a working knowledge of the *content* of the book of Colossians. Then, we want to know its *aim* and *purport*. Finally, we want to lay hold of the message of the book both for its first century and its twenty-first century readers. The final test of value will be not how much of the text we have mastered, but how much Christ has mastered our lives through these *Studies in Colossians*.

# ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

- I. Salutation (1:1-2)
- II. Thanksgiving for Their Progress in the Gospel and the Spread of the Truth (1:3-8)
- III. Prayer for Their Spiritual Enlargement (1:9-11)
- IV. The Enlargement to Be Realized Through an Attitude of Thankfulness for Converting Grace Which Is Meditated Through Christ (1:12-14)
- V. Christ's Universal Relations (1:15-23)
  - A. He Is the Image of the Invisible God (1:15)
  - B. He Is Before All Things and the Source, Medium, and Bond of All Created Things (1:15-17)
  - C. He Is the Head of the Body, the Church, the First-born from the Dead (1:18)
  - D. In Him the Divine Fullness Dwelt (1:19)
  - E. Through Him Universal Reconciliation Is Made (1:20)
  - F. The Colossians Were Reconciled Through Him (1:21-23)
- VI. Paul's Ministry and Sufferings for Them Are According to a Divine Dispensation (1:24-25)
- VII. His Aim Is to Make Known the Gospel Mystery and Present Them Perfect in Christ (1:26-29)
- VIII. He Longs That They May Know His Strivings for Them to the End That They May Understand the Mystery (2:1-5)
- IX. Exhortation to Continue in Christ as They Began (2:6-7)
- X. Warnings Against Error and Exhortations to Conformity to the True Life in Christ (2:8 to 4:6)
- XI. Warning Against False Philosophy (2:8)
- XII. Christ Supplies All Need, Since in Him Is All Divine Fullness (2:9-15)
  - A. In Him They Received Spiritual Circumcision (2:11)
  - B. They Were Raised from the Dead, Having Been Made Alive with Him and Forgiven (2: 12-13)
  - C. The Bond Against Us Was Blotted Out by the Cross (2:14)
  - D. By the Cross He Triumphed over All Our Spiritual Enemies (2:15)
- XIII. Warning Against the False Judgments of Men on the Low Plane of Ceremonialism (2:16-19)
- XIV. Exhortation to Abstain from Fleshly Precepts, Since They Died to Them (2:20-23)
- XV. Exhortation to the Risen Life, Since They Were Raised with Christ from the Dead (3:1-4)
- XVI. Exhortations in Accordance with Their Spiritual Death and Resurrection to a Corresponding Life (3:5-17)
  - A. Mortify Your Members Which Were Once Given to Sins of Uncleanness (3:5-7)
  - B. Put Away All Sins of Disposition, Anger, and so Forth (3:8-11)
  - C. Put on the Various Graces of Self-Restraint, Along with Love and Peace and Thankfulness (3:12-15)
  - D. Let the Word of Christ Abound and Perform Every Duty in His Name (3:16-17)
- XVII. Exhortations to Particular Classes (3:18 to 4:1)
  - A. To Wives (3:18)
  - B. To Husbands (3:19)
  - C. To Children (3:20)
  - D. To Fathers (3:21)
  - E. To Servants (3:22-25)
  - F. To Masters (4:1)
- XVIII. Exhortations to All (4:2-6)
  - A. To Steadfastness in Prayer (4:2-4)
  - B. To a Wise Walk as Christians (4:5-6)
- XIX. Closing Words
  - A. Words in Commendation of Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-9)
  - B. Salutations from Paul's Companions (4:10-14)
  - C. Instructions to Exchange Epistles with Laodicea (4:16)
  - D. A Word to Archippus (4:17)
  - E. Final Salutation (4:18)

## CHAPTER I

### I. THE CITY OF COLOSSAE

### II. THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

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# 1

## Introduction

### I. THE CITY OF COLOSSAE

The city of Colossae was situated on the river Lycus, a tributary to the Maeander, in Phrygia, Asia Minor: It was a city of much importance in ancient times. Eusebius records the destruction of Colossae along with Hierapolis and Laodicea, neighboring cities, by an earthquake in the reign of Nero. Colossae stood on a very important route of commerce in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. There was thus opportunity for the introduction and spread of new ideas. The Epistle to the Colossians affords evidence, as we shall see, that philosophic speculation, common to Asia Minor generally, had obtained footing in Colossae and had, in a considerable degree affected the church there.

