INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO COLOSSIANS

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Marion, Iowa
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Introduction to the Epistle to Colossians

The apostle Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is a fascinating epistle which contains some of the most significant Christological passages. It is one of Paul’s shortest letters and is considered by the church throughout her history as being one of four “prison epistles.” The other three are Philemon, Philippians and Ephesians. As we will note, Colossians and Philemon were written around the same time. Tychicus delivered the Colossian epistle to its recipients as well as delivering Philemon to its recipient.

Paul’s epistle to the Colossians has quite a bit about to say regarding the importance of the gospel as well as the person and work of Jesus Christ especially in regards to creation and the reconciliatory fallen creation to God through His finished work on the cross. This letter also speaks of the Christian’s union and position in Christ which is followed by exhortations to appropriate this position in Christ in order to experience victory over sin. Appropriating by faith one’s position in Christ produces godly conduct.

The Colossian epistle presents the supremacy of Christ more than any other of Paul’s epistles. In fact, Colossians 1:15-20 is often scrutinized by scholars. Paul inserts this hymnic section in order to communicate to the Colossian church practical implications for the spiritual life of the church since one’s view of Christ will determine the manner in which one lives their life. The Colossian epistle has often been cited by theologians and pastors in the church throughout her history to protect the church from legalism and false doctrine.

Douglas Moo writes “Paul’s letter to the Colossians has had an impact on Christian theology and practice out of proportion to its size. Christian thinkers since the patristic period have turned to its teaching about Jesus’ role in creation and his preeminence over the church to formulate their Christology. Paul’s warnings about people who insist on following certain kinds of rules as basic to spiritual growth have been cited by theologians and laypeople alike to hold up the principle of Christian liberty. And the paraenetic section of the letter, though brief, is typified by a collection of broad ethical principles that have provided significant guidance for believers seeking to translate their commitment to the Lord Jesus into practice.”

Colossians emphasizes the sovereignty of God and has a very high Christology. The core of the letter is the person and work of Jesus Christ—in whom all the “fullness” (πλήρωμα, plērōma) of God “was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19 ESV). This emphasis was necessary—false teachers may have been threatening true Christology. To counter them, Paul points to Christ—center of all of life in

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spiritual, personal, and social realms. Moo notes that the letter is “a prime witness to the ‘christological monotheism’ that characterizes early Christianity” (Moo, Colossians and Philemon, 62). Throughout the letter, the centrality, sufficiency, and supremacy of Christ are emphasized, primarily in three areas: 1. In salvation 2. In the cosmos 3. In the Church. The letter repeatedly stresses that Christ: 

• is the avenue to redemption (Col 1:13–14, 20–22) • holds a place of primacy in creation (Col 1:15) • is the center and source of creation (Col 1:16) • holds the universe together (Col 1:17) • is the head of the church (Col 1:18) • is God Himself (Col 1:15, 19) • disarmed and dismantled the evil spiritual authorities and strongholds (Col 2:15) • is the ultimate reality over and above earthly rituals (Col 2:17) • nourishes and grows the church (2:19) • is seated at God’s right hand (Col 3:1) • is where real life exists (3:3–4) • wipes away ethnic and racial division (Col 3:11) • is the source of unity and peace in the church (Col 3:15) • provides the impetus to do good work (Col 3:24) • is good reason to suffer (Col 4:3).²

Richard Melick writes “Christianity faced one of its most severe challenges in the complex and confusing intellectual climate of ancient Colossae. Perhaps due to the nature of the times, the location, and the ideological climate, what had begun well faced a major threat to Christianity’s very existence. False teachers were urging the people to move away from their Christian roots and to accept other religious ideas. Although Paul did not found the church at Colossae, it manifested Pauline traits, and Paul felt the responsibility to address its problems. This little epistle contains distinctive teachings about the person and work of Christ, about Christian living and relationships, and about Paul’s conception of his ministry. Studying the epistle is an adventure in Christian theology. It reveals Pauline thought and authentic Christian living. The pages of the text are alive with relevance and challenge the reader to a more reflective and informed faith. Paul constructed his arguments to counter false teaching and to teach orthodox theology. One theme predominates: the centrality of Christ. No other epistle is as Christocentric as this one. Whether the reader spends countless hours with Colossians or reads it only casually, every encounter with the text brings one face to face with the Lord whom the text introduces so well. Every occasion to read it leaves its mark indelibly on the mind. This commentary provides another exposure to the powerful little letter.”³

³ Many commentaries provide a wealth of information. As a starter, the serious student should consult the following: P. O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, WBC; E. Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, Her; J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon; R. P. Martin, Colossians and Philemon, NCB; also Colossians: The Church’s Lord and the Christian’s Liberty; F. F. Bruce, Ephesians and Colossians, NIC; C. F. D. Moule, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon, CGTC; W. Hendriksen, Colossians and Philemon, NTC; C. Vaughan, Colossians: A Study Guide Commentary, and “Colossians,” EBC; Dibelius and Greeven, An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon, HNT 12; G. B. Caird, Paul’s Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon), and John Callow, A Semantic Structure Analysis of Colossians; R. E. O. White, “Colossians,” BBC. Many more could be mentioned along with even more helpful articles, dictionaries, introductions, etc.
Canonicity

Colossians has been considered a part of the New Testament canon as evidenced by the fact it is contained in the canon lists from the very beginning of canon lists. It appears in the heretic Marcion’s list and in the Muratorian Canon. It is also found in the Syriac and Old Latin versions and in addition it is cited by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian. There has not been any question with regards to the letter’s canonicity in early church history so that she has not had any problem recognizing it as inspired by God.

There was no dispute over the authenticity of Colossians in the early period. The letter is included in the earliest known canonical list of the NT books (early second century AD) compiled by Marcion, as well as in the Muratorian canon (late second or early third century).\(^5\)

The genuineness of this Epistle is attested by Justin Martyr [Dialogue with Trypho, p. 311, B.], who quotes “the first-born of every creature,” in reference to Christ, from Col 1:15. Theophilus of Antioch [To Autolycus, 2, p. 100]. Irenaeus [Against Heresies, 3.14.1], quotes expressly from this “Epistle to the Colossians” (Col 4:14). Clement of Alexandria [Miscellanies, 1. p. 325], quotes Col 1:28; also elsewhere he quotes Col 1:9–11, 28; 2:2, &c. Col 2:8, &c. Tertullian [The Prescription against Heretics, 7], quotes Col 2:8; [On the Resurrection of the Flesh, 23], and quotes Col 2:12, 20. Origen [Against Celsus, 5.8], quotes Col 2:18, 19.\(^6\)

Literary Genre

This letter to the Colossians is written according to the pattern of letter writing found in the ancient world during the first century called the “epistle.” The epistle is among the oldest forms of communication. In fact, the epistle is among the oldest and most abundantly preserved types of texts that we have today from the ancient world. These extant documents are extremely important to us today for historical, literary and biblical research.

The Babylonian royalty employed epistolary communication as far back as 2275 B.C. The Egyptians used this form of written communication extensively as evidenced by remains from the 2nd Millennium B.C. Akkadian letters have been

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found on potsherds and clay tablets. The greatest epistolary activity occurs during the Greco-Roman period.

The Greek language was diversified into various dialects such as Aeolic, Doric, Ionic, Attic, but yet mutually intelligible. Eventually, all of these dialects were joined into one “common” language, the Koine Greek, which Alexander the Great spread throughout the rest of the world which he had conquered.

The Romans spoke Latin but very much influenced by the Greeks and their culture. In fact, the Roman Empire at its height spoke primarily Koine Greek. The Romans wrote their Law in Latin but their literary prose was in Greek. Latin was not used by Roman historians until Cato in 160 B.C.

Latin is practical and economical like the Romans themselves, whereas, the Greeks were much more colorful in their speech and thought and therefore, produced a more complicated language. There are over 14,000 extant epistles from the Greco-Roman period. This was the result of the increase in scribal learning and influence as well as the growing demands for careful documentation in the areas of: (1) Commerce & travel (2) Official propaganda (3) The administrative concerns in government (4) Military (5) Law (6) Apologetic considerations (7) Philosophical speculations (8) Rhetorical practice (forensic, didactic, and epideictic).

The needs in these various areas produced various responses, which can be categorized as such: (1) Business letters (2) Official communiqués (3) Letters for public consumption (4) Letter essays (5) Letters of introduction and commendation (6) Poetic letters (7) Epistles of consolation (8) Encyclical documents (9) Rhetorical paradigms (10) Legal pleas.

Letters can also be classified according to the form of preservation and the writing materials employed. There were various materials used for writing during the Greco-Roman period.

The historian Will Durant in his work The Life of Greece sheds some light on what the Greeks employed for writing materials, he writes, “The materials used to receive writing were various: at first, if we may believe Pliny, leaves or the barks of trees; for inscriptions, stone, bronze, or lead; for ordinary writing, clay tablets as in Mesopotamia; then wooden tablets covered with wax, which were popular, in retrospect, with schoolboys; for more important purposes papyrus, which the Phoenicians brought from Egypt, and (in the Hellenistic and Roman periods) parchment, made from the skins or membranes of goats or sheep. A metal stylus was used on wax tablets; on papyrus or parchment a reed dipped in ink. Wax writing was erased with the flat butt of the stylus, ink with a sponge.”7

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7 Will Durant, The Life of Greece, chapter 9, page 206
In his work, Caesar and Christ, Durant comments on what the Roman’s used for writing materials, “The Romans wrote in ink with a slit metal reed (calamus, stilus), at first upon leaves (folia), whence our words folio and leaf (two pages); then upon strips of inners bark (liber; often upon white (album) tablets of waxed wood; later upon leather, linen paper, and parchment.”

The English word “epistle” is from the Greek verb epistello, which refers to the “act of sending or writing a military or an administrative order.” In classical Greek, epistello meant, “to send, announce, order through the passing on of a message or commission either in writing or by verbal communication.”

In the Septuagint, it meant only “to write,” rather than “to send a message orally.” In the New Testament, the verb meant “to send a communication, to inform, to instruct by letter.”

Epistello is used in an authoritative and official nature in the Greek New Testament and occurs 3 times (Acts 15:20; 21:25; Heb. 13:22). The noun epistle occurs 24 times and means “a letter,” or “epistle.” It originally meant in classical Greek a message of any kind, either written or verbal. Where the verb epistello meant the act of writing a message, the noun epistle meant “that which is transmitted or written,” the message or letter itself. The noun epistle in classical Greek referred to a wide range of written communication.

Gunter Finkenrath of Burscheid-Hilgen University commenting on the classical usage of the noun epistle writes, “With the spread of the Hellenic culture a whole range of letters was developed, from private letters of an intimate nature, open letters (e.g. the didactic letters of the Epicurean philosophers) to artistic epistles, which were aesthetic treatises in letter form. Traveling philosophers and their pupils were accustomed to carry letters of recommendation.”

By the Septuagint and the New Testament periods, epistle had lost its oral meaning and meant only the written message, hence, a letter, or epistle. Epistle was not only used in an informal sense in the New Testament as in secular writings, but more importantly it was employed in an authoritative and official sense.

The apostolic epistles in the New Testament were authoritative in nature. They were authoritative because they originated from the throne room of God. The apostolic epistles are unique from secular epistles in that sense alone. The Christian epistle claimed divine authorship. They claimed to be the very words of God. The Christian epistle is unique simply by the fact that they claim divine authorship. Pasa graphe theopneustos, “All Scripture, God-breathed!”

So we can see that Colossians is written according to the pattern of letter writing found in the ancient world during the first century.

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8 Will Durant, Caesar and Christ, Chapter 4, page 73
9 Colin Brown’s Dictionary of New Testament Theology, volume 1, page 246
The general form of a first century letter contained the following elements: (1) The author identifies himself (2) The author identifies the recipient (3) The greeting (4) Main body of the epistle (5) Closing greeting (usually a simple word wishing the recipient good health) (6) Final signature of endorsement by the writer of the letter.

The final signature of endorsement authenticated the letter’s contents and served as protection against fraudulent correspondence. The final signature was also important because frequently an amanuensis was employed to write the letter.

The great German scholar Adolf Deissman in his book Bible Studies gives several examples of first and second century letter writing from everyday life in the Roman world. He gives a translation of a letter of recommendation written in A.D. 25, “Theon to his esteemed Tyrannos, many greetings. Herakleides, the bearer of this letter, is my brother. I therefore entreat you with all my power to treat him a protege. I have also written to your brother Hermias, asking him to communicate with you about him. You will confer upon me a very great favor if Herakleides gains your notice. Before all else you have my good wishes for unbroken health and prosperity. Good-bye.”

Deissman also translates a letter from a “Chaireas” to “Tyrannos” written in the same year, “Chaireas to his dearest Tyrannos, many greetings. Write out immediately the list of arrears both of corn and money for the twelfth year of Tiberius Caesar Augustus, as Severus has given me instructions for demanding their payment. I have already written to you to be firm and demand payment until I come in peace. Do not therefore neglect this, but prepare the statements of corn and money from the...year to the eleventh for the presentation of the demands. Good-bye.”

Today, we begin our letters by addressing the recipient first and identifying ourselves at the end of the contents of the letter which is the exact opposite to what the ancient letter writer would do.

Paul’s letters in the New Testament generally followed the same pattern of letter writing found in the first and second centuries. His introduction found in Colossians follows exactly the formula of this period.

In Colossians, Paul follows the correct chronological order of a first century letter’s introduction: (1) The author identifies himself first (2) Then he identifies the recipient of the letter (3) Then he gives a greeting. It follows the usual Pauline letter structure (1) Opening (1:1-2) (2) Thanksgiving (1:3-12) (3) Body of letter (1:13-4:6) (4) Closing (4:7-18).

There was a constant exchange of letters in the early first century churches. This was by apostolic command. A good example of this procedure is found in the letter to the Colossians.
The letter to the Colossians was meant not only to be read by the believers in Colossae but also in Laodicea and in turn the letter to the Laodiceans was meant not only for the believers in Laodicea but was also to be read by the Colossians (Col. 4:16).

