

The Epistle To The Colossians For The Church Of Today

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE

Is The Epistle Relevant For Today?

Whilst the relevancy of anything seems to be almost an obsession in today's society, yet Paul's Letter to the Colossians becomes more significant for us when we see parallels in today's churches. Such parallels make the Letter quite relevant. Under the headings, 'The Problems at Colossae', and 'The Teaching of the Epistle', we have gathered Paul's main reasons for writing the Letter, namely an inadequate view of Christ's Lordship, of creation and redemption because of the dominance of gnosticism and even docetism.

The 'Then' Problems and Also the 'Now' Problems

We might think our church doctrine and practice situations have changed so much that there are few if any parallels. To the contrary: we have the whole matter of Christ's Lordship brought into question, we face gnosticism no less today than then-though it be in somewhat different garb-and in addition we have the mushrooming of secular humanism which has in fact become a religion. It has so penetrated our modern thinking that we cannot recognise it is now deeply seated in the church itself

The terms 'gnosticism' and 'docetism' are not words with which all readers of the New Testament are conversant. Commentators speak of these heresies but at this point we will not pause here to describe them in detail. Briefly we can say that gnosticism in Paul's day was a form of knowledge of spiritual mysteries by which a man could obtain salvation, that it had as its basis an assumption of the grossness of that which was material, thus positing a dualism, i.e. matter as evil, and only that which was insubstantial as spiritual. Because of this dualism the gnostic would view with abhorrence the idea of the incarnation of God. The only way out of gross incarnation would be to claim that Christ came in the appearance of man, but was not actually a man. This was (and is) the doctrine of the Docetists.

Today gnosticism is reappearing in many forms, some of them linked with supernaturalism. Many church members would be surprised-if not shocked-to know they have gnostic ideas. Likewise many do not think that Christ really became man forever. They somehow think he was 'God in a skin', i.e. his taking of humanity was a temporary cover for His deity, so that when the man Jesus was resurrected and glorified his humanity—somehow—became dissolved back into his deity, so that now he is God and only God. If this were the case then the incarnation and redemption were only a charade. By nature of the case they cannot be effective in man's salvation.

Faith and Practice in the Epistle

The simplest way of seeing the present relevance of the Epistle is to go through it from beginning to end, listening to what Paul teaches. This bird's eye view of the Letter will help us to grasp what Paul was saying. What we believe determines what we do, so that if we believe correctly then we will have correct practice.

The Salutation

In 1: 1-2 Paul opens his Letter by the salutation which invokes the grace and peace of God upon the readers. These two words—grace and peace—are not invoked formally. Both are inseparable, one never being present without the other. Thus in 1:6 Paul says that through Ephaphras they 'understood the grace of God in truth'. At the end of the Letter (4:18) he again invokes grace, but his whole letter is a setting out of grace in redemption, by which all things-hitherto hostile to God—are reconciled (1:19-22). He speaks of the peace of God as being umpire in the heart (3:15). Reconciliation is, of course, man's coming to peace with God.

The Prayer

From 1: 3-14 Paul prays for the Colossian church, showing they are a community of love, faith and hope. Such elements are not only indispensable to true Christian living, but they spring essentially from the Gospel, i.e. 'the grace of God in truth'. We happen to know that grace and truth (cf. John 1: 14) are as inseparable as the duo of grace and peace, and the triad of faith, hope and love. Paul affirms the church at Colossae is authentic. He points to one of the true hallmarks of genuine spirituality and practical living, i.e. "your love in the Spirit' (1:8), 'your love for all the saints' (1:4).

In 1:9-14 his prayer gathers momentum. Against the foolishness of gnosticism, docetism, and the local forms of heresy he prays for them to be 'filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding'. Later he will show that Christ is the very wisdom of God, and salvation the outworking of that wisdom. Thus the seeming wisdom of the esoteric gnostics must seem to be false. His prayer for their maturity relates to 'all power... for all endurance, and patience with joy'. This is most practical.

The Basis of Paul's Petition

1:13-14 states categorically the whole basis of their salvation and place in God's Kingdom. God has acted sovereignly in Christ for, He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.' Thus simply but categorically and brilliantly, Paul not only states the radical act of redemption but wholly undercuts the heresies which seek to diminish the Lordship of Christ and keep men in subjection to occult powers.