The Apostle Paul himself had never visited Colossae or its neighbor, Laodicea, as he tells us in Colossian: 2: 1. Epaphras, however, came from this region and labored among the Colossians (4:12-13). Timothy is included in Paul's salutation in Colossians 1:1. From this it is reasonable to infer that Timothy was known to the Colossians, and it is quite possible that both Epaphras and Timothy were among the founders of the church at Colossae.

### II. THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

The church at Colossae is treated by the apostle as a Gentile church. In Colossians 1:21 he describes its members as "you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works." It is not definitely known whether or not there were Jewish members among these Gentile Christians. In a great many instances, the Jews who had been scattered by the Roman dispersion were the nuclei of the churches outside of Palestine. A colony of Jews was established in Lydia and Phrygia. It consisted of two thousand families transplanted from Babylonia and Mesopotamia by Antiochus the Great. J. B. Lightfoot estimates the number of Jews in this region in 62 B.C. as not less



than eleven thousand. But whether there were dispersed Jewish Christians in the church at Colossae or not, it is evident that some of the influences at work there arose in Judaism and were injurious to the faith of the Colossians. This appears clearly from the references in the warnings and exhortations of the apostle in chapter 2 of the epistle (v.v. 11, 14, 16, 17).

### III. FALSE TEACHINGS IN THE CHURCH

Christian Gnosticism was developed from a pre-Christian religion based upon Greek philosophy that later incorporated Jewish ritualism. In early Christianity it encompassed the teaching that salvation comes by learning esoteric spiritual truths that free humanity from the material world, believed in this movement to be evil. Although believing in Jesus, salvation was a work system based upon gaining a superior knowledge (gnosis) that would lead to salvation. It was later defeated by orthodox, biblical preaching and our only understanding of it comes from its condemnation in Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, Jude and by early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and Tertullian. Marcion, the most famous of the Gnostics established his corruption of the Pauline epistles.

A one-sentence description of Gnosticism: a religion that differentiates the evil god of this world (who is identified with the god of the Old Testament) from a higher more abstract God revealed by Jesus Christ, a religion that regards this world as the creation of a series of evil archons/powers who wish to keep the human soul trapped in an evil physical body, a religion that preaches a hidden wisdom or knowledge only to a select group as necessary for salvation or escape from this world.<sup>1</sup>

Definite information as to the nature of Gnosticism's false teachings which were beginning to be current in Colossae is supplied by the epistle itself. Archibald M. Hunter explains this Colossian Heresy of Gnosticism:

The nature of the heresy in Colossae should be considered for a full understanding of the letter. To discover what precisely it was, we have to piece together the clues in the letter itself.

From what Paul says, we gather that this heresy threatened the supremacy of Christ for faith, trafficked in astrology, demonology, and asceticism, and stressed ritual and holy days, circumcision, and worship of angels. What does all this add up to? Something Jewish, or something pagan? The answer

is: an amalgam of both, with of course a Christian basis.