Literary Style

Two of the most striking features of Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is the hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15-20 and household duties in Colossians 3:18-4:1. The former is lyrical in style and is divided into two stanzas. It forms one of the two highest praises of Jesus Christ in the New Testament canon with the other being of course Philippians 2:6-11. The latter emphasizes the death and exaltation of Christ whereas the Colossians 1:15-20 affirms the fact that He is the creator of the universe as well as the church. Colossians 3:18-4:1 parallels Ephesians 5:22-6:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7.

Text

Textually Colossians is found in the Alexandrian, Western and Byzantine traditions. It is very well represented in papyrus, uncial and minuscule manuscripts which contain the Pauline epistles. Interestingly many of the twenty-seven textual issues in the epistle are the direct result of taking expressions in Ephesians and introducing them into Colossians. Others are the result of common errors such as slips between similar words. Therefore, the text of this epistle has been well preserved.

So there is no reason real reason to doubt whether the church has today the Colossian letter substantially as Paul wrote it. There are some places in this epistle where it is impossible to be sure of the right reading but this does not affect the sense as a whole.

Authorship

The letter to the Colossians explicitly states that the apostle Paul is the writer in that he is named the author in the opening greeting (1:1) and within the body of the letter (1:23) and at its conclusion (4:18).

Some scholars have argued that Colossians is “deutero-Pauline” meaning that they view certain allegedly non-Pauline features of vocabulary, style and theology in this epistle that it was not written by Paul himself but rather by one of his disciples such as Timothy while he was still alive (Dunn 38-39, 105, 117, 169, 171, 192 and esp. 269-270). They even claim that it could have been written by a
member of a so-called Pauline “school” who was well versed in Paul’s theology. They believe that this individual was dealing with certain theological or pastoral issues with the theology he learned from the apostle. There are even some scholars who regard Colossians as pseudepigraphic (see M. Kiley, Colossians as Pseudepigraphy [Sheffield: JSOT, 1986]).

This idea that Colossians is “deuteron-Pauline” has been refuted sufficiently by other scholars (see Barth-Blanke 114-26; Moo 28-41; O’Brien xli-xlix). By far, the most powerful argument in favor of the authenticity of Colossians and that it is Pauline is its close connection to Paul’s epistle to Philemon whose authenticity has never really been questioned or open to serious challenge. The reason is that both epistles share many common features. The first of these is that the author of both Philemon and Colossians is in prison (Col. 4:3, 10, 18; Phlm. 9-10, 13). Secondly Philemon and Colossians both mention the same companions such as Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas (Col. 4:10-14; Phlm. 23-24). Also, in the opening greetings to both epistles, the name of Timothy is associated with Paul and he is described as ὁ ἀδελφὸς (Col. 1:1; Phlm. 1:1). Then, in Philemon 2, Archippus is named as an addressee and in Colossians 4:17, the author directs the Colossian church to charge Archippus to fulfill his ministry. Lastly, Philemon 12 mentions the return of Onesimus to Philemon while Colossians 4:9 refers to his going to Colossae with Tychicus. Therefore, if Paul authored Philemon and there is no convincing argument raised against its authenticity, it would appear very likely that the apostle Paul also wrote Colossians considering that both epistles share very similar circumstances.

In response to those who claim that the language of Colossians does not resemble other known Pauline letters, it should be noted that Paul could have very well been influenced by the terms and concepts of those teaching false doctrine in Colossae which influenced the terms he used in writing this epistle. Paul was quite capable of taking the terms of those he opposed and inserting them into his own arguments so as to turn them to his service. We see this phenomenon in both the Corinthian letters and Galatians. In Colossians we see Paul’s creativity and flexibility in using the language of the false teachers in Colossae and not evidence against his authorship.

The idea of pseudonymity can’t be taken seriously since the early church was very much concerned about receiving authentic Pauline epistles and would totally reject the practice of pseudonymity. The early church were very concerned with problems of literary fraud and Paul was too (2 Thessalonians 2:2; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18). One must remember that Paul never visited Colossae. What would be the purpose of creating a Pauline letter to this city?

The overall structure of Colossians conforms to that of the typical Pauline letter: After the address there is a thanksgiving paragraph; in the body of the letter,
affirmations and exhortations are closely related; and the letter is concluded with various personal data, greetings, and a benediction.\textsuperscript{10}

Dr. Dan Wallace writes “Most NT scholars accept the genuineness of Colossians, though it has been assailed on critical grounds from some circles. Beginning with T. Mayerhoff (1838) and F. C. Baur (1845) and the Tübingen school, Colossians has found itself outside the pale of undisputed Pauline books. 1. External Evidence Ignatius has several reminiscences from Colossians, though no explicit quotations. Polycarp and Barnabas also seem to allude to it. Justin Martyr’s allusions are stronger still, and Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen explicitly call it Paul’s letter. Both Marcion’s canon and the Muratorian canon list it, and it is found in \[\text{[}46, the earliest MS containing any of the corpus Paulinum. Normally dated at c. 200 CE, this papyrus has been recently reassessed: Young Kyu Kim gives it a date of sometime before the reign of Domitian (70s CE).\textsuperscript{11} Although the external evidence for the authenticity of Colossians is not as good as for 1 Corinthians or Galatians, it is nevertheless quite strong. ‘In fact, the external testimony for it is so ancient and consistent as to obviate any doubts regarding its authenticity.’\textsuperscript{12} 2. Internal Evidence a. Arguments Against Pauline Authorship There are two primary arguments against Pauline authorship, linguistic/literary and theological. As C. F. D. Moule stated the issue, ‘A decision turns largely on whether or not one can imagine the type of error implied by Colossians having appeared already in St. Paul’s lifetime, and can conceive of St. Paul dealing with it in this way and in these words.’\textsuperscript{13} 1) Linguistic/Literary a) Linguistic. Colossians betrays a different style, and a different vocabulary stock than the undisputed Pauline books. The style ‘is more laboured, with many more subsidiary clauses than in Paul’s earlier letters . . .’\textsuperscript{14} Not only this, but the genitive, preposition, and participle uses are somewhat different from the undisputed books. ‘The general impression left by the Greek style of Colossians is that it is very ragged.’\textsuperscript{15} As for vocabulary, a number of terms are used which are not found in Paul’s undisputed letters. Further, the author leaves out major motifs which are found in the Hauptbriefe (e.g., justification by faith). b) Literary. Mayerhoff argued that Colossians is dependent on Ephesians. Most today would argue the reverse however. But if Mayerhoff is right, then the arguments used against Ephesians’ authenticity on the basis of its dependence on Colossians could now be used against Colossians’ genuineness. 2) Theological The basic doctrinal problem is the apparent presence of gnosticism in the Colossian church. This doctrinal problem

\textsuperscript{11} See our discussion in the introduction to 2 Peter for discussion of this article.
\textsuperscript{12} C. Vaughan, \textit{Colossians} (EBC), 164.
\textsuperscript{13} C. F. D. Moule, \textit{Colossians and Philemon}, 13.
\textsuperscript{14} Guthrie, 574-75.
\textsuperscript{15} G. H. P. Thompson, \textit{Colossians} (Cambridge Bible Commentary), 106.
was the main argument in Baur’s rejection of Colossians. The discussions in the letter on wisdom, philosophy, fullness, perfection, and the insistence on the incarnation of the theanthropic person all suggest that the author was fighting full-blown gnosticism. b. Arguments for Pauline Authorship 1) Counter-Arguments a) Linguistic/Literary. (1) Stylistically, this epistle is indeed somewhat different from Paul’s undisputed books. But as we suggested for Ephesians, (a) a different amanuensis would account for many of the differences; and (b) if Paul wrote Ephesians first (as we suggested earlier)—at least in draft form—with its contemplative and reflective mood, employing the same kind of “more laboured” style for Colossians is what we would expect. That is to say, even though Colossians is addressed to a specific situation, the amanuensis borrowed from a draft he had been working on for some time (Ephesians), retooling the language to fit the occasion. The net result is that even though Colossians is addressed to a crisis in the church, its language looks contemplative, labored, reflective. Rather than arguing against authenticity, this actually argues for authenticity—for both Ephesians and Colossians. (2) Regarding vocabulary, not only would a different amanuensis account for many of the differences, but also the new situation certainly would. The heresy needed to be addressed—and in terms which drove home their point. Besides this, as Thompson has rightly pointed out, ...the occurrence of new words and phrases can be a very insecure guide in deciding whether a work is written by a particular author. For example, it is difficult to judge from the amount of Paul’s writing that has survived how rich and wide his vocabulary might be. The range of a writer’s vocabulary can also be extended by his own widening experience, and new words may be brought into use in new situations. (3) Concerning the hypothesis of literary dependence on Ephesians—a view which most would not adopt today—either Colossians is dependent on Ephesians or Ephesians is dependent on Colossians. Regardless of which came first, as we pointed out in our introduction to Ephesians, such literary dependence does not at all argue against authenticity (especially since it is so free most of the time, without much exact agreement). b) Theological. Most scholars today would regard the theological argument (originally articulated by Baur) as bearing the real force in the argument against authenticity. In our discussion of the heresy at Colossae we will see that the most that can be said about the heresy is that it is incipient gnosticism. That is to say, what Paul is opposing is not the full-blown gnosticism of the second century. As Guthrie rightly points out, Too much early

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16 Thompson, Colossians, 105.
18 For detailed argumentation, see our introduction to Ephesians. What may be of interest to note is that in our reconstruction Ephesians actually did come first (at least in draft form), and to this extent Synge’s criticism that Colossians is but a pale reflection of Ephesians has some warrant. But if Colossians can be established on other grounds, this equally argues that Ephesians is authentic, too.
criticism proceeded on the unreal assumption that similar language implied identical meaning. Consequently if similar terms were found in New Testament writings and Gnostic heresies, the New Testament content was assumed to be identical with the Gnostic and those parts containing it removed to the second century. But the most important question, whether the respective authors intended them to be used in a similar sense, was bypassed . . .

2) Positive Arguments for Authenticity

a) The Relation of Colossians to Ephesians. First, if Ephesians is genuine, then Colossians must also be genuine, in spite of the protests of Synge and Mayerhoff. Scholars who reject Ephesians almost always do so because they accept Colossians. And the vast bulk of scholars, if they are to reject one, reject Ephesians. Yet, if Ephesians is genuine (admittedly our arguments are more labored for its authenticity), then Colossians must be too. Second, even on the assumption that Ephesians is not genuine, this is a strong argument for authenticity for Colossians. For if Ephesians were written by c. 90 CE (as the critical assessment suggests), and if it used Colossians by far more than any other Pauline letter, Colossians must have existed some time before this date. Yet, if so, if Colossians were not genuine, then we would have the completely unparalleled situation of a pseudepigraphist using another pseudepigraphist’s work—which he himself believed was genuine—in order to pass off his work as genuine. In that case, Colossians must have been regarded as genuine well before 90 CE.

b) The Relation of Colossians to Philemon. ‘The strongest arguments in support of its authenticity are the indisputable nature of the external evidence and the inseparable connection of the epistle with Philemon.’ Guthrie summarizes the relationship nicely: 1. Both contain Timothy’s name with Paul’s in the opening greeting (Col 1:1; Phm 1). 2. Greetings are sent in both letters from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, who are all clearly with Paul at the time (Col 4:10-14; Phm 23-24). 3. In Phm 2 Archippus is called a ‘fellow-soldier,’ and in Col 4:17 he is directed to fulfill his ministry. 4. Onesimus, the slave concerning whom the letter to Philemon is written, is mentioned in Col 4:9 as being sent with Tychicus and is described as ‘one of you.’ In the light of these data it is impossible to imagine that

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19 Guthrie, 575, n. 4.

20 Though I have not seen this argument in print, I find it quite compelling. The author of Ephesians becomes the first one to use Colossians and must therefore be added to the external testimony. Not only this, but all the external testimony on behalf of Ephesians can now, indirectly, be used on behalf of Colossians. And to suppose that the author of Ephesians did not think that Colossians was authentic is to ruin the entire raison d’être for his letter—viz., to pass it off as authentic. Further, to argue that the church later canonized Colossians because of its similarity to Ephesians finds no parallel in the early church: this would be similar to saying that Jude was written by Peter since (as it has been assumed) Jude is used by 2 Peter—yet the authorship of Jude has never been questioned on that score.

21 Though I have not seen this argument in print, I find it quite compelling. The author of Ephesians becomes the first one to use Colossians and must therefore be added to the external testimony. Not only this, but all the external testimony on behalf of Ephesians can now, indirectly, be used on behalf of Colossians. And to suppose that the author of Ephesians did not think that Colossians was authentic is to ruin the entire raison d’être for his letter—viz., to pass it off as authentic. Further, to argue that the church later canonized Colossians because of its similarity to Ephesians finds no parallel in the early church; this would be similar to saying that Jude was written by Peter since (as it has been assumed) Jude is used by 2 Peter—yet the authorship of Jude has never been questioned on that score.
the two epistles were sent at different times, and since the authenticity of Philemon is generally unquestioned it carries with it the high probability that Colossians is a genuine work of Paul. In sum, there is no good reason to doubt the authenticity of Colossians. Precisely because of this, most NT scholars accept it as genuine."\(^{23}\)

Geisler writes “The Pauline authorship of Colossians is supported by abundant evidence both in and out of the book. Colossians has three personal references to Paul in the first person (1:1; 1:23; 4:18) and numerous references to Paul’s associates, such as Tychicus (4:7), Onesimus (4:9), Aristarchus (4:10), Mark (4:10), Justus (4:11), Epaphras (4:12), Luke (4:14), Demas (4:14), and Archippus (4:17). The style and content of Colossians is similar to Ephesians, written about the same time and probably alluded to as ‘the letter from Laodicea’ (4:16). While 34 Greek words are unique to Colossians, they are characteristic of the theme of the book and fit the thoughts of Paul. Words in this category include ‘visible’ (1:16), ‘supremacy’ (1:18), ‘fill up’ (1:24), ‘philosophy’ (2:8), and ‘Deity’ (2:9). The conclusion of Ephesians confirms that Tychicus was the carrier of both it and Colossians (Eph. 6:21; cf. Col. 4:7). This helps confirm Paul as the author of the Colossian epistle. The external evidence for Paul’s authorship is strong, despite the claim of some that the heresy combated in the book is second-century Gnosticism. But there is good reason to believe that the heresy addressed in Colossians (at least in its incipient form) had appeared already in Paul’s lifetime. And in view of Paul’s other encounters with heresies, in books which are unquestionably his, it seems clear that he authored Colossians (cf. 1 Cor. 15; Gal. 1–2; 2 Thes. 2). Colossians includes some stylistic differences such as unusual genitival combinations: ‘the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:27), ‘body of … flesh’ (2:11, nasb), ‘growth … from God’ (2:19, nasb), ‘reward of … inheritance’ (3:24, nasb). However, as Donald Guthrie correctly observed, ‘stylistic differences are generally attributable to changing circumstances or subject matter’ (New Testament Introduction. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p. 553). One of the strongest lines of evidence that Colossians is a first-century work of the Apostle Paul is its close link to the Book of Philemon, the authenticity of which is virtually impeccable. (1) Both books include Timothy’s name with Paul’s in the opening greeting (Col. 1:1; Phile. 1). (2) Greetings are sent in both books from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (Col. 4:10–14; Phile. 23–24). (3) Archippus’ ministry is referred to in both books (Col. 4:17; Phile. 2). (4) Onesimus the slave is mentioned in both books (Col. 4:9; Phile. 10).\(^{24}\)

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\(^{22}\) Guthrie, 576-77.