The Hymn of Affirmation

Commentators often differ as to whether 1: 15-18 was a well-known early hymn. That it is a hymn is not in doubt, even if it was immediately and directly from Paul's pen. It is what the hymn affirms that matters, namely that Christ, the beloved Son (1:13) is Lord of all both by creation and redemption. In v. 15 he is the image of the invisible God in a way that man by creation is not. He is unique in that he is the first-born of all creation. The first-born of the family is the one who rules and to whom comes the preeminence. He is the heir. Paul is not explaining 'first-birth' but setting forward Christ's preeminence. If he is not preeminent, then other powers-thrones, dominions, principalities and authorities-may well equal him. No! For he has created these very things, **whether they be in the heavens above** or the earth below, or anywhere! He cannot have been created because he is 'before all things'. Again 'in him all things hold together'! They are all upheld by him, having their life and sustained being in him (cf. Heb. 1:2-3).

If this were not enough Paul enhances this preeminence by showing Christ is the dead of the church which is his body. He is Lord of the church, and by rising first from the dead, may lead others out of death thus being in both creation and redemption-as -also in providence—preeminent. Everything is under his rule. As Lord of the universe all things derive from him, are redeemed and sustained by him. This is because in the man Jesus God's fullness was pleased to dwell. Through Christ and the given fullness God set out to effect a cosmic reconciliation of all things disparate, making them one, i.e. 'making peace by the blood of his cross'. Again Paul undercuts the heretics who would make esoteric knowledge, and concatenations of angels the means of a gnostic salvation. Concatenations means a linked series of emanations from above to below.

The Goal of Salvation

In verses 21 to 23 Paul-while not passing from dynamic cosmic salvation-shows the Colossians that person salvation, that coming to peace with God, and states that its goal is 'to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him'. This eschatological goal and intention is based upon God's grace but demands the practical obedience of experimental holiness (1:23). The resources for such lie within the Gospel, but they demand the response of the believer.

Suffering, Glory, and Maturation

It is difficult for us, after almost 2000 years to understand the mindset of the Colossian believer. Given the 'grace of God in truth', i.e. the Gospel, this person was best on all sides by tempting theories said theologies. None of those had any demand for suffering, or fire promise of glory! As we shall see they represented forms of religious legalism. Paul is not drawing upon Hellenistic (Greek) or oriental sources for exotic doctrines and theories. He is pointing back to the solid history of Israel, God's acts within and for Israel, and the prophetic promises which constitute the substantial basis of truth. As In Ephesians 3:1-11 he is asserting that God's plan-His 'mystery'—is that the Gentiles (the non—God nations) will all participate in, i.e. inherit, all the promises made to Israel through covenant. The 'riches of the glory of this mystery' are 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. If we choose to make 'Christ in you' something subjective, or something of

inner emotional experience, we may miss the wider sweep of the 'in' (Greek: **en**) which can be translated 'Christ among you, the hope of glory'. By this Paul would mean, 'Christ is not only in Israel as their hope of glory (Isa. 43:67, cf. Eph. 1:11-14) but in you Gentiles, you pagan nations to bring you all to glory, and so to glorify Himself.

Paul is amazed and gratified that God should choose him to 'make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery', and sees the necessity for suffering of the church in this process. Each member—so to speak—has a portion of this suffering which in another letter Paul calls 'the fellowship of his sufferings' (Phil. 3: 10). Whilst Paul sees no lack of Christ's suffering he seems to see a lack of filling up those sufferings within the body, and gladly takes—so to speak—more than his apportioned share.

This whole passage must not only have been devastating to those whose 'gospel' was so different (cf. Gal. 1:6-9), but wonderfully encouraging to those of Gentile background who may have seen those of Jewish origins as having an edge on other Christian believers. The goal and outcome of suffering and 'the plan of the mystery' is full maturation, the glorification of each believer and the whole people of God.

The Pauline Persistence

In 2:1-5 Paul now becomes a paradigm for those of us who have not founded a church directly. If Ephaphras was the agent through whom the church was formed, then Paul was the one who kept this assembly in heart and mind, striving in prayer for them. It was not the interest of a founder once removed, but an apostle who knows (knew) the dangers of onslaught which new (and old) churches know. He sees their stability and integrity in the action of God's love, and not love that is merely notional but love that binds them together in practice, and leads them further into 'all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery in Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. Such knowledge, also, is not simply notional, but personal and experimental, and fortifies them against those who 'delude with beguiling speech'.