The mention of new moons, festivals, sabbaths, angels, and circumcision (Col. 2:11, 16, 18) strongly suggests that the heresy had Jewish elements. But, equally strongly, the allusions to a specious "philosophy," to "elemental spirits of the universe" (2:8, 20); to asceticism (2:23); and to an inadequate conception of Christ's Person (1:15-20; 2:15) suggest that the heresy had a deep "Gnostic" tincture. Gnosticism (from a Greek word meaning "knowledge") represented the pagan "Higher Thought" of the time. It took many shapes and forms; but one root principle of it, held by all Gnostics, or "Knowing Ones" (shall we say "The Intellectuals"?), was that *matter was evil* and the creation so badly flawed that the high God could have no direct communication with it. If man, tied to his body of flesh, was ever to know the transcendent God and find salvation, there must be some kind of spiritual ladder to be climbed, some sort of lore to be learned, enabling him to leave the material world behind and make contact with the unapproachable God. So the Gnostics conceived of a whole hierarchy or collection of spiritual beings (often called "aeons") or mediators, strung out between God and this evil world. By their help and by the knowledge of secret lore and passwords a man might hope to win through to the higher world. Some kind of religious philosophy like this seems to have flourished in Colossae. It was a system in which Christ apparently had a high, but not the supreme, place. What kind of morals went along with it? If you believe that matter, and therefore the body, is evil, you may take one of two ways. Either you keep your body in severe check by a rigorous asceticism, or, you take the line that, since the body is evil, it does not much matter what you do. Gnosticism could thus issue in either asceticism or immorality.

From all this it follows that the heretics in Colossae were propagating two serious errors. On the one hand, they were dethroning Christ from his unique place as the only true mediator between God and men. On the other, they were forcing on the Christians in Colossae an unhealthy asceticism which was mixed up with Jewish taboos and Jewish observance of new moons and holy days. In chapter 1, verses 15-23, Paul is obviously attacking the first, that is, the Christological error. Just as obviously in chapter 2, verses 8-23, he is warning his readers

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gnostics.html>

against the second error, the ethical aberrations of the heretics.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING

There are many evidences in the epistle itself that it was written by the apostle Paul during his first Roman imprisonment and sent by the same messenger about A.D. 61-63. Paul seems to have been considerably stirred by reports brought to him by Epaphras, who visited him during his captivity. Epaphras came from Colossae, and in all probability he brought word to Paul that false teachings were making headway in and around Colossae. Not far away were the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, both of which are mentioned by the apostle (Col. 4:12-13).

For the apostle Paul, the impulse to write and correct injurious teachings would be very strong. His solicitude expresses itself in the epistle. The Colossians, however, are told that there was another epistle he desired them to read, which was to reach them from Laodicea (4:16). At the same time he wished this epistle to be read to the Laodiceans (4:16).

Now the letter to the Laodiceans was, possibly, our Epistle to the Ephesians. It will be recalled that the evidence indicates rather clearly that our Epistle to the Ephesians was a general letter addressed, not to the church at Ephesus, but to a group of churches. Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae were neighboring cities which would naturally be included as a part of the destination of the Ephesian epistle.

That Paul was in prison when he wrote the Epistle to the Colossians is clear from references in the epistle itself. In Colossians 4:18 he says, "Remember my bonds," and in 4:10 he refers to "Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner." The bearer of the epistle is Tychicus (4:7-8). It will be recalled that Tychicus was also the messenger who bore the Ephesian epistle (Eph. 6:21-22). Indeed, the two verses in Colossians 4:7-8 are almost exactly the same as those in Ephesians 6:21-22. In both, the name of the messenger is given, and warm praise is bestowed upon him. In Colossians 4:9 Paul mentions Onesimus, the runaway slave whom he is sending back to his master, Philemon, who lived at Colossae. Onesimus bore to his master from Paul our Epistle to Philemon. Onesimus accompanied Tychicus

and with him was to make known to the brethren at Colossae "all things that are done here."

#### V. GENUINENESS OF THE EPISTLE

##### A. *Unquestioned in the Early Centuries*

There was never a question as to the Pauline writer-ship of the Epistle to the Colossians until modern times. It is included in the Muratorian canon, which dates from the latter half of the second century, and in all canons and versions since that time. There are quotations from it in the writings of the apostolic fathers.

Justin Martyr, early in the second century, quotes from Colossians 1:15-17, using the language of the epistle which describes Christ as "the firstborn of all creation." Theophilus of Antioch refers to the same passage. In writings of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, there are frequent and abundant references to the epistle.