\(^{23}\) Wallace, Daniel, Colossians: Introduction, Argument, Outline; pages 1-3; Biblical Studies Press, 2000; www.bible.org

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The church has generally accepted its authenticity—the church fathers regarded it as genuine. It is included on Marcion’s list of accepted letters, and also the Muratorian canon (O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, xlii). However, since the 19th century, its authenticity has been questioned. One main source of contention is the apparent difference in theology between Colossians and Paul’s other letters. Dunn claims that Colossians has moved theologically “further along the trajectory” (Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35). The letter’s theological adherence to Paul’s views on church authority, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are questioned (Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 32). 1. The letter appears to suggest a more developed sense of church structure in lieu of the anticipated return of Christ. 2. The letter seems to have a more elevated view of Christ’s role in creation (Col 1:16) and contains the one of the clearest statements of Jesus’ divinity in Paul’s letters (Col 1:15). 3. The author uses “church” (ἐκκλησία, ekklēsia) in a more universal sense (Col 1:18, 24), in addition to meaning a local congregation (e.g., Col 4:15, 16). 4. There appears to be a different conception of eschatology in the letter. Moo writes, “Colossians replaces the temporal scheme of ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ with the spatial scheme of ‘below’ and ‘above’ (Col 3:1–4) and teaches a ‘realized’ eschatology that ignores the Pauline temporal tension” (Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 34). Dunn concludes from Colossian’s style that the “letter comes from a hand other than Paul’s.” It has “features characteristic of flow of thought and rhetorical technique that are consistently and markedly different from those of the undisputed Paulines” (Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35). Dunn believes that Colossians was probably written during Paul’s lifetime and under his supervision by a close associate like Timothy (Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37; see Col 1:1). Lohse, among others, contends that “Paul cannot be considered the direct or indirect author of Colossians (Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 181). He bases his argument on theological differences. However, O’Brien notes, “Many expressions used in Colossians show decidedly Pauline peculiarities of style,” (O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, xliii). He argues that differences in theological emphasis do not necessarily disprove Pauline authorship. For example, regarding the perceived differences in eschatology, O’Brien remarks, “The differences of emphasis can be satisfactorily explained by the particular circumstances of the letter. There is no need to resort to a non-Pauline or post-Pauline authorship” (O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, xlvii). Similarly, regarding Christology, Moo notes that it is likely that Paul developed a richer understanding of Christ in light of the Colossian controversy—“Paul himself [was] an acknowledged theological genius” (Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33). The closely related nature of Ephesians and Colossians further diminishes the perceived theological differences between
Colossians and the rest of Paul’s letters” (Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 36). Paul may have developed a more robust theology as the situation at Colossae necessitated it. Moo concludes that “Paul must be seen as the real author” (Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 40).²⁵

Guthrie writes “Because they were written at the same time, possibly on the same day, Ephesians and Colossians present many parallels in thought as well as in wording. Tables of these parallelisms have been constructed, usually, however, in order to prove that one or the other epistle is not written by Paul but by an imitator. These similarities are most natural. Yet the differences are just as arresting. In Ephesians the subject is the *Una Sancta*; in Colossians, Christ over all. In the former there are no polemics, in the latter polemics throughout. Each epistle has its own plan and its own details. The Christology of both is thought to be an advance over the Christology of the other epistles of Paul. This puts the matter in a wrong light. The advance is said to consist in viewing Christ in relation to the whole universe and no longer in his relation only to his followers or to men. This view, however, disregards the respective readers. The Colossian errorists made it necessary that, for their thorough refutation, Paul present the Christological facts which he did set forth, facts which it was not imperative to emphasize in other epistles. Paul’s great arsenal held still other artillery. If he had had still other opponents he would have drawn on still other bolts and missiles to demolish their errors. We do the same today. After using certain truths in one battle we use still others in another somewhat different battle. Are our opponents free to use one and then another kind of attack while we are always and everywhere confined to only one kind of defense? Who will forbid the sword of Christology (or of any doctrine), after cutting down one error with a moderate blow, to cut down a greater enemy with a wider sweep and a longer reach?”²⁶

Richard Melick Jr. writes “While the questions of authorship are quite complex, some general observations about method may be helpful.”²⁷ Many of the recent theories of critical scholarship arise from a procedure of methodological doubt. That is, skepticism becomes the tool of learning. The result is that, rather than approaching the text with sympathy for its statements and the history of its study, some approach the text to see why it cannot be what others decide it is. Doubt has a place in the reasoning process, but it should not overrule good arguments to the contrary. Often good explanations are rejected simply because they are traditional. Along with this is a second methodological principle, that of determining proper

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²⁷ This is more in keeping with the nature of this commentary series which attempts to focus on theological thought more than matters of introduction.
standards for comparison. Since the objective data are limited, scholars can easily drift into subjective standards of comparison that are psychological and sociological, as well as theological. For example, determining what Paul should have said or would have said in a given situation is almost impossible once one departs from what Paul did say. A third concern is about a kind of focused-theology approach. Many assume that Paul’s theology was only one-tracked. This means, first, that he could not speak to any subject other than the one addressed by him in his undisputed writings. Second, if he did speak to another issue, he had to speak from the perspective of his one foundational principle. While there can be no doubt about the general contours of Pauline thought, Paul could have written on subjects that required basing an argument on another theological foundation. As these assumptions work into practice, some specific areas may be addressed. First is the assumption that a developed theology determines the date or author. This assumption moves in two contrary directions. Sometimes a writing is given a late date because it shows mature thought on the part of the writer. At the same time, some assume the writing is from another writer because of the belief that a writer cannot mature in his presentations. The second assumption relates to the questions of vocabulary. The specific words chosen to address an issue arise from the issue itself. When the situation to be addressed changes, the vocabulary with which it is addressed also changes. For example, some assume that Paul could not have written Colossians because it does not contain his distinctive vocabulary (i.e., 2:6–3:4). Yet when discussing the problem in those texts, some of the same people suggest that Paul employed the terminology of the opponents. Naturally their terminology would not be his, and both arguments should not be used together in the authorship question. Finally, some have pointed to theological and ideological differences in a literalistic and pedantic fashion. They say that if the same terms and constructions are not used the author is not the same. Yet they may be quick to point out that Paul used different metaphors to make a point. Thus the arguments may become circular. Care should be taken here.²⁸ Interesting and challenging questions are to be answered regarding Pauline authorship. Most of the objective concerns, however, have been sufficiently answered, as Lohse and others affirm. The questions of theology are the primary obstacles. That broadens the discussion to its most subjective level. Too many factors affect the particular formulations of theology. No compelling reason has been given for rejecting the traditional authorship. Paul addressed a unique situation. Perhaps that solves more problems than it raises.”²⁹

²⁸ This discussion does not suggest that the methods identified have been useless to scholarship. Much has been learned which would not have been learned had not someone questioned. This discussion was simply to warn of inconsistent applications of principles brought on by a tendency to disprove.

Recipients

Colossians 1:2 identifies the recipients of this letter as being the church at Colossae which was an insignificant city in the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. and was located in the Lycus River Valley of west-central Asia Minor. However, during the third and fourth centuries before Christ, the city was very important because of its thriving textile industry. It held great prominence during this time because of its location because it was at the crossroads of two great highways. One of these ran east to west and connected the cities of Ephesus and Sardis to the interior east. The other ran north and south. However, Colossae began to decline when the latter was moved west to pass through Laodicea. Thus during the mid-first century A.D. Colossae was not as important as Laodicea which was twelve miles to the west or Hierapolis which was fifteen miles northwest.

The city of Colossae belonged to the Roman province of Asia and belonged to the region of Phrygia. The population of Colossae was ethnically very diverse because of its location on an important highway when travel was increasing in the Empire and different ethnic groups were mixing with each other. It appears that most of these people were indeed Gentile. However, there was in all likelihood a substantial Jewish population. This is indicated by the fact that Josephus mentions two thousand Jewish families being settled in the area in 213 B.C. by Antiochus III the Great. Also, Cicero mentions the Romans in the first century A.D. seizing a significant amount of money from the Jews in the area to support the Jerusalem temple.

Douglas Moo writes “The diversity of population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highway meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together. This diversity helps explain the apparently syncretistic religious movement that was affecting the Colossian Christians and that gave rise to the letter. At the same time…this diversity makes it notoriously difficult to pin down the exact contours of this movement.”

The city of Colossae was more than likely evangelized during Paul’s stay in Ephesus since Acts 19:10 states that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” It appears that Epaphras served as the apostle’s personal representative for the evangelization of the Lycus Valley region which included Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13). Paul had in fact never met the church in Colossae (Col. 1:4 8; 2:1) but he was confident he would do so according to Philemon 22. He in fact might have passed through Colossae during his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23; 19:1).

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Richard Melick Jr. writes “The origins of the church at Colossae are obscure. Clearly, Paul did not found it since he said as much in 2:1; however, Paul addressed the church as though it were his responsibility. He considered it in some sense a Pauline community, taking liberty to address problems within it as though he had the authority to do so. Some suggest that Paul’s authority came because he was the ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ and had a proprietary interest in all Gentile congregations. They support this conclusion from the Letter to the Romans, the other church to whom Paul wrote but whom he had never met. In writing to the Romans, Paul spoke to vital issues of misunderstanding in the fellowship. This suggests that it, too, was Pauline. In Romans, however, Paul introduced himself to gain support for a mission to Spain (Rom 15:24). His advice regarding the problems comes from a “softer voice” than Colossians. The church at Colossae had no resources to offer Paul, as the Roman church did, and Paul’s writing to them appears to reveal a special interest in their well-being, though, of course, he shared a similar concern for all the churches. The Colossian church was Pauline in a way that the Roman church was not. The most common suggestion regarding the founding of the church is that Epaphras founded it. Probably that is correct. Paul identified his fellow-prisoner Epaphras as a Colossian (4:12), a servant of Christ (4:12), and an envoy from the other churches in the valley (4:13). Further, Paul stated that the Colossians heard the word from Epaphras (1:7). The church most likely began during Paul’s third missionary journey, while he taught in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus. Luke recorded that all of Asia heard the word during that time (Acts 19:9–10). Epaphras met Paul in Ephesus, became a student and able minister, and took the word to his own people. This reckoning dates the founding of the church at about A.D. 53–55, some seven to ten years before Paul wrote the epistle.”

Colossae was located in the southwest corner of Asia Minor in what was then the Roman province of Asia. Hierapolis and Laodicea were situated only a few miles away. All three were in the Lycus River Valley. A main road from Ephesus to the east ran through the region. See Asia Minor, Cities of. Colossae was prominent during the Greek period. By Paul’s day it had lost much of its importance, perhaps due to the growth of the neighboring cities. Extremely detrimental to all of the cities of the region were the earthquakes that occasionally did severe damage. Shortly after Paul wrote Colossians, the entire Lycus Valley was devastated by an earthquake (about A.D. 61) which probably ended occupation of the city. The region included a mixture of people native to the area, Greeks, Romans, and transplanted Jews. The church probably reflected the same diversity. As far as we know, Paul never visited Colossae. His influence was felt, however,

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during his ministry in Ephesus. (Acts 19:10 records that all Asia heard the gospel.) The letters to Philemon and to the Colossians indicate that many of Paul’s fellow workers (if not Paul himself) had worked among the churches of the Lycus Valley. As a result, the relationship between the apostle to the Gentiles and the Colossian church was close enough that when trouble arose some of the church turned to Paul for instruction.  

The first-century city of Colossae was an insignificant town—nearby were the important cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Colossae sat on the banks of the river Lycus, about 100 miles inland from the major coastal city of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). An earthquake struck the region in the early AD 60s. In earlier centuries, Colossae held a place of importance in the region because of its location at the crossroads of two major highways and its manufacture of woolen textiles. Paul never visited Colossae; his primary knowledge of the Colossian church came through Epaphras, a trusted “fellow servant” (συνδούλου, syndoulou) (Col 1:4; 1:7). The church was likely Gentile, although cities in that region featured “the presence of a substantial Jewish minority” (Dunn, Colossians and Philemon, 20). The rest of the New Testament sheds little light on the city itself—Colossae is not mentioned in Acts or any other book. However, the mention of Onesimus in Col 4:9 connects the city to Philemon. Little archaeological information is available about the city—it has not yet been excavated.