The Apostle's Warning and Tuition

Paul, then, has come to the heart of the matter, namely the deceitfulness of human 'wisdom', which is no true wisdom. In 2:6-15 he first points back to their initial experience of Christ—'as you received him so live in him'—for this is no new rule for going on in Christ (v.6). Rooted and built up in him they must let their roots go deeper and make their foundations stronger. 2:8 is one of the central verses, 'See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human traditions, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.'. There is there one system which is wholly in Christ, and others which are not. We cannot fully discover what was taught which was wrong, but we can see that it was against Christ and his fullness. All that is not truth (cf. Rom. 1:21-25) is deceitful, for men have 'exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and so do not know the truth. Hence they worship the wisdom of their own minds, be it secular or religious wisdom. All this against the riches of Christ. If we would measure what is truth and not deceit, what is full and not empty, then we must measure by the reality of Christ.

The Fullness of Christ

The reason for this kind of measuring lies in Christ (v.9, cf. 1:9) for ‘in him the whole fullness (Greek: *pleroma*) of deity dwells bodily’, hence (v. 10) ‘we are filled full in him’, i.e. our supply is from him alone. Anything that is not Christ or from him is ‘empty’ whilst all from him is ‘fullness’. This is because he is head over all rule and authority. Nothing is greater than him, or can give us other than what he gives.

The fruits of this fullness are the very actions of Christ (2:11-15). The cross and the resurrection have effected God’s radical change in both Jew and Gentile. Through the circumcision of the flesh at the cross, the burial that came in his death and effective in baptism, has brought the dead person to true life, because the heart of the matter has been dealt with, i.e. the believer has received radical forgiveness of all his sins because ‘the bond which stood against us with its legal demands’ has been lawfully set aside through his suffering its judgement in the Cross. This taking of human guilt and dissolving it has disarmed evil principalities and powers. Helpless, they are now driven in a show-ring, shown to shorn of their hold over man which was tragic human guilt, and fear of death and judgement (cf. Heb. 2:14-15).

No Power For the Disarmed

In 2:16-23 Paul presses in to show the futility of the occult and esoteric teachings the purveyors of human wisdom and philosophy have sought to bring to the believers at Colossae. In this passage we can gather some of the elements which have been propounded. In 2:8 Paul used the phrase ‘the elemental spirits of the universe’, and this has been variously **interpreted**. Some see these elements spirits (Greek: *stoicheia*) as the evil (fallen) powers which use men to teach falsely, and so keep them in bondage. Some simply see these as elements of fallen men trying to adduce a philosophy or religion which will rationalise the matters of God, man, and creation, and keep their subjects in bondage.

No Head But Christ

Whatever the part of spirits or men in such teaching the practical outcome is bondage to religious traditions, angelology and angelolatry, shown in the use of visions, foolish intellectual pride, and self-abasement. The root of such activity is ‘not holding fast to the head’, for ‘holding fast’ is clinging, as does a tight garment to the body. Not to have Christ as Head is to have no true head, for the true Head gives life to the body, fullness to the members, and direction to the true people of God. To refuse this Headship is to have one’s own, or the headship of another. It is in fact to be apart from the whole body of Christ. It is not to derive its life and being from Christ. Thus in 2:16-23 Paul unmasks the bondage which holds man outside of Christ. He will have no mixing of Christ and these other false elements.

We saw that the ‘elemental spirits-whatever they were-had been defeated at the cross. Esoteric and occultic laws are mysterious, binding, and even frightening. Those who are under them suffer deeply from guilt if they do not obey (cf. Gal. 4:8-10). Man is always in guilt; guilt is dynamic, and false regulations keep man in perpetual binding guilt. Paul may be referring to asceticism—one element of gnostic practice—or to some false

forms of Judaistic practice, but whatever they are they do not liberate man but increase his bondage and his fleshliness. Only in Christ is there freedom and authentic life.

The Practics of the Gospel

In 3:1-4:5 Paul indicates the new life in Christ. In 2:6 he has advised believers to walk in accordance with the way they received Christ, i.e. by faith, love and hope, being rooted and founded in his Lordship, rejecting the lordships of other creatures, and the so-called wisdom of false teachers. Now he enters on the way in which believers live.

He first tells them their position. In 2:11-12 he has spoken of their death in Christ, and their being raised with him. Assuming they are raised he shows them their object of worship and attention is Christ seated at the right hand of God (v.1). This implicit quote from Psalm 110: 1 is affirming Christ's Lordship over all other 'lords' and powers. As he has said Christ is the source of their life, now he shows their life is presently hidden with Christ in God (v.3). The time will come when the hiddenness of Christ will be revealed, and so will believers appear with him in glory-the outcome of 1:27.