Doctor Abbott thus states and explains a difficulty which naturally arises in comparing the very early use of Ephesians with that of Colossians.

There is no indication in any early or later writing of any serious question as to the Pauline authorship of the epistle, until within the last two hundred years. Some questioning has arisen as a result of the modern critical movement. I shall note some of the more important of these questions.

##### B. *Objection by Holtzmann*

There is one form of the modern objection to the Pauline authorship of the epistle which need not detain us, save for very brief mention. One writer, Holtzmann, held that the epistle as we have it was founded on a shorter genuine epistle of Paul, of which we have no direct knowledge. He attempts to extract this original Pauline epistle from the Epistle to the Colossians as we have it. Of course, almost any writing may be successfully abridged and still make sense. And no one can disprove absolutely a theory based on an ingenious handling of the material in accordance with such a theory. A skilful editor can obtain a much briefer Colossians that will read connectedly and possess a certain unity. At the same time, it must be added that disproof in such cases, in the absence of other evidence, is quite as strong as the proof. One inevitably asks what became of the briefer original from which the more expanded epistle came? How did it come to pass that Paul's own letter perished and the spurious expansion of it came to be accepted so generally

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<sup>2</sup> Archibald M. Hunter, *THE LAYMAN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY*, Vol. 22 (Richmond, Va., John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 113, 114.

without misgiving or question? Today, few hold to this theory.

### C. Other Objections

The objections to the Pauline authorship are chiefly three: first, the objection based on the words used in the epistle and on its literary style; second, the objection based on alleged inconsistencies or seemingly contradictions between the teachings of the epistle and those of other writings of the apostle Paul; and third, the objection which claims that the false teachings combated in the epistle show that it was written at a later date. I will consider each of these objections in order:

1. *Words used and style.*—One phase of the first objection calls attention to the presence of numerous words found in Colossians and not found elsewhere in Paul's writings. These number forty-eight. This objection has comparatively little weight, since Paul discusses new and important aspects of truth in the epistle before us. If he were dealing with the older problems, discussed by him in earlier writings, it might occasion surprise that there should be found so many new words. But surely a writer must be permitted to employ new words if he is expressing new ideas; and besides, in the case of a writer so gifted and resourceful as the Apostle to the Gentiles, we must allow something for his own wealth of language as well as of ideas, and his love for variety in the expression of his ideas. Another fact helps to explain the wide range of words employed by Paul. He was a great traveler and, of course, heard many new words and would naturally add many of them to his own stock.

T. K. Abbott quotes a statement from Doctor Mahaffy in which the parallel case of Xenophon is cited as follows:

His [Xenophon's] later tracts are full of un-Attic words, picked up from his changing surroundings; and, what is more curious, in each of them there are many words used by him only once; so that on the ground of variation in diction each single book might be, and, indeed, has been, rejected as non-Xenophontic.

He then goes on to show that such variation in language not only applies in Xenophon to words which would be needed only once, but also in cases where a different word is used to express the same idea. "Now, of all classical writers," he concludes, "Xenophon is perhaps (except Herodotus) the only man whose life corresponded to St. Paul's in its roving habit, which would bring him into contact with the spoken Greek of

varying societies."<sup>3</sup> In view, then, of Paul's varied experience as a traveler, and of the subjects discussed in Colossians, the objection based on the presence of words used only in this epistle is seen to have little force.

2. *Unlike Paul's other writings.*—Again it is objected that there are wanting many words which are favorite forms of expression in other writings of Paul. Under this head come Paul's terms for "righteous," "righteousness," "obedience," "law," "believe," and also a number of adverbs and conjunctions found in abundance in his argumentative epistles to the Galatians and Romans. But it has often been pointed out that some of these favorite words are wanting in other acknowledged epistles of Paul, such as 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. Besides this, we are to keep in mind the fact that the entire group of words in question belongs to the epistles which deal with the controversy with the Judaizers. Some of Paul's epistles are exceedingly argumentative, and he would inevitably employ terms in these which would not be necessary in quiet expositions like the Colossian and Ephesian epistles.