Colossae was “a city of Phrygia, on the Lycus, which is a tributary of the Maeander. It was about 12 miles above Laodicea, and near the great road from Ephesus to the Euphrates, and was consequently of some mercantile importance. It does not appear that Paul had visited this city when he wrote his letter to the church there (Col. 1:2). He expresses in his letter to Philemon (ver. 1:22) his hope to visit it on being delivered from his imprisonment. From Col. 1:7; 4:12 it has been concluded that Epaphras was the founder of the Colossian church. This town afterwards fell into decay, and the modern town of Chonas or Chonum occupies a site near its ruins.”

Robert Wild writes that Colossae was “a city in Asia Minor located in the upper Lycus River valley about 110 miles east of Ephesus, ten miles east of Laodicea, and twelve miles southeast of Hierapolis. In the fifth century B.C. and later, Colossae was an important center. Herodotus called it ‘a large city of Phrygia’ and Xenophon described it as ‘a populous city, large and well off.’ This prominence derived especially from its wool-working and cloth-dying industries; the dark red wool cloth known as colossinum was widely known. However, by the late first

century B.C. Colossae had been outstripped by both Laodicea and Hierapolis, and Strabo lists it among a group of smaller towns. A severe earthquake in A.D. 60 or 61 may have further accelerated Colossae’s decline. A significant number of Jews probably resided at Colossae; a statement made by Cicero (*Pro Flacco* 68) permits the estimate that over ten thousand Jewish males lived in the Laodicea-Hierapolis-Colossae area. A Christian community, perhaps founded by Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8), existed here in the mid-first century A.D. and was the recipient of a Pauline letter. Colossae passed into oblivion in later Roman times—only a few coins survive from this period—and its site, rediscovered in 1835 and still unexcavated, became a quarry in the Byzantine era.”

E. M. B. Green and C. J. Hemer commenting on Colossae, write “A city in the Roman province of Asia, in the W of what is now Asiatic Turkey. It was situated about 15 km up the Lycus valley from *Laodicea*, on the main road to the E. It was originally the point at which the great routes from Sardis and Ephesus joined, and at a defensible place with an abundant water-supply. It was an important city in the Lydian and Persian periods, but later it declined when the road through Sardis to Pergamum was resited farther W at the prosperous new foundation of Laodicea. The site is now uninhabited; it lies near Honaz, 16 km E of the town of Denizli. The gospel probably reached the district while Paul was living at Ephesus (Acts 19:10), perhaps through Epaphras, who was a Colossian (Col. 1:7; 4:12–13). Paul had apparently not visited Colossae when he wrote his letter (Col. 2:1), though his desire to do so (Phm. 22) may have been met at a later date. Philemon (Phm. 1) and his slave Onesimus (Col. 4:9; Phm. 10) were members of the early Colossian church. The mixture of Jewish, Greek and Phrygian elements in the population of the city was probably found also in the church: it would have been fertile ground for the type of speculative heresy which Paul’s letter was designed to counter. The neighbourhood was devastated by an earthquake, dated by Tacitus (*Ann. 14. 27*) to AD 60. There is no hint of this in the Epistle, which we must suppose was written before news of the disaster had reached Rome.”

The Dictionary of New Testament Background has the following article on Colossae, they write “Colossae was a small town in the first century a.d. located on the southern bank of the Lycus River at the foot of Mt. Cadmus (elevation, 8,435 feet) 11 miles east of Laodicea and about 15 miles south southeast of Hierapolis (Pamukkale). It was located near a major highway running through the territory of Phrygia in the Roman province of Asia (see Asia Minor). The closest town is Honaz Dagi, which is on the slopes of Mt. Cadmus in western central Turkey.

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According to Herodotus (Hist. 7.30), the city was the largest in the Lycus Valley in the five centuries before the Christian era. Xenophon (Anab. 1.2.6) described it as a large and prosperous city in about 400 b.c., but by the first century b.c. it had declined considerably in size and importance and was overshadowed by its closest neighbor, Laodicea. Numerous coins have been found in the area that point to the worship of the Ephesian Artemis, the Laodicean Zeus, Men, Selene, Demeter, Hygieia, Helios, Athena, Tyche, Boule and the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis (see Religion, Greco-Roman). The makeup of the population is not certain, but Cicero indicated that in the three cities of Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colossae there were some ten thousand Jewish males (Cicero Flac. 68). By the middle of the first century a.d., the Jews of this area were so plentiful that the Roman governor, in order to finance many projects in the region, would not allow them to send money outside of the province to pay their Jerusalem temple tax. The Jewish influence in this region can also be seen in the references in the letter to the Colossians to circumcision (Col 2:11), keeping the sabbath (Col 2:16) and the differences between Jews and Gentiles (Col 1:27; 3:11). By the first century a.d. Colossae was overshadowed by Laodicea and was described as a smaller city by Strabo (Geog. 12.8.13). The days of its former wealth were apparently over. After a major earthquake in the Lycus Valley that destroyed Colossae and Laodicea (c. a.d. 60–64; Tacitus Ann. 14.27), Colossae was never fully rebuilt, and by the eighth century it was abandoned. The site has not yet been excavated.\[^{37}\]

The Lexham Bible Dictionary commenting on the city writes “A city of Phrygia on the Lycus River. The letter to the Colossians was addressed to the church located there. Colossae was a city in the province of Phrygia located in the Lycus Valley within Anatolia, or Asia Minor, about 120 miles east of the major port city of Ephesus (Arnold, ZIBBC, 73). Today this is part of southwestern Turkey. In the first century AD, Colossae was a small agrarian town. However, by the 5th century BC, Colossae was a thriving economy, known especially for its unique textiles and wool (Moo, Colossians, 26). The first known reference to Colossae can be found in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, who mentions that Xerxes stopped briefly at the great city of Colossae during the Persian wars (Herodotus, The Histories: Xerxes, 7.30). Yet, the eventual demise of Colossae was linked to the construction of a trade route in the third century that went west of Colossae to Laodicea (Wilson, Biblical Turkey, 194). Eventually Laodicea became a prominent city, and Colossae turned into a rural community. Thus, in the first century Colossae was a rather insignificant city in the Roman world (Arnold, The Colossian Syncretism, 4). Colossae remains an unexcavated “tell” or mound, although a few stone steps from a small theatre are visible on the eastern side

(Wilson, Biblical Turkey, 195). Paul wrote a letter to the small community of Colossae, although it’s unlikely that he personally visited the town (Col 2:1). An errant “philosophy” (Col 2:18) had arisen in the midst of the church—one that likely denied the supremacy of Christ in all matters of life (Arnold, The Colossian Syncretism, 246–309; Dunne, “The Regal Status of Christ”). Dunn suggests that the tension arose from conflict with the Jewish synagogue (Dunn, Colossians, 23–35). Colossae was a small town overshadowed by two nearby cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul mentions Laodicea and Hierapolis at the end of his letter to the Colossians (Col 4:13), which suggests a connection between the Christian communities in these cities. Colossae was located 11 miles southeast from Laodicea, which explains why Paul could end his letter to the Colossians by asking them to greet brothers and sisters from Laodicea (Col 2:15). Paul also asks them to exchange the letter he had written to them for the letter he wrote to the Laodiceans (Col 2:16).  

The location of the biblical Colossae has been known since the first half of the last century, and the tell of the old city is still clearly visible. In the eighth century, the inhabitants began to leave that site for the safer town of Chonai (modern Honaz), five kilometres to the south. Though on the surface fragments of building material can be seen, to this day there has been little excavation of the tell. As recently as 1975, the Near East Archaeological Society sought permission to dig there, but till recently the Turkish government refused (Yamauchi). In the meantime, valuable archaeological material is being destroyed by human beings and by nature, as can be seen from the fragments ploughed up in the fields. These underline the need for excavations at Colossae, presenting a challenge to future archaeologists.  

Richard Melick Jr. writes “No one knows when Colossae was founded. As early as the time of Xerxes of Persia (485–465 B.C.), it was a thriving community. Herodotus, a Greek historian, said it was a ‘great city of Phrygia’ in 480 B.C.” No doubt its early greatness came in part from its location. Colossae sat on the main East-West road from Ephesus to the East, at the entrance to a pass in the Cadmus range of mountains. In this location, westbound travelers came to it first when they entered the Lycus valley. Travelers, such as Paul and his company, traversed this same road from Antioch (Syria) to Tarsus, through the Cilician Gates on to Derbe,
Lystra, Iconium, and Colossae. They could continue westward to Laodicea and 100 miles to Ephesus and possibly 1000–1200 land miles to Rome. The location of Colossae provided the resources to make the city great. The Lycus River ran through the valley. The river was a branch of the Maeander River and became known as the Little Maeander. The area suffered frequent earthquakes, one of which did severe damage to Laodicea and Hierapolis, neighboring cities, in the year A.D. 60. No doubt Colossae suffered as well. The beautiful valley had lush pastures for grazing sheep. The abundance of wool supported a flourishing garment industry. One of the branches of the Lycus River left chalk deposits that were useful for dyeing cloth. The valley prospered from both ranching and industry. By the time of the apostle Paul, Colossae’s importance had waned. Strabo, about twenty years before Paul, called the city a ‘small town.’ The two neighboring cities eclipsed Colossae. Laodicea, mentioned in Col 4:15–16, was most prominent. The Romans made Asia a province in 190 B.C. and selected Laodicea as a conventus, the capital of a district of twenty-five towns. The Romans also changed the road system, and Laodicea became an important junction of the East-West highway and four other roads. This meant it was ideally suited for commerce, banking, and general prosperity (Rev 3:14–22). Hierapolis almost equally eclipsed Colossae. Located about six miles from Laodicea, it formed the third member of the triangle. Paul mentioned that a joint venture of churches in these three cities supported Epaphras in his ministry to Paul; that was entirely feasible, given the geographical and cultural intercourse among them (Col 4:13). Hierapolis was noted for its mineral baths. One of the hot wells, the Plutonium, issued a deadly vapor. Superstitions about it abounded, and many temples of various sorts surrounded this city. By the time of Paul, therefore, for commercial interests one went to Laodicea; for luxury and pleasure, to Hierapolis. The cities had a mixed population. The natives were Phrygian. Because of the military and commercial heritage of the valley, however, Greeks may have settled in the area during the Greek period of dominance. To this were added Jews of the Diaspora, Romans involved in politics, and various ethnic groups drawn by commercial interests. The exact population mixture of Colossae during this time is unknown. From the epistle, both Jews and Gentiles lived there and became part of the church.”

The ancient city of Colossae was situated 100 miles east of Ephesus in Phrygia on the southern bank of the river Lycus (in modern Turkey), and its fertile valley

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41 Excellent graphs and maps of these relationships are presented in W. Hendriksen, Colossians and Philemon, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 6–9.
42 Lightfoot, 3, 38. In note 1, p. 38, he listed the known earthquakes in the area.
43 Hendriksen, 10. Pliny noted that there was a river in the city which turned brick into stone (Lightfoot, 15).
44 Cited in Lightfoot, 16.
46 Ibid., 12–13. Even the name Hierapolis possibly means “Holy City.”
47 See the evidence later in the “The Problem at Colossae.”

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produced large crops of figs and olives. Colossae lay on the main road from Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates. In the fifth and fourth centuries b.c. it was described as populous, large and wealthy, its commercial significance being due to its wool industry. Later the city declined in importance so that in Roman times it had become a “small town” (Strabo Geog. 12.8.13, though the text is debatable) and had been surpassed by Laodicea and Hierapolis which were also in the Lycus valley. By the time Paul wrote to the Christians living at Colossae the commercial and social importance of the town was already on the wane, though coins and inscriptions attest to the civic life of the town in the second and third centuries a.d.

1.2. Its People. Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae belonged to the proconsular province of Asia. Colossae’s population consisted mainly of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers, but in the early part of the second century b.c. two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia were settled in Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III (Josephus Ant. 12.3.4 §§147–53). According to grave inscriptions in the area Jews had become part of the Asian culture by the first century b.c. So the Colossae of Paul’s day seems to have been a cosmopolitan place in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled. 2. The Church at Colossae. The believers at Colossae, who are addressed as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ (Col 1:2), were not converted through the ministry of Paul himself. This Christian community had come into existence during a period of vigorous missionary and evangelistic activity (see Mission) associated with Paul’s Ephesian ministry (c. a.d. 52–55) recorded in Acts 19. But the apostle himself during his missionary work in Asia Minor had not reached Colossae in the upper valley of the Lycus (cf. Col 2:1). His daily evangelistic “dialogues” held in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus were so effective that Luke can claim “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). While the work was directed by Paul, he was assisted by several coworkers through whom a number of churches were planted in the province of Asia. Among these were the congregations of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which, we infer, were the fruit of Epaphras’s evangelistic efforts (Col 1:7; 4:12, 13). Epaphras, a native of Colossae (Col 4:12), who may have become a Christian during a visit to Ephesus, was “a faithful minister of Christ” and as Paul’s representative (Col 1:7) he had taught the Colossians the truth of the gospel. The many allusions to the non-Christian past of the readers suggest that most of them were Gentile converts. They had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, being hostile to God in mind and godless in their actions (Col 1:21; cf 1:12, 27). They had been spiritually dead because of their sins and “the uncircumcision of … [their] flesh”—a statement which indicates they were both heathen and godless (Col 2:13). But God had
effected a mighty change in their lives: he had reconciled them to himself in an earth-shattering event, namely, Christ’s physical death on the cross (Col 1:22). He had delivered them from a tyranny of darkness and transferred them into a kingdom in which his beloved Son ruled (Col 1:13). They now possessed redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:14; 2:13; 3:13). Because the congregation had received Christ Jesus the Lord as their tradition (parelabete, Col 2:6) when they accepted the gospel at the hands of Epaphras, they are admonished to conduct their lives as those who have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection. Since Christ Jesus was a more-than-adequate safeguard against empty human traditions, they are urged to see to it that their way of life and thought conform continually to Christ’s teaching (Col 2:6–8). The picture is therefore drawn of a Christian congregation obedient to the apostolic gospel and for which the apostle can give heartfelt thanks to God (Col 1:4–6). He knows of their love “in the Spirit” (Col 1:8) and was delighted to learn of their orderly Christian lives and the stability of their faith in Christ (Col 2:5).  