The New Man, Mortification and Holiness

In the light of what they will be they must now live. In 3:5-11 Paul is calling for holy action. He is not concerned with ability or inability to carry out his injunctions. Anything that belongs to the old life must be 'put to death, i.e. what Christ has defeated they must recognise as defeated and kill them dead. These things include 'fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry' v.5). The point is that these things can be slain.

Likewise there are things the believer can 'put away' (2:8-11). He has the power and the obligation to do this. These things are 'anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk'. such things are incongruous with the new life, hid with Christ in God. Indeed believers have put off the old humanity, i.e. the sinful fallen humanity they once had in Adam, and they have put on the new humanity (doubtless Christ himself) and this humanity (i.e. their participation in it) is 'being renewed after the image of its creator'. Doubtless Paul means that the lost knowledge and truth which itself determined practice and character is being restored (renewed) and so their is growth in genuine knowledge and correct practice. In the new humanity things are different, eg. all are one, and not divided by race or social status (slave or free man, cf. Gal. 3:28) where these sinful or functional differences cannot deny the essential unity that is the new humanity.

The New Man and the New Life of Love

In 3:12-17 Paul shows how the new life works out in unity and love. Back in 1: 19-22 he talked about the reconciliation of all things. Here, in the church, it is working out into the interrelationships of love. Having put off things that are evil and offensive those sharing in the new humanity put on 'compassion, holiness, meekness and self-abasement'. The outworking of such is a life lived in forgiveness of others in Christ's forgiveness, the putting on of love thus effecting harmony. The very peace which Paul has invoked now gives serenity within the heart, and in the same heart the word of Christ dwells richly. The heresies and their teachers are far away. The true wisdom has come and is dispersed amongst them through worship, praise and thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving, by the way, is a continuing theme in this Letter (see 1:3, 12, 2:7, 3:16,17, 4:2). The source of all saying and doing is Christ the Lord.

The New Love in the Family of the Church

The behaviour of wives, husbands, fathers, children, slaves and masters (3:18-4:1) is all under the regimen of love. In the new humanity there are functional ways of living in true relationships. Doubtless the false teachers taught things which led to false practice. The Lordship of Christ determines the new relationships, hence the phrases 'in the Lord', 'pleases the Lord', 'fearing the Lord', 'serving the Lord', 'serving the Lord Christ', and 'you also have a Master in heaven'.

Closing Thoughts, Greetings and Injunctions

From 4:2 to 4:18 Paul, having discharged his artillery against the heresiarchs, taught positively the believers, and opened up the mystery of the plan of God which is worked out in Christ's fullness, now enters into quieter waters. He enjoins prayer for himself and his team, especially for the opportunity to share the mystery of Christ with those who as yet do not know it. He also exhorts those at Colossae to buy up the opportunities for proclamation.

Finally he opens up the domestic nature of the body of Christ. He speaks of those with him where he is in prison, and perhaps one or two of them are fellow prisoners. His comments on persons such as Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Luke and Ephaphras show his keen discernment of his brethren and his love for them. Some of them are linked with the churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis-as churches in the Lycus valley, none of which Paul has directly founded or personally visited but for which he has a ministry of prayer and teaching by letter. So ends the epistle, and this with the brief invocation, 'Grace be with you,' which, if short, sums up the substance of the Epistle.

The Value of the Letter to the Colossians

We asked ourselves, previously, whether it was fair to say that this Colossian Letter has relevancy for us today. We will not here speak of current gnosticism and docetism, but even a cursory reading of the New Testament Letters (included the seven in Revelation chapters 2 and 3) will show us that the church was always attacked by false teachers, false doctrine and so false practice. The reading of Church History will verify this fact.

Even if our primary concern is not to expose and defeat heresy this Letter is of prime importance. It has a Christology (study of the person and work of Christ) which is rich. It shows, too, that in creation, redemption and the ultimate reconciliation of all things Christ is the Father's mediator and agent. This process of reconciliation will not simply be an act in the end time, but must be a process in the continuing 'now' time. Hence we are involved in reconciliation.

As moderns living at the end of the second millennium we may be intrigued by Paul's plain injunctions as to our ways of living as the people of God, but if we can only offer more modern terms in which to couch our teaching, then that is little enough. It is

doubtful whether any one of us can fully grasp the nature of God, of His Son, of the mystery of the plan, of creation, providence, redemption and the ultimate reconciliation of those 'all things' as fully as has Saint Paul.

For this reason we must continually open up the riches of Christ from this Letter. My only regret is that in spending decades on many other books of the Bible, I have only in later years begun to mine the riches of this small but powerful Epistle to the Colossians.