The long sentences found in Colossians have also been the occasion of objection to the Pauline authorship of the epistle. But that Paul was capable of writing very long and more or less involved sentences is clear from various passages in Romans and Galatians. (For example, see Rom. 1:1-7; Gal. 2:3-5, 6-9.)

The absence of certain ideas is pointed out. Of course, we admit as self-evident the absence of certain ideas of Paul which are treated at great length and with much emphasis elsewhere. In Galatians and Romans, Paul discusses a circle of ideas which had their roots in the Jewish attempt to construe Christianity in terms of Judaism. These false teachers combated Paul and made trouble for him wherever it was possible. With all the vehemence and force of his strong nature and clear intellect, he sets forth the true meaning of the gospel. Justification by faith is the universal principle of the gospel. Paul opposes this to the Jewish doctrine of justification by the works of the law, the necessity for circumcision and ceremonial righteousness generally. His polemic against the Judaizers takes him necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> T. K. Abbott, *The International Critical Commentary: Ephesians and to the Colossians*, "The Epistle to the Colossians," (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1953 reprint). Introduction.

into the very heart of the Jewish ideas and doctrines. At every point he opposes the true meaning of the gospel to the Jewish perversion.

Now the Colossian epistle was written under circumstances which were wholly different. There is no evidence that the Judaizers were busy with their evil teachings at Colossae. There was no direct attack of any kind upon the apostle for his teachings. What he had learned from Epaphras convinced him, however, that a heresy of another kind was beginning to make headway. The exposition of truth in this epistle is therefore aimed implicitly or explicitly at this new form of false teaching. We do not find in it the same abruptness of language and style, the same heat and impetuosity of argument and rebuke, as we find in Galatians and Romans. Nor do we find the same set of favorite words and ideas. Of course not! These would be out of place in the new connection. But we find no contradiction with earlier teachings; indeed, we find these assumed in our epistle and incidentally referred to or implied in numerous connections. It is a groundless proceeding, therefore, to raise objection to the Pauline authorship of the epistle because it is not a repetition in substance of Galatians and Romans.

3. *Deals with heresy of much later date.*—This brings us to the third form of the objection to the Pauline authorship of the epistle, namely, that it deals with a form of teaching which arose in opposition to Christianity at a much later date. This teaching is known in the history of the time as Gnosticism. The controversy between those who hold that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Colossians and those who deny it, insofar as it turns upon the question of Gnosticism, is a somewhat complicated one. Some opponents of the Pauline authorship assert that the epistle combats a form of teaching much later than Paul's day, while others claim that it is an attempt to incorporate the Gnostic speculations into Christianity by some writer who saw no necessary contradiction between the two.

There is not space here to consider all the bearings of this controversy. The fact that critics hold directly opposing views as to the aim of the teaching in the epistle itself should give us pause in drawing hasty conclusions. One or two things need to be emphasized, however, as to the internal evidence afforded by the epistle itself. The first is that we do not possess in Colossians any definite or very clearly defined statements as to the form of error which the epistle was intended to refute. Various things are implied, and a number of incidental references are made to these

errors. But nowhere do we find clear and distinct definition or formulation of the views in question.

Again it is to be noted that the literature of Gnosticism which has come down to us sheds no clear light on the particular phase of that speculation which was current when this epistle was written. As already stated, Gnosticism seems to have passed through several stages. The aeons or emanations which were assumed by the Gnostics were of various degrees of remoteness from God. At first, they were simply defective in their appreciation of God. Next, they were ignorant of him, and finally they were opposed to him. The first of these phases of belief seems to correspond with the conditions suggested by the teachings in the Epistle to the Colossians.

The false teachers at Colossae held some views as to angels and the worship of angels which were unfavorable to the true Christian conception of Christ. This bowing down to angels (Col. 2:18) illustrates the tendency to interpose mediators between the Supreme God and men. The writer of Colossians at every point places Christ above all such mediators. In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead.