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Place of Origin

The burden of proof rests with an Ephesus and Caesarea origin since church tradition holds to Paul writing Philemon and Colossians while under house arrest in Rome. A critical factor in a Roman origin of this epistle is that Luke is with Paul during his imprisonment (see Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24). This is supported by Acts since it makes clear Paul’s Ephesian ministry does not occur in a “we” section of Acts. The traditional view, that Paul was in Rome when he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, is still by far the best view.

Paul had two Roman imprisonments: (1) A.D. 60-62: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon (2) A.D. 68: 2 Timothy, Hebrews. The apostle Paul wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon during his first Roman imprisonment while he was awaiting his appeal before Caesar and he was actually permitted to have his own rented quarters in Rome with a Roman soldier guarding him (See Acts 28).

The city of Rome is favored by many expositors as the place of origin for Paul’s epistle to Philemon and Colossians. However, there has been debate among scholars as to where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote these two epistles. Three solutions have been typically advanced: (1) Rome (2) Ephesus (3) Caesarea. The traditional answer and one that this author holds to is that Paul wrote the letter from Rome during his imprisonment there (cf. Acts 28:30).

Philemon 1, 9, 10, and 23 record Paul as a prisoner. If one compares this epistle to Colossians 4:7-17 and in particular the names, it shows that Philemon was sent from the same place as Colossians. Tychicus was entrusted with delivering the Philemon epistle and Onesimus was his companion on the journey to Colossae. This was the same Onesimus mentioned in Philemon 12.

There is literary evidence that Philemon was written from Rome and if so Colossians was as well since both epistles are closely connected as we noted. In some ancient Greek manuscripts there are several forms of a postscript to Philemon which contain the words “written from Rome.” Though this postscript is not a part of the original text, this does not mean that this information is incorrect. If Philemon is Pauline, and most scholars believe so and the evidence points to a Pauline authorship, then Colossians also must have been written at the same place and time because nearly the same coworkers are with Paul when he wrote Colossians and Philemon. Also, in support of Rome as a place of origin is that Rome was a favorite place of refuge for runaway slaves like Onesimus. They could get lost in the throngs of people that inhabited the capital of the Roman Empire. They had a good chance in this city to find work and a benefactor. They even could find a job as an “emperor slave,” which was prestigious. Also, they could find refuge in the slums of the city.
Dr. Dan Wallace commenting on the place of origin of Colossians writes “The traditional view that this letter was written while Paul was in a Roman prison has been assailed from two corners: some claim Ephesus is a better starting point, others suggest Caesarea. Before deciding on this issue, it must first be recognized that, on the assumption of authenticity, where Paul was when he wrote Ephesians is where he was when he wrote Colossians and Philemon. This can be seen by several pieces of evidence: (1) the commendation of Tychicus, as the bearer of the letter, found in exactly the same form in both Eph 6:21-22 and Col 4:7-8, surely indicates that he was sent with both epistles at the same time; (2) the strong verbal overlap between Colossians and Ephesians must, if authentic, indicate that the two were written at the same time; (3) Colossians is inseparable from Philemon—that is, they must both have been sent at the same time. Hence, all three letters were written and sent at the same time. Consequently, if there is anything in either Colossians or Philemon which helps to narrow down where Paul was imprisoned at the time of writing, such would equally apply to Ephesians. 1. Caesarea A Caesarean imprisonment is improbable for two reasons: (1) Onesimus, the runaway slave, would hardly have gone to Caesarea. Not only would he not have escaped notice as easily, but he would most likely not have had very good access to Paul. In Rome, however, Paul was under house arrest and had relatively free mobility.50 (2) In Phm 22 Paul requests Philemon to prepare lodging for him, in anticipation of his release. This would hardly be the case in Caesarea, however, for Paul appealed to Caesar, prolonging his imprisonment by more than two more years. 2. Ephesus On behalf of Ephesus are two arguments (both negative in character): (1) the great distance between Rome and Colossae (1200 miles each way) suggests that Onesimus would hardly have made the journey; it would be easier for him to travel to a nearby city; (2) in Phm 22 Paul asks Philemon to prepare him lodging, suggesting that he intended on returning to Asia Minor after his release. But he had written the Romans a few years earlier of his plan on going westward, even to Spain (cf. Rom 1:10ff; 15:19ff.). It should be noted that both of these arguments only help an Ephesian imprisonment, not a Caesarean (because Caesarea is far from Asia Minor and because Asia Minor would conceivably be en route to Rome and Spain from Caesarea). In response: (1) There is just as much likelihood that Onesimus would want to travel to Rome, because it was far away as Ephesus because it was close by—especially since he robbed Philemon, giving himself travel funds.51 Not only this, but he would surely have been detected in Ephesus by other Christians, perhaps even by some of Paul’s traveling companions. But whether he would have been able to visit Paul before being detected is doubtful.

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50 Cf. Guthrie, 577.
51 Cf. Guthrie, 577.
(2) Paul could easily have changed his mind about going to Spain, or he might have wished to visit his friends in Asia Minor before journeying westward—especially to gain emotional strength after having suffered imprisonment for several years. Not only this, but an Ephesian imprisonment is improbable: (1) We have no positive evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. (2) If the “in Ephesus” in Eph 1:1 is original, then this view is almost impossible; even if not original, there is the strong possibility that Ephesians was sent to the churches in Asia Minor (with Ephesus being the port of entry, giving cause for the traditional view). And if so, then Paul most likely was elsewhere when all three letters were sent. 3. Rome Both because of Paul’s known imprisonment in Rome, and because of the tradition of a Roman imprisonment for these letters, the burden of proof must rest with a non-Roman origin. As we have seen, the arguments against the Roman theory are not convincing. On behalf of Rome, however, is an important internal clue: Luke is with Paul during his imprisonment (Col 4:14; Phm 24). Luke’s presence with Paul is supported by Acts while Paul was in Rome, ‘whereas the Ephesian ministry of Paul does not occur in a ‘we’ section and it may reasonably be doubted whether Luke was with Paul during this period.’ In conclusion, the traditional view that Paul was in Rome when he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, is still the most reasonable view.”

Richard Melick Jr. writes “The position that Paul was in Rome at the time of writing has various lines of support in addition to the traditions. Luke’s description of the situation in Rome certainly allows for the type of ministry Paul described in his imprisonment letters. Paul was under house arrest with a great deal of freedom (Acts 28:30). Further, many of the names of persons associated with Paul in the Prison Epistles are also found in Philemon. Particularly, the runaway slave Onesimus is mentioned. He may have gone to the imperial capital to avoid recapture. When the data are compared to the Book of Acts, no other imprisonment fits the required details as well. Many question this conclusion. The most significant concern is the distance between Colossae and Rome, which is variously estimated as 1000–1200 land miles. Would a runaway slave have had the resources to make such a long trip and the courage to be on the open road subject to recognition? Others also traveled to and from Colossae to Paul. Does the distance prohibit that? A second concern is Paul’s apparent change of plans if Rome is the place of origin. Earlier he wrote of his plans to go to Spain when he could (Rom 15:23–24). In Philemon, however, he indicated he would go to Asia and urged Philemon to prepare a room for him (Phlm 22). Would this be likely from Rome?

52 Marcion’s Prologue places Paul in Ephesus for the writing of Colossians, but it places him in Rome for the writing of Philemon. Yet, since both of these must surely have been written at the same time, Marcion can only be half right. The rest of the external testimony puts Paul in Rome for the writing of these epistles.

53 Guthrie, 579.

Some, therefore, have suggested a Caesarean imprisonment. According to Acts, Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years, awaiting transport to Rome. Advocates suggest that Onesimus more likely would have fled there, and Paul more easily could have envisioned a trip to Colossae by land on his way to Rome. Even after his appeal to Caesar, that was a possibility. This suggestion also has its problems. Since Caesarea had a small population, Paul probably would not have needed the extensive missionary staff he had during his imprisonment. Further, Onesimus would have had no reason to flee to that particular city since several other larger ones on the way would have provided more anonymity. Most scholars reject this view. A third suggestion is that Paul wrote from prison in Ephesus. Although Acts does not record an Ephesian imprisonment, it does speak of serious difficulties there and an imprisonment is quite likely (2 Cor 11:23; 1 Cor 15:32). In 2 Cor 1:8 Paul also wrote about serious trouble in Asia. G. S. Duncan, the first to suggest this hypothesis, thought that the imprisonment came after the Demetrius riot (Acts 19:23–41). If this scenario is correct, several events seem to fit in place better. First, this allows for the fairly extensive travel reflected in the epistle. Second, Paul’s request that a room be prepared for him soon makes good sense because he was only one hundred miles away. Third, many suggest that the church at Colossae appears to have been young, and the Ephesian location supports that conclusion. It reduces the time between the founding of the church and Paul’s letter. Finally, some objective evidence supports this view. A few traditions of limited value suggest that Paul was there. In the Marcionite prologue to Colossians, for example, it states: “The apostle already a captive writes to them from Ephesus.”

Of these suggestions, more scholars accept Ephesus than Caesarea. The Ephesian hypothesis has much to offer and would satisfy most of the data. One major problem, however, is, Why would Paul write a letter to the Ephesians when he was in prison in Ephesus? Admittedly, the earliest manuscripts of Ephesians do not contain any destination, so it is impossible to tell who received the letter first. On the other hand, no manuscript exists with any other stated destination. Apparently at least one copy of the letter was sent to the church at Ephesus. The


57 Wright reflects others when he states: “Colossians has, however, increasingly given me the impression of a letter to a church which, very young in the faith, needs to be strengthened, informed about what has actually happened to its members in their becoming Christians, taught how to pursue Christian maturity, and warned against a threat most dangerous for those only recently converted from paganism” (35). The argument has plausibility, but the telling statement is “increasingly given me the impression.”

58 Quoted in Martin, 27. An impressive list of scholars accept that conclusion, including recent writers Martin, 30, and Wright, 39.

59 Many have suggested that Ephesians was a circular letter and that the one copy which survived was the one sent to Ephesus. It would seem strange that the church needed even a copy.
similarity of Colossians and Ephesians suggests that they were written by the same author at approximately the same time.

The Roman imprisonment seems to account for the data best. Both a stronger tradition and the parallels to Ephesians support it. In light of these factors and the fact that the Ephesian imprisonment is a hypothesis without solid factual data, it seems best to accept the Roman origin. If it were from Ephesus or Caesarea, however, nothing would be gained or lost from the message of the epistle. The historical context would be slightly altered.\(^{60}\)

**Date**

If Colossians is Pauline as this author’s has argued then it must be one of the four so-called prison epistles with the others being Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon. If it can be determined that Paul wrote Philemon from Rome in approximately 61 or 62 A.D. while awaiting his appeal before Caesar, then Colossians must have been written at the same time and sent out at the same time since both epistles share as we noted many similarities.

Dr. Dan Wallace writes “This letter was sent while Paul was in prison in Rome (59-61 CE). Since the apostle gives no indication that he will be released soon (contra Philippians), it is likely that this was written before the end of his imprisonment. Further, it is obvious that it was sent along with the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to Philemon. Once the occasion for the writing of Colossians/Philemon is established, it can be reasonably supposed that all three letters were written sometime during the middle of Paul’s imprisonment—hence, c. 60 CE. But more than that can be said here. Philemon 22 seems merely to be an expression of the hope of release from prison, without giving any indication as to when. If this is read as an expression of imminent release, then the relative dating of Ephesians-Colossians-Philemon in relation to Philippians may need some revision. But other considerations certainly suggest that Philippians is the last of the so-called prison epistles: (1) Phm 22 may be a somewhat exaggerated statement (intended to reflect Paul’s positive attitude more than the reality of imminence), for if Paul was in Rome, it would take him several weeks to travel to Asia Minor; (2) Epaphras is mentioned in Phm 23, as someone known to Philemon (cf. also Col 4:12), without any mention of his illness (cf. Phil 2:25ff.)—even though news of his illness was know to Christians outside of Rome (ibid.); (3) Only Timothy is with Paul when he wrote Philippians (Phil 2:19-21), while Luke, Demas, Aristarchus, Mark, and Epaphras are with him when he wrote Colossians-Ephesians-Philemon (cf. Col 4:10-14; Phm 23-24). Whatever else this indicates, it

is evident that Philippians cannot be dated at the same time as the other three epistles; (4) the final proof is that Paul sends Epaphroditus to the Philippians (Phil 2:25-30) with the epistle, while he is still with Paul when the apostle wrote the other three letters. All of this evidence points to Philippians being written not only at a different time than the other three prison epistles, but at a later time. Hence, a date of c. 60 CE is most appropriate for Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.”  

Contents

Colossians 1:1-2 contains the salutation of the letter which is followed by Paul expressing thanksgiving for the faith and love of the Colossian church. Then, in Colossians 1:9-14, the apostle prays for the love and spiritual growth of the church. This is followed by a hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15-20 which brings out the truth that Christ is the image of the invisible God and that He is active in the creation and sustaining of all things. It also declares that all of creation is for Him and that He is the head of the church. Colossians 1:15–20 is a magnificent passage of praise exalting Christ as the Lord in creation (Col 1:15–17) and author of reconciliation (Col 1:18–20). As to the structure of the hymn no scholarly consensus has been reached about the number and content of the stanzas. It is better to speak of certain parallels (cf. Col 1:15 and 18), with relative clauses being followed by causal clauses (Col 1:16, 19), the frequent use of “all,” and the formal chiasmus in verses 16c and 20 (note also Col 1:17, 18). Although the backgrounds in pre-Christian Gnosticism and rabbinic Judaism have been suggested as the source of the hymn’s ideas, a general Wisdom milieu in the OT and Hellenistic Judaism (E. Schweizer) is probably correct. But how the predicates and activities ascribed to Wisdom came to be applied to Jesus of Nazareth, recently crucified and risen from the dead, cannot be explained by the background itself. This hymnic paragraph is not a christological digression or excursus but is clearly central to the context in which it stands. Paul’s lengthy prayer (Col 1:9–14) leads up to the hymn, and themes from it are taken up and applied throughout the rest of the letter (cf. Col 1:19 with 2:9; Col 1:20 with 1:21–23 and 2:15). Although the passage praises Christ, surprisingly the names “Jesus,” “Christ” and “Lord” do not appear with it. The stanza simply begins, “He is …” However, it is clear that the words of praise can apply to no one else. The Pauline authorship of the “hymn” has been challenged on linguistic and structural grounds. The arguments for and against Paul’s authorship are not decisive either way, so we should accept the passage as authentic. Thus, there has been considerable debate whether the apostle here incorporated an existing “hymn” into his letter. This is


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possible, but if so he has woven the rest of the letter around it, and the focus on the supremacy of Christ is intended to strengthen the readers and correct the erroneous views of the false teachers. Whether pre-Pauline or not, the passage perfectly suited the apostle’s purposes in writing to the Colossians.\footnote{Hawthorne, G. F., Martin, R. P., & Reid, D. G. (Eds.). (1993). In Dictionary of Paul and his letters. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.}

Paul then in Colossians 1:21-23 goes on to affirming the fact that Christ reconciled all things to Himself by making peace with a holy God through His death on the cross.

Next, in Colossians 1:24-29, the apostle then mentions his past work for the church and the purpose of which was to produce spiritual growth among believers. Then, in Colossians 2:1-8, Paul expresses his present concern that the Colossians will not be deceived by worldly philosophy from Satan’s cosmic system.

In Colossians 2:9-15, he communicates to them the sufficiency of Christ by affirming His authority (2:9-10), His omnipotence (2:11-12) and that He is the victor in the angelic conflict with Satan and his kingdom (2:13-15). Then, in Colossians 2:16-20, he warns them again about submitting to legalistic false teaching which was undoubtedly originating from the Judaizers.

Paul in Colossians 3:1-4 reminds the Colossian church of their position in Christ in that they have died with Christ and have been raised and seated with Him at the right hand of the Father. Consequently he exhorts them to appropriate by faith their position in Christ in order to experience victory over the sin nature (Colossians 3:5-11). He brings out another consequence of their position in Christ, namely that they are the elect of God and holy people who are the object of God’s love and thus are to live accordingly exercising God’s love toward each other which will produce unity among them (Colossians 3:12-17).

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, the apostle Paul presents instructions for wives, husbands, children, slaves and their masters in the Colossian church. Husbands were to love their wives and not be bitter toward and wives were to obey their husbands in all things as unto the Lord. Children were to obey their parents. Fathers and by way of implication mothers were not to provoke their children so that they will not become disheartened. Slaves were to obey their masters in every situation as unto to the Lord whom they were in reality serving. Masters were to treat their slaves fairly and with justice because they will be held unaccountable by the Lord for any unfair treatment of their slaves. This section is rounded off with injunctions for the church to pray and to be wise in their behavior with the non-Christian (Colossians 4:2-6).

The apostle informs the Colossian church that Tychicus will bring them news of his circumstances in Rome during his first Roman imprisonment (Colossians 4:7).
This is followed in Colossians 4:8-15 by a number of greetings to the Colossians from a number of Paul’s companions.

Then we have an injunction to circulate this letter and to exchange it with the one to the Laodiceans as well as a command for Archippus (Colossians 4:16-17). We have then Paul asserting he wrote this letter with his own hand and requests prayer with regards to his imprisonment in Rome and then gives a final benediction (Colossians 4:18).

Colossians is often described as a polemical writing, since in 2:8–23 false teachings and practices are vigorously opposed. However, this letter does not exhibit the kind of argumentation that one finds in Galatians where Paul seems to be in constant dialogue with his opponents. Colossians is much more admonitory than argumentative, and it is most accurately characterized as a letter of exhortation and encouragement (Bujard 1973: 129, 229). The representation in 1:28 of what Paul does could also be a description of what the letter itself does; it preaches, it admonishes, and it instructs. In the process, various materials from the hymnic (1:15–20), liturgical (2:13–15), and ethical (3:18–4:1) traditions of the church are drawn in. It is striking, however, that no scriptural texts are quoted or discussed, and that even allusions to Scripture are infrequent.63

Occasion and Purpose

The contents of Colossians reveal that Paul’s purpose for writing to the Colossians was to protect them from doctrinal error or false doctrine and consequently to prevent ungodly conduct which is the result of doctrinal error or false doctrine. The apostle sent Tychicus along with Onesimus, Philemon’s runaway slave to deliver the letter to the Colossians (4:7-9) because he wanted Epaphras to stay with him (4:12-13; Phlm. 23).

Epaphras visited Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (Phlm. 23). He informed the apostle of the spiritual state of the Colossian church (Col. 1:3-8; 2:5) which was predominately Gentile (1:27; 2:13). He communicated to the apostle a two-fold danger facing this church. First Epaphras was concerned that the people of this church would return to their old pre-conversion pagan ways of thinking and acting (3:5-11). Secondly, he feared that they were being deceived by false teaching (1:23; 2:1-23). Therefore, Paul’s epistle to the Colossians was dispatched for the express purpose of dealing with these two issues confronting this church.

Although there is a build-up in Paul’s presentation in the first chapter, it is not until Colossians 2:4 (“I am saying this in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive language”) that the apostle expressly points to the dangers facing the

congregation. He is aware of the methods of the false teachers and issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard lest they be carried off as spoil (Col 2:8, sylagōgeō, “kidnap, carry off as booty,” is a rare and vivid word, showing just how seriously Paul regarded the evil designs of those seeking to influence the congregation); these spiritual charlatans were trying to ensnare them by their “philosophy and empty deceit” (Col 2:8). Although they set forth their teaching as “tradition,” Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin. It was a human fabrication (“according to human tradition”) that stood over against the tradition of Christ—the tradition which stems from the teaching of Christ, which also finds its embodiment in him (Col 2:6). In a magnificent passage of praise exalting Christ as the Lord in creation and reconciliation (Col 1:15–20), Paul asserts that Christ is the one through whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers (see Principalities and Powers) which figured so prominently in the Colossian heresy. All things have been made in him as the sphere, through him as the agent and for him as the ultimate goal of all creation (Col 1:16). Those who have been incorporated into Christ have come to fullness of life in the one who is master over every principality and power (Col 2:10). They need not seek perfection anywhere else but in him. It is in him, the one in whose death, burial and resurrection they have been united (Col 2:11–12), that the totality of wisdom and knowledge is concentrated and made available to all his people—not just an elite group. Christ Jesus is the sole mediator between God and humankind. The Colossians are not to be misled by the false teachers into thinking it was necessary to obey the angelic powers who were said to control the communication between God and humankind. That way was now controlled by Christ who by his death is revealed as conqueror of the principalities and powers (Col 2:13–15; see Triumph). The apostle’s criticisms of the advocates of the Colossian philosophy, with their false notions and aberrant behavior, are devastating (Col 2:16–23). Because of their legalism, the false teachers failed to recognize God’s good gifts and his purpose in giving them, namely, that all of them should be enjoyed and consumed through their proper use (Col 2:22). The things covered by the taboos were perishable objects of the material world, destined to pass away when used. The taboos themselves, which belonged to a transitory order (Col 2:17), were merely human inventions that laid no claim to absoluteness but stood over against the revelation of the will of God (cf. Col 2:22). To place oneself under rules and regulations like those of Colossians 2:21 is to go back into slavery again—under the personal forces overthrown by Christ (Col 2:20). By his death he had freed the Colossians from bondage to the principalities and powers. They must not turn their backs on that life-changing event. Although the prohibitions (cf. Col 2:21) carried a reputation for wisdom in the spheres of voluntary worship, humility and severe treatment of the body, these practices were in fact spiritually and morally bankrupt. Such
energetic endeavors could not hold the flesh in check. Instead, these self-made regulations actually pandered to the flesh (Col 2:23). In his reply to the false teaching Paul expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully than in his earlier letters (see Christology). Hints had previously appeared in Romans 8:19–22 and 1 Corinthians 1:24; 2:6–10; 8:6 but a more detailed exposition is given in Colossians 1:15–20 and 2:13–15. Against the false teachers who boasted in their exalted spiritual experiences, their fresh revelations and their participation in the divine fullness, the apostle’s criticisms are trenchant: they are arrogant and in danger of being separated from Christ (Col 2:18–19). In his handling of the Colossian false teaching Paul places his emphasis on realized eschatology (see especially Col 2:12; 3:1–4). Within the “already-not yet” tension the stress is upon the former, called forth by the circumstances of the letter. The Colossians have a hope laid up for them in heaven (Col 1:5; cf. 3:1–4), they have been fitted for a share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col 1:12), having already been delivered from a tyranny of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13). Not only did they die with Christ; they were also raised with him (Col 2:12; 3:1; cf. 3:3). Although the “not yet” of salvation does feature in the letter (esp. Col 3:4), the “already” needed to be asserted again and again over against those who were interested in “fullness” and the heavenly realm, but who had false notions about them, believing they could be reached by legalistic observances, a special knowledge, visionary experiences and the like (see Visions). Christ has done all that was necessary for the Colossians’ salvation. They had died with Christ, been raised with him and given new life with him (see Dying and Rising with Christ). Let them now zealously seek the things above (Col 3:1–2), that new order centered on the exalted Christ (see Exaltation), and let them as a consequence show true heavenly-mindedness (cf. Col 3:5, 8, 12 and 3:18–4:1).

Paul addresses the Colossian church with particular concern for false teachers that have sprung up among them (Col 2:8–23). Moo concludes “The purpose of the letter … is to provide the resources Colossian Christians need to fend off … false teaching” (Moo, Colossians and Philemon, 46). These false teachers threatened the church by spreading a human philosophy opposed to Jesus (Col 2:8, 22). This philosophy apparently: • placed an unhealthy and dangerous emphasis on rituals (Col 2:16) • pursued higher planes of ascetic spiritual experience and the worship of angels (Col 2:18) • lost connection with the Christ the head (Col 2:19) • improperly valued rules and regulations (Col 2:20–23) Paul reminds the Colossians that their life is completely identified with Christ’s death and life. The false teachers’ practices have only “an appearance of wisdom” but have “no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23 ESV). This false teaching

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undermined the sufficiency of Christ in redemption—the heresy was adding to or modifying the gospel. The precise origin and philosophy of these false teachers is debated. Since Paul does not give a thorough description of the heretical teaching, it can only be guessed from relevant historical possibilities. These possibilities are (Dunn, Colossians and Philemon, 26–29): 1. Hellenistic or pre-Gnostic syncretism from local religions and/or secular philosophy, 2. Jewish teachings, 3. A combination of the two. Dunn and Wright understand the heresy to have been distinctly Jewish—Judaism itself may have been the philosophy (Wright, 31). Judaism certainly did influence the false teaching in matters like circumcision (Col 2:11, 3:11) and the Sabbath (Col 2:16). However, Bruce argues there is also “a degree of asceticism not usually associated with Jewish tradition” (Bruce, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, 18). The heresy was likely a combination of distinct Jewish elements mixed with local folk religion or secular elements (Melick, Moo, O’Brien, Bruce). 65

Nowhere in the letter does the apostle give a formal exposition of the “heresy”; its chief features can be detected only by piecing together and interpreting his positive counterarguments. Several recent scholars have questioned whether these counterarguments point to the existence of a “Colossian heresy” at all. They prefer to speak in terms of tendencies rather than a clear-cut system with definite points and suggest that the young converts were under external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbors (Hooker). This view rightly stresses Paul’s positive statements about the life and stability of the congregation (Col 1:3–8; 2:5) and warns against the danger of arguing in a circle when reconstructing the situation behind Paul’s writings. However, in the light of Colossians 2:8–23 with its references to “fullness,” specific ascetic injunctions (Col 2:21), regulations about food and holy days (see Holy Days), unusual phrases which seem to be catchwords of Paul’s opponents and the strong emphasis on what Christ has already achieved by his death and resurrection, it seems appropriate to speak of a “heresy” which had just begun to make some inroads into the congregation. 4.2. Some Distinguishing Marks of the “Heresy.” The teaching was set forth as “philosophy” (Col 2:8), based on “tradition” (paradosis denotes its antiquity, dignity and revelational character), which was supposed to impart true knowledge (Col 2:18, 23). Paul seems to be quoting catchwords of the opponents in his attack on their teaching: “all the fullness” (Col 2:9); “delighting in humility and the worship of angels,” “things which he has seen upon entering” (perhaps “entering into visions”; Col 2:18); “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t even touch!” (Col 2:21); and “voluntary worship,” “humility” and “severe treatment of the body” (Col 2:23). Further, the keeping of these taboos in the “philosophy” was

related to obedient submission to “the elemental spirits of the world” (Col 2:20; see Elements/Elemental Spirits). 4.3. Interpreting These Distinguishing Marks. No complete agreement has been achieved among scholars as to the nature of the teaching. Basically the heresy seems to have been Jewish, because of the references to food regulations, the Sabbath and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar. Circumcision is mentioned (Col 2:11) but did not appear as one of the legal requirements. (Wright argues for an exclusively Jewish background to the heresy.) But what kind of Judaism? Apparently it was not the more straightforward kind against which the Galatian churches had to be warned, but was one in which asceticism and mysticism were featured and where angels and principalities played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the Law. They were regarded as controlling the communication between God and man, and so needed to be placated by keeping strict legal observances. A number of important suggestions has been made as to the nature of the Colossian “philosophy,” ranging from a pagan mystery cult (Dibelius) and a syncretism of gnosticized Judaism and pagan elements (Bornkamm)—the “worship of angels” (Col 2:18) was regarded as a pagan element in the false teaching, but should be understood as “the angelic worship [of God]”—to Essene Judaism of a gnostic kind (Lightfoot) and Judaizing syncretism (Lyonnet). Many recent scholars, however, consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras’s elementary gospel, is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true “fullness.” “Self-abasement” (Col 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences. The “mature” were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the “angelic worship of God” as part of their present experience (Col 2:18). 66

The purpose of the epistle to the Colossians is perfectly clear: Paul crushes the heretical teaching that had arisen in Colosse. As yet no actual inroads had been made into the congregation. The point that is unclear is whether the heretics, who were pretending Christians, were members of the congregation or not. It seems that they were not members—yet where and how had they learned about Christ? They were Judaizers, but of a type that was quite distinct from those who had come into the Galatian congregations from the outside (Palestine), and likewise distinct from those who had invaded Corinth in the same way. We may suppose that the Colossian heretics were native Jews, men who had adopted fanciful ideas that corrupted their Judaism and who, when Christianity entered the city through

Epaphras, took up also with this and amalgamated it with all their other notions. Although they were not members of the congregation, they presently sought to win the members for their peculiar teaching. Then, before any real damage was done, Epaphras hurried to Paul, and this epistle followed which crushed the error completely. We take it that Paul sent a similar letter to Laodicea where this same heresy was seeking entrance, and that thus Paul wants each congregation to read and to study both letters.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{The False Teaching: Essene Judaism and Incipient Form of Gnosticism}

Paul addresses the Colossian church with particular concern for false teachers that have sprung up among them (Colossians 2:8–23). The precise origin and philosophy of these false teachers is debated among scholars. Since Paul does not give a thorough description of the heretical teaching, it can only be guessed from relevant historical possibilities. These possibilities are (Dunn, Colossians and Philemon, 26–29): (1) Hellenistic or pre-Gnostic syncretism from local religions and/or secular philosophy, (2) Jewish teachings (3) A combination of the two.