The last fact has a bearing on the other phase of the objection to the Pauline authorship, which is that this epistle came after Paul's day and from the pen of a Christian who sought to amalgamate the Gnostic with the Christian doctrine.

Two points are emphasized to make good this claim. One is that in Colossians the idea of reconciliation is prominent, just as it is a very distinct feature of Gnosticism. In reply, it is to be noted that, while reconciliation is an idea common to both Christianity and Gnosticism, there is a vast difference between the ideas of reconciliation in the two systems.

With the Gnostics, reconciliation was needed because of emanations from God which passed through successive stages of degeneration. The conquest of matter through knowledge was the mode of reconciliation insisted upon by the Gnostics. With Paul, on the other hand, the reconciliation was moral and spiritual. The separation was due to sin. Man is far from God because of transgression, not because he is the victim of a progressive decline in the nature of created beings who emanated in the first place from God and gradually became opposed to him. The whole conception of the mediation of Christ and the reconciliation of man to God through Him is radically opposed to the Gnostic view.

The second point advanced is that another Gnostic idea is suggested by the word translated "fulness" (*pleroma*) in the epistle. The inference has been drawn, that, because Paul employs this word, found later in use among the Gnostics, Colossians must have been written at a later period by someone holding Gnostic views. (See Col. 2:9.)

On the contrary, it is to be noted that the use of the word in Colossians seems designed to oppose the views of the Gnostics rather than to reproduce them. The Valentinian Gnostics held that aeons or emanations from God were many, and that the "fullness" of the divine was to be asserted of them all taken together. In Colossians there is insistence upon the fact that all the divine fullness dwelt in Christ alone. The form of the declaration as we have it in the epistle, therefore, seems particularly directed against a view similar to that of the later Gnostics. As already noted, we have no means of determining the exact form of false teaching which was becoming current at Colossae, beyond what is suggested in the epistle itself. All the indications found therein suggest the beginnings of the Gnostic doctrine, according to which angels or other intermediate beings were supposed to separate God and man. It is beyond question that the writer of the epistle opposes this view and assigns the supreme headship of creation to Christ alone and makes Him the sole Mediator between God and man.

#### D. *Side Light in Epistle to Philemon*

A very interesting side light is shed upon the question of the genuineness of the Epistle to the Colossians by reason of its connection with the Epistle to Philemon. The latter epistle was, without doubt, written by Paul. It was sent by the hand of Onesimus, the runaway slave, to his master, who was accompanied by Tychicus, the bearer of the Epistle to the Colossians. Doctor Abbott says:

The coincidence in some of the names mentioned might be explained by the hypothesis that the forger of the longer epistle made use of the shorter. But the differences exclude this supposition. Colossians mentions Jesus, surnamed Justus, an otherwise unknown person, in addition to those mentioned in Philemon, while Philemon is not mentioned at all. Again, while Aristarchus and Epaphras are mentioned in both epistles, it is the former that is called "fellow-prisoner" in Colossians, the latter in Philemon. But there is nothing in the Epistle to Philemon to suggest Colossae as the city of his residence. We learn his connection with it only by

finding his runaway slave Onesimus mentioned in Colossians as "one of you." Having learned this, we observe further that Archippus, who in the private epistle appears as an intimate, perhaps son, of Philemon, is mentioned in Colossians in such a way as to suggest that he held office either there or in Laodicea. Certainly the way in which his name is introduced there is an unlike as possible to the contrivance of a forger. That Onesimus alone should be mentioned as Paul's messenger in the letter to Philemon, but Tychicus with him in the public Epistle, is perfectly natural.<sup>4</sup>

#### E. *Light Also in Revelation*

It has been pointed out that the book of Revelation in the third chapter, verses 14 to 21, where the church at Laodicea is addressed, contains expressions strongly suggestive of the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians. In Revelation 3:14 Christ is called "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God." In Colossians 1:15 He is called "the firstborn of all creation." Also in Revelation 3:21 we read "I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." In Colossians 3:1 is the expression "where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." In Ephesians 2:6 a similar expression is found, "made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Lightfoot and others have insisted that these parallel passages clearly indicate a knowledge on John's part of the earlier writing of Paul. This point seems to possess much force, especially as regards the first of the two parallels. The second, in which Christ's throne is spoken of, might have been derived by John from other parts of the New Testament, although the language is quite in harmony with the idea of a derivation from Paul's expressions in Colossians and Ephesians. In the first parallel, however, the resemblance is very strong, and the conclusion seems almost forced upon us that there is a connection between the language of John and Paul.