This author also believes strongly that the nature of the false teaching in Colossae was Jewish. In fact, it appears that Paul was dealing with the Essene branch of Judaism with a tinge of an incipient form of Gnosticism that was found in Essene Judaism.

The Essenes lived on the shores of the Dead Sea and were very well-known in the first century for their ascetic practices, one of which was abstaining from marriage. Asceticism is the idea that abstinence from physical things like food or sex is essential for spiritual purity. This Essene Judaism which had confronted the Colossian church in Paul’s day also had a Gnostic tendency. In fact, it appears that it contained an incipient form of Gnosticism.

Anthony Saldarini writes “a sect of Judaism from the middle of the second century B.C. until the war with Rome in A.D. 66-70. They are described by the first-century A.D. authors Josephus and Philo and mentioned by some non-Jewish writers. They have been convincingly identified with the inhabitants of Qumran who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. The meaning of the Greek name ‘Essenes’ is unclear; it may come from the Aramaic for ‘pious’ or ‘healers.’ Archaeological research at Qumran, data from ancient sources, and cryptic allusions to the sect’s history in its writings suggest that the group, whose members were probably some of the Hasideans who supported the Maccabees, withdrew from Jerusalem and active participation in the Temple because Jonathan Maccabee assumed the high-priesthood in 152 B.C. though he was not from the correct, hereditary priestly

\textsuperscript{67} Lenski, R. C. H. (1937). \textit{The interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon} (p. 9). Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern.
family. The group was led by a prominent priest whose identity is hidden behind the designation ‘Teacher of Righteousness.’ The community built a complex of buildings on the cliffs around the Dead Sea at Qumran, between Jericho and En-gedi, and went through several stages of development there, including a refounding of the community after an earthquake in 31 B.C. The community was persecuted and attacked by Jonathan Maccabee, survived other pressures, but was finally destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 68. Some Essenes also lived in towns and cities, probably in small communities, and a few are mentioned by name in Josephus as playing a political role. The Qumran community was sharply divided into hereditary priests and nonpriests. They were ruled by an elaborate hierarchy of officers and councils and guided by a detailed set of rules based on biblical law. Numerous practices were peculiar to this sect. Property was held in common, celibacy was practiced, a high state of ritual purity was maintained, economic and social relations with nonmembers were greatly restricted, admission to full membership was preceded by three years probation, solemn ritual meals were held regularly, participation in the ritual of the Jerusalem Temple was forbidden for as long as the Temple was improperly run, and detailed rules of behavior supported a rigorous ethic that was sanctioned by judges and punishments, including excommunication. The Essenes who lived outside the Qumran community seem to have married, had private property, and engaged in some social relations with outsiders. Besides some OT books and other Jewish pseudepigraphical writings the Essenes had their own biblical commentaries, hymns, rules, and apocalyptic writings. Though Josephus compares them to the Greco-Roman Stoics, the Essenes were apocalyptic in their thought and orientation, maintaining ritual purity, ethical probity, and spiritual readiness for the intervention of God to destroy evil. No convincing evidence has been produced to demonstrate any dependence on Essene thought by John the Baptist, Jesus, or other early Christian leaders. The similarities that exist are more likely due to their common Jewish background than to any direct relationship.

John Collins writes “The attitude of the Essenes to animal sacrifice and temple worship has been a matter of much controversy. Philo says that they worshipped God ‘not by offering sacrifices but by resolving to sanctify their minds’ (Quod Omn 75). This would seem to imply a rejection of sacrifice in principle, but it may mean only that sacrifice was not central to their piety. The testimony of Josephus is confused by textual variation. The Gk mss say that they “send votive offerings to the temple, but perform their sacrifices employing a different ritual of purification. For this reason they are barred from those precincts of the temple that are

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OT Old Testament

Quod Omn Philo, Quod omnis probus liber sit


mss manuscripts
frequented by all the people and perform their sacrifices by themselves” (Ant 18.1.5 §19). The Epitome (an abbreviation of the Antiquities which is thought to date from the 10th century) and the Latin translation of Cassiodorus read a negative: “they do not perform their sacrifices.” (Cassiodorus, however, only says that they did not sacrifice in the temple; see Black 1961: 40.) From this evidence it would seem that the Essenes were excluded from the official temple cult. However, the evidence could be interpreted to mean that they still offered sacrifice, either in a special part of the temple area or elsewhere, on their own. The preoccupation of the Essenes with purity is evident in many of their practices, including celibacy and avoidance of oil (see above). Josephus mentions their ritual baths in cold water (JW 2.8.4 §129), notes that novices were allowed to share a purer kind of holy water after their year of postulancy (2.8.7 §138), and mentions that if a senior member of the community was touched by a junior, he had to take a bath ‘as after contact with an alien’ (2.8.10 §150). He also reports their custom of burying their excrement (so as not to offend the rays of the deity) and of avoiding bowel movements on the Sabbath (2.8.9 §148). Even those expelled from the community were apparently still bound by purity regulations (2.8.8 §143–44). Perhaps the most distinctive custom noted by Josephus is the custom of praying towards the sun before dawn “as if entreating him to rise” (JW 2.8.5 §128). They are said to pray ‘towards’ (eis) not ‘to’ (pros) the sun and so should probably not be regarded as sun worshippers. Nonetheless, the practice is surprising in a Jewish context and is reminiscent of the custom condemned in Ezek 8:16. The parallel passage in Hippolytus makes no reference to the sun, a fact which is probably due to editorial intervention. A more conventional aspect of the Essenes’ piety is their devotion to the law. They are said to hold Moses in reverence second only to God (JW 2.8.9 §145) and to display an extraordinary interest in the writings of the ancients (2.8.6 §136). Philo claims that the exposition of the law at the sabbath services was allegorical (Quod Omn 82), but his description of the Essene assembly does not differ greatly from his account of the assembly of the Therapeutae in the Vita Cont (75–78) or of the Jewish people in Hypothetica (7). Finally, the common meals of the community had religious significance. Josephus comments that, after their ritual bath, “pure now themselves, they repair to the refectory as to some sacred shrine” (JW 2.8.5 §129). The meal is ritualized by the prayers of a priest both before and after. Philo mentions the common meals as
factors which further the unity of the members (Quod Omn 86; Hypothetica 11.5); but in his description of the related group, the Therapeutae, he dwells at length on the meal, which he calls a “sacred symposium” (or banquet) (Vita Cont 71). . . . The 1st-century accounts of the Essenes are primarily concerned with the practices of the sect. Philo gives us scarcely any information about their beliefs but he does state that they believed that the godhead is the cause of all good things and nothing bad (Quod Omn 84). This belief may imply a dualistic view of the universe. The main account of the beliefs of the sect is found in Josephus (JW 2.8.11 §154–58), and there is some additional information in Ant 18 and in Hippolytus. Josephus clearly asserts that the Essenes believed in the immortality of the soul and regarded the body as a prison house (compare Ant 18.1.5 §18). He compares their idea of the abode of the virtuous souls to the Greek isles of the blest and the murky dungeon of the wicked to Hades. The parallel account in Hippolytus, however, goes beyond this and says that they also believed in the resurrection of the body. The sojourn of the soul in the “isles of the blest” is “until the judgment,” which would be followed by the ekpyrosis, or universal conflagration. Some have suspected that the reference to resurrection is intended to bring the Essenes into line with Christian teaching, but it is by no means clear that Hippolytus would have wanted to make a Jewish sect look like an anticipation of Christianity. The account in Ant 18.1.5 §18 emphasizes the determinism of the sect: they are wont ‘to leave everything in the hands of God.’ Josephus and Hippolytus say that some of the Essenes professed to foretell the future. Josephus elsewhere relates incidents involving three different Essene prophets (JW 1.3.5 §78–80; 2.7.3 §111–13; and Ant 15.10.5 §373–79). In each case the prophecy concerns the fortunes of a king: in the first case, Judas the Essene predicted the murder of Antigonus (about 104 B.C.E.); in the second, an Essene named Simon interpreted a dream of Archelaus (about 6 C.E.); and in the third, Menahem foretold the kingship of Herod and earned the despot’s respect for the Essenes. In Hippolytus the notice about prophecy follows immediately on the reference to the final judgment and may have apocalyptic overtones. Josephus also notes their interest in medicinal roots and the properties of stones (JW 2.8.6 §136). Hippolytus also ascribes to the Essenes a fanatic aversion to idols, an inclination to kill the uncircumcised, and an unwillingness to recognize any lord except God. Throughout this passage, however, he appears to have confused the Essenes with

Quod Omn Philo, Quod omnis probus liber sit
Vita Cont Philo, De vita contemplativa
1st first
Quod Omn Philo, Quod omnis probus liber sit
JW Josephus, The Jewish War (= Bellum Judaicum)
Ant Josephus, Jewish Antiquities (= Antiquitates Judaicae)
Ant Josephus, Jewish Antiquities (= Antiquitates Judaicae)
Ant Josephus, Jewish Antiquities (= Antiquitates Judaicae)
JW Josephus, The Jewish War (= Bellum Judaicum)
Ant Josephus, Jewish Antiquities (= Antiquitates Judaicae)
JW Josephus, The Jewish War (= Bellum Judaicum)

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the Zealots or Sicarii. Despite this militant portrayal Hippolytus says that they swore not to hate anyone—in sharp contrast to the oath in Josephus which promises always to hate the wicked. It is possible that Hippolytus has introduced some elements of Christian morality into the text in this instance.”

The New Bible Dictionary commenting on the Essenes, writes “Generally it is safe to accept as Essene characteristics those elements in which the DSS evidence reinforces and corrects the picture derived from the classical sources. They lived in various communities throughout Palestine, but had a large settlement at Qumran. An initiation regime was required of all potential members: a preparatory period of study and examination was followed by 2 years of training, during which they were accepted in stages to share in the common property and the pure foods and drink. At some point a solemn oath of loyalty was taken. A strict hierarchy, dominated by priests and elders, ordered their communities, led by individual fiscal and spiritual overseers, but judicial functions were carried out democratically by large bodies of full members. They held property in common but retained some personal discretion. Regularly (twice daily according to Jos.), they shared a common meal over which a priest had to pray. Their purification baths were unique in that access was restricted to members of the sect alone after a probationary year, and purification was required before common meals as well as for the usual cases of impurity. They differed from the temple authorities with regard to cultic purity, and therefore seem to have restricted or renounced participation in sacrifices. Because of their stringent purity, they avoided contact with oil, isolated excrement away from the community, and prohibited spitting into the middle of a group. Sabbath regulations among the Essenes were especially strict. Josephus’s report that they prayed to the sun is unlikely to mean that the Essenes worshipped the sun, but refers rather to the practice of daily communal prayer at sunrise (Jos.; DSS) and sunset (DSS). Also, Josephus’s statements that they believed in ‘fate’ and the immortality of the soul, express to a Gk. audience the determinism and (probably) life beyond death witnessed in the DSS. Essenes carefully guarded certain esoteric knowledge, including the names of angels. Wealth was despised as a corrupting influence. They devoted themselves to the study of sacred writings. Transgressions of Mosaic laws and community rules were strictly punished by fines and expulsion. It is not certain that the majority of Essenes were celibate or that they completely withdrew from all participation in the temple cult as is commonly believed. Even though they are not mentioned in the NT, study of the Essenes is important for understanding early Christianity because of numerous similarities between the two groups (e.g. organization and offices, common meals, common property, purification baths restricted to those

who have undergone instruction and repentance). Attempts to identify Essenes and early Christians have failed, however, and suggestions that the two groups inhabited a common quarter in Jerusalem remain highly speculative.70

The fact that Paul emphasizes the supremacy of Christ in relation to the false teachers indicates that the false teachers did not have a high Christology. They appear to have simply viewed Christ as a beginning. Paul’s emphasis upon the fact that Christ is God and the creator as well as the reconciler of all things to God indicates that the false teachers in Colossae did not adhere to the apostolic teaching of Christ. Also, the false teachers argued for strict adherence to rules and regulations which is in line with the Judaizers who insisted that the Christian must keep the Mosaic Law in order to grow to spiritual maturity.

The apostle speaks of “philosophy and empty deception” (Col. 2:8). The opponents appear to have been involved with asceticism which is in line with some aspects of Judaism such as the Essenes who were ascetics. The phrases “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (Col. 2:21) and “self-made religion” (Colossians 2:23) reflect the asceticism of the false teachers as does “self-abasement” and “severe treatment of the body” (2:23).

The references to circumcision (Col. 2:11; 3:11) and human tradition (Col. 2:8) strongly suggest that the false teachers were Jewish. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their adherence to their own rabbinical traditions rather than the Word of God (Mark 7). Furthermore the references to Sabbath observance (Col. 2:16), religious festivals and new-moon celebrations and food regulations (Col. 2:16, 21) clearly reflect there was a problem with the teaching of Judaism.

Also, Colossians 2:14 affirms Christ delivered the Colossians from the condemnation they incurred from breaking the Law. Although the Law itself is not explicitly mentioned by Paul in this verse, it is clearly implied. In this verse, the expression τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, “the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us,” echoes an expression in Ephesians 2:15, namely τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας, “by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.”

Ephesians 2:15 explicitly mentions the Law whereas Colossians 2:14 does not but does imply it since sinners are all legally indebted to the Law whether the Jews in regards to the Mosaic Law or the Gentiles with the Law in their conscience (Romans 2:14-15). The Law condemned both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1:18-3:23). Christ’s death on the cross paid the sinner’s sin debt which was incurred from breaking the Law.

The reference to worshipping angels might at first glance appear to refute the idea that the opponents were Jewish (2:18). However, they did have a significant

interest in them since Jewish writings reflect speculation about angels. The precise nature of this angelic worship is debated among scholars since some believe angels weren’t actually worshiped but were simply thought of as guiding spirits and intermediators by which men thought they could worship or contact God. Whatever the case may be, there seems to be little doubt that in some way, these false teachers in Colossae were advocating occult experiences with these angelic beings or guiding spirits or ascended masters as they are sometimes called in the New Age movement. The goal appears to be of having an experience of some kind of religious fullness and gain contact with God.

Beall writes “The Essene interest in books is abundantly evident at Qumran. In addition to many sectarian works, biblical, deuterocanonical and pseudepigraphical books are all well attested. As with the Essenes, there is much interest in angels in the Qumran writings (1 Enoch, Hodayot, War Scroll and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice).”

The fact Paul is writing to the Colossians to protect them from an incipient form of Gnosticism in the Essene branch of Judaism is indicated by several factors in the Colossian epistle. First of all, Paul employs the language of the false teachers. He uses the noun σοφία, “wisdom” which appears six times in the Colossian epistle (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23; 3:16; 4:5). Paul also uses the noun σύνεσις, “understanding, intelligence” which appears twice in Colossians (1:9; 2:2). The apostle also employs the noun γνώσις, “knowledge” which appears in Colossians 2:3. He also uses ἐπίγνωσις, “true knowledge” which appears in Colossians 2:2 and 3:10.

Paul countered this exclusivity by proclaiming the public and universal nature of the gospel which offers a salvation to all who would believe through faith in Christ in Colossians 1:20, 23, 28 and 3:11. He then went on to affirm that all believers are complete in Christ who was Himself not only the fullness of deity in bodily form, but the fullness of salvation through whom all believers are reconciled to God (Colossians 1:19-20; 2:9-10).

The apostle also uses πλήρωμα, “fullness” which occurs in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9. In both instances Paul uses the word in relation to the deity of Jesus Christ declaring that all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form in the person of Jesus Christ. He does this it appears to refute these false teachers.

J. B. Lightfoot writes “From the informing spirit of Gnosticism we turn to the speculative speculative tenets—the cosmogony and the theology of the tenets of the Gnostic. And here too the affinities to Gnosticism reveal themselves in the Colossian heresy. We cannot fail to observe that the Apostle has in view the doctrine of intermediate agencies, regarded as instruments in the creation and

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71 O’Brien, xxxiii, 143.
government of the world. Though this tenet is not distinctly mentioned, it is tacitly assumed in the teaching which St Paul opposes to it. Against the philosophy of successive evolutions from the Divine nature, angelic mediators forming the successive links in the chain which binds the finite to the Infinite, he sets the doctrine of the one Eternal Son, the Word of God begotten before the setting worlds. The angelology of the heretics had a twofold bearing; it was intimately connected at once with cosmogony and with religion. Correspondingly St Paul represents the mediatorial function of Christ as twofold: it is exercised in the natural creation, and it is exercised in the spiritual creation. In both these spheres His initiative is absolute, His control is universal, His action is complete. By His agency the world of matter was created and is sustained. He is at once the beginning and the end of the material universe; ‘All things have been created through Him and unto Him.’ Nor is His office in the spiritual as the re-world less complete. In the Church, as in the Universe, He is sole, absolute, supreme; the primary source from which all life and earth, proceeds and the ultimate arbiter in whom all feuds are reconciled. On the One hand, in relation to Deity, He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is not only the chief manifestation of the Divine nature: He exhausts the Godhead manifested. In Him resides the totality of the Divine powers and attributes. For this totality Gnostic teachers had a technical term, the *pleroma* or plenitude. From the *pleroma* they supposed that all those agencies issued, through which God has at any time exerted His power in creation, or manifested His will through revelation. These mediatorial beings would retain more or less of its influence, according as they claimed direct parentage from it or traced their descent through successive evolutions. But in all cases this *pleroma* was distributed, diluted, transformed and darkened by foreign admixture. They were only partial and blurred images, often deceptive caricatures, of their original, broken lights of the great central Light. It is not improbable that, like later speculators of the same school, they found a place somewhere or other in their genealogy of spiritual beings for the Christ. If so, St Paul's language becomes doubly significant. But this hypothesis is not needed to explain its reference. In contrast to their doctrine, he asserts and repeats the assertion, that the *pleroma* abides absolutely and wholly in Christ as the Word of God. The entire light is concentrated in Him. Hence it follows that, as regards created things, His supremacy must be absolute. In heaven as in earth, over things Lord. immaterial as over things material, He is king. Speculations on the nature of intermediate spiritual agencies—their names, their ranks, their offices—were rife in the schools of Judaeo-Gnostic thought. ‘Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers’—these formed part of the spiritual nomenclature which they had invented to describe different grades of angelic mediators. Without entering into these speculations, the Apostle asserts that Christ is Lord of all, the highest and the
lowest, whatever rank they may hold and by whatever name they are called \ for they are parts of creation and He is the source of creation. Through Him they became, and unto Him they tend.”

Gnosticism is an amalgam into which quite a number of different elements have been fused. A heretical system of thought, at once subtle, speculative and elaborate, it endeavored to introduce into Christianity a so-called higher knowledge, which was grounded partly on the philosophic creed in which Greeks and Romans had taken refuge consequent on the gradual decay and breaking-up of their own religions, partly, as will be shown, on the philosophies of Plato and of Philo, and still more on the philosophies and theosopies and religions of the East, especially those of Persia and of India.

Gnosticism is a system of false teachings that existed during the early centuries of Christianity. Its name came from the Greek word for knowledge, gnosis. The Gnostics believed that knowledge was the way to salvation. For this reason, several writers of the New Testament condemned Gnosticism as false and heretical.

Our knowledge of Gnosticism comes from several sources. First, there are the Gnostic texts, which are known as the New Testament Apocrypha. These texts are not recognized as Scripture because they contain teachings, which differ from those in the Bible. Then, there are the refutations of the Gnostics by the early church fathers. Some of the more important ones are Irenaeus, Against Heresies; Hippolytus, Refutations of All Heresies; Epiphanius, Panarion; and Tertullian, Against Marcion.

Irenaeus makes the following comment regarding the Gnostics, “Such then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions. Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that poorly.

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73 The Epistles of St. Paul, Epistle to the Colossians, Epistle to Philemon, J.B. Lightfoot; pages 101-103; Zondervan Publishing House; Grand Rapids Michigan, 1879.
executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king’s form was like, and persuade them that the miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives’ fables, and then endeavor, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.”

There were at least two types of Gnostic thought: (1) Iranian: This branch developed in Mesopotamia and reflects a horizontal dualism associated with Zoroastrian worship and is epitomized in its later Gnostic form of Manichaeism. In this pattern light and darkness, the two primal principles or deities, are locked in a decisive struggle. (2) Syrian: This type arose in the area of Syria, Palestine and Egypt and reflects a much more complex vertical dualism. In this system the ultimate principle is good and the task of the Gnostic thinkers is to explain how evil emerged from the singular principle of good. The method employed is the identification of some deficiency or error in the good.

The Gnostics accepted the Greek idea of a radical dualism between God (spirit) and the world (matter). According to their worldview, the created order was evil, inferior, and opposed to the good. God may have created the first order, but each successive order was the work of anti-gods, archons, or a demiurge (a subordinate deity).

The Gnostics believed that the earth is surrounded by a number of cosmic spheres (usually seven), which separate man from God. These spheres are ruled by archons (spiritual principalities and powers) that guard their spheres by barring the souls who are seeking to ascend from the realm of darkness and captivity, which is below to the realm of light, which is above.

Kenneth Wuest writes “Internal evidence in the letter indicates that the heresy with which Paul is dealing, contains two elements that are fused into one system. His mention of the observance of sabbaths and new moons, his distinction between meats and drinks, and his reference to circumcision, all point to an element of Judaism in this system. His reference to a self-imposed humility and service of angels, the hard treatment of the body, and a superior wisdom, indicates that he is dealing with a Gnostic element. The word ‘Gnostic’ comes from the Greek gnōsis (γνώσις) which means ‘knowledge.’ It is the name designating an intellectual

74 Against Heresies, 1.8.1
oligarchy, a few who set themselves above all others as possessing a superior knowledge. We will look at Gnosticism. This school of thought was concerned with two questions: first, How can the work of creation be explained? and, second, How are we to account for the existence of evil? These two questions posed the following problem, namely, How can one reconcile the creation of the world and the existence of evil with the conception of God as the absolute Being? In other words, How explain the fact of a holy God as Creator, and a universe in which there is sin? The Gnostic argued as follows: If God had created the universe out of nothing, and evolved it directly from Himself, then God being holy, could not have brought an evil universe into existence. Otherwise, one is driven to the inescapable conclusion that God created evil, which is impossible, since He is holy. But the fact of a holy God and an evil universe still remained, and the Gnostic must explain. He does so by putting forth the theory of some antagonistic principle, independent of God, by which His creative energy was thwarted and limited. This opposing principle of evil he thought of as the world of matter. Thus, evil is seen by him to be residing in the material universe. The Gnostic then asks the questions, How then is creation possible? How can the Infinite communicate with the finite, the good with the evil? How can God act on matter? God, he says, is perfect, absolute, incomprehensible. The Gnostic answers his own question by saying that the difficulty is solved by the theory that God must have limited Himself in some way in the act of creation. There must have been some evolution, some effluence from God. There was a germination of God. This first germination evolved a second, and so the process went on. The more numerous the emanations, the farther away from Deity they became, and as a result the divine element in them became more feeble, until it became so diffused that contact with matter was possible, and creation took place. Thus, the gap between a holy creator God and matter which, according to the Gnostic is evil, is bridged by these emanations from God that are so far removed from a Deity who is holy, that matter could be created which is inherently evil, and this act of creation could not be attributed to a holy God. In this way, the Gnostic brushes aside the intermediate agent in creation, the Lord Jesus (John 1:3), and the fact that God put a curse upon the perfect creation because of sin (Rom. 8:20). Paul says in the latter text that the creation was made subject to futility (vanity mataios (ματαιος)). That is, God rendered it relatively futile so far as glorifying Him was concerned. From these philosophical speculations, two opposing codes of ethics emerged, a rigid asceticism and an unrestrained license. The problem confronting the Gnostic was as follows: Since matter is evil, how can one avoid its baneful influence and thus keep his higher nature unsullied? The answer, according to one group, was a rigid asceticism. All contact with matter should be reduced to a minimum. Thus, the material part of man would be subdued and mortified. One should live on a spare diet and abstain
from marriage. The edible flesh of animals was forbidden. The anointing of the body with olive oil, so necessary in hot climates, was prohibited. But with others, such a negative course of procedure produced but slight and inadequate results. These argued that matter is everywhere. One cannot escape contact with it. Therefore, one should cultivate an entire indifference to the world of sense. One should not give matter any thought one way or the other, but just follow one’s own impulses. How like the behavioristic psychology of today. This group argued that the ascetic principle gives a certain importance to matter, and thus he fails to assert his own independence to it. The true rule of life is to treat matter as foreign or alien to one, and as something towards which one has no duties or obligations, and which one can use or leave unused as one likes. This philosophy led to unbridled license. Gnosticism as described above, had no connection with Christianity in itself. That which channeled it into the thinking of the professing Christian Church was a sect of Jews who were called Essenes. The Essene was a mystic, and a member of a brotherhood. The characteristic feature of Essenism was mystic speculation involving a rigid asceticism. However, the Essene also included in his system, a rigorous observance of the Mosaic ritual. In his strict abstinence from work on the Sabbath, he far surpassed other Jews. He would not light a fire or move a vessel. He would not perform the most ordinary functions of life. His whole day was given over to religious exercises and the exposition of the Scriptures. After God, the name of Moses was held in the highest reverence. The one who blasphemed the name of Moses, was punished by death. But the Essenes went beyond the Mosaic legislation. Marriage to them was an abomination. To secure the continuance of the order, they adopted children. Some accepted marriage as necessary for the preservation of the race, but nevertheless regarded it as an evil. The Essenes drank no wine, nor did they eat animal food. They lived on bread and vegetables. They refused to anoint their bodies with olive oil, which in hot countries is almost necessary to life. They condemned in any form the natural cravings, and sought to disengage themselves from all conditions of physical life. In addition to these practices, the Essenes were sun-worshippers. At day-break they would address certain prayers to the sun as if entreating it to rise. They would bury all polluting substances so as not to insult the rays of the god. The Essenes did not believe in the resurrection of the body, but confined themselves to a belief in the continuance of the soul-life after death. This is, of course, in line with their belief that matter is evil. They maintained that the soul was confined in the body as a prisoner in jail, and that only after death, would it be free by reason of its escape from the body. They rejected the blood sacrifices of Judaism, and instead sent bloodless offerings to the Temple as gifts. They placed angels in the category of beings that should be worshipped. Like the Gnostics who prided themselves