## VI. EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS COMPARED

The epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, written about the same time, present marked points of agreement. This was entirely natural. Paul's Roman imprisonment gave him opportunity for reflection upon

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<sup>4</sup> T. K. Abbott, *Op. Cit.*

the transcendent side of the doctrine of Christ's person. The necessity for some deliverance from the apostle on the subject arose out of conditions which were beginning to show themselves in the churches. It was natural that in churches situated in the same region there should exist similar spiritual tendencies, giving rise to similar needs. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that Colossians and Ephesians exhibit points of very marked resemblance.

At the same time, it is to be noted that there are equally striking points of difference. These are not in the nature of contradictions but of variety due to the differences in the spiritual condition of the churches and the points of view of the respective epistles.

#### *A. Points of Agreement*

In both epistles, much emphasis is given to Christ's general relations to the universe on its heavenly and, earthly side. In both, Paul dwells upon the gospel as a mystery which had been hidden but is now revealed. In both, he calls attention to his own apostleship to the Gentiles as a part of the plan and purpose of God for making known the gospel to all men. In both epistles, again, the apostle represents the church as the body of Christ and gives emphasis to the conception of the universal church. (Some call it the Body of Christ.) [Compare Col. 1:18, 24; 2:17 with Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 4:12; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32.]

This similarity is, no doubt, due to Paul's purpose in both epistles, which is to expound and define Christianity in its most universal terms. The errors against which he writes are such as go to the very roots of things, and, in order to meet them, he states Christian truth in the largest possible way. It must be added, however, as to the teaching that the church is Christ's body, that while in Ephesians it is brought out with much emphasis and at considerable length, in Colossians it is introduced incidentally and rather assumed as the foundation of other teachings called for by the particular needs of the Colossian church. In most cases where Ephesians and Colossians deal with the same matters, Ephesians treats them more fully than Colossians.

#### *B. Points of Difference*

We note next the points of difference. Here, of course, are numerous minor points which need no special notice. What Paul says about Epaphras and his connection with the Colossian church, his references to the progress of the church, and his solicitude for their spiritual welfare, would fall under this head. The numerous personal greetings at the end of the epistle

are another point of contrast with Ephesians. This harmonizes with the destination of the latter, which was a group of churches, while Colossians was written to a single church.

In comparing this epistle with that to the Ephesians, the chief point of difference is found to consist in the teaching regarding the person of Christ. As already indicated, there is a deep underlying unity of view in the two epistles, but in Colossians there are marked instances of variation and transfer of emphasis. In Ephesians the eternal purpose of God toward the church and the execution of that purpose through Christ come in for special emphasis. The vital union between Christ and the church is dwelt upon. Especially does Paul elaborate the thought that the church is the body of Christ, and the unity which has followed the breaking down of the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles.

Now, all of this comes out incidentally, or by way of implication, in Colossians. But the writer's mind ranges out into a new set of relations and it is upon these that the chief emphasis falls. Here he is combating a special form of dangerous error, and his statements as to the person of Christ have in view its correction. Accordingly, we find the supreme headship of Christ made prominent, a headship which extends not only to the church but to the universe at large. In fact, we find in Colossians perhaps the most comprehensive and complete statement of Christ's relations to the universe to be found anywhere in the New Testament. It is true the Fourth Gospel contains a similar statement, and Paul presents substantially the same view in Philippians and elsewhere. Colossians was written earlier than the Fourth Gospel, however, and its teaching as to Christ's person affords a striking illustration of the substantial unity of view as between Paul and John.

It is to be noted further that Paul's teaching as to Christ's person in this epistle is not merely incidental to other teachings. It belongs to the warp and woof of the argument. It is formally and fully stated in order to show, by way of contrast with the speculative error Paul is opposing, just how we are to regard Jesus Christ in His relations to creation.

The various points will receive treatment in the commentary proper. In brief, they may be summed up as follows: Christ is the image of the invisible God and the source and ground of creation, but is not Himself a created Being. He is the medium through which the creative act passed. All things were made through Him. He is the bond of all created things, since they hold

together in and through Him. He is the goal of all since all things are "unto him." He is the head of the body, the church, the "firstborn from the dead." In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead. Through Him God [the Father] is reconciling all things unto Himself. Christ has made peace through the blood of the cross, having conquered the powers of evil through His death. He will carry on the spiritual creation until He shall present the saints holy and without blemish and unreprouvable before God.

## VII. COLOSSIAN'S MEANING AND MESSAGE

### A. *Its Meaning*

How much good doctrine heretics have been responsible for, indirectly! Not the least of these were the nameless ones in Colossae who set Paul thinking out his doctrine of Christ in such terms that he found he had to give his Lord the freedom of the universe. The Christ of Colossians is the Cosmic Christ. Not that the heretics had any design or dream of effecting this. They were evidently aiming at a "superior" Christianity of their own. Finding the gospel too simple, they set out to embellish it with this or that element of "philosophy" (though Paul has a much blunter name for it, "empty deceit") and ritual. In fact, as Paul saw, they were scaling down the Person and work of Christ, limiting the scope of His redemptive work, filching from Him His uniqueness. For this there could be but one remedy—to make clear who Christ really is and what He has really done for men.

### B. *Its Message*

So Paul says in reply to them: Christ is not one in a system of mediators. He is the principle and goal of creation: the visible manifestation of the unseen God, the Father's First-born, his Agent in creation, the totality of Deity corporately, the Head of the new Divine Community, the Reconciler of estranged men. God's great Secret now unveiled and containing in Himself all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (1:15-2:3).

What has Christ done? He has redeemed us: by the sacrifice of the Cross He has brought reconciliation, canceled the Law's indictment that stood against us, and triumphed over the demonic forces of evil (2:13-15).

No one who realizes the sufficiency of Christ's Saviorhood should bother any more with fads about foods or holy days, with angel-worship or visionary

lore or any petty prohibitions about external things. These are only the shadows; the substance belongs to Christ (2:16-23).

From there Paul goes on to sketch the new life in Christ. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above" (3:1). This involves "killing" our old bad habits, telling the truth, showing forgiveness, building up Christian homes, and dealing graciously with outsiders (3:1-4: 6).

We may ask, What has the letter to say to us today? This, first: To all who would "improve" Christianity by admixing it with spiritualism or Sabbatarianism [prescribed worship on the Sabbath, Saturday] or occultism or any such extra, it utters its warning: "What Christ is and has done for us is enough for salvation. We need no extra mediators, or taboos, or ascetics. To piece out the gospel with the rags and tatters of alien cults is not to enrich but to corrupt it."

And this, second: If the titles and place Paul assigns to Christ in Colossians surprise, and even stagger, us, they do but say what any true doctrine of Christ must say, that the Fact of Christ must somehow be embedded in creation, that all creation exists with Him in view, and that in some deep mysterious way it has promise of Christ in it.<sup>5</sup>

### C. *Its Theme*

The over-all theme of Colossians is "Christ, the Pre-eminent One, the Only and All-Sufficient Savior,"<sup>6</sup> Colossians is all about Jesus Christ, the creating God who became the all-sufficient sacrifice for sinner's sins. God's plan for the redemption of sinners is fulfilled in the life and sacrifice of Christ.

## **END OF SAMPLE**

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<sup>5</sup> Archibald M. Hunter, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>6</sup> H. G. C. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon Studies* (Ft. Washington, PA., CLC Pub., 2002), p. 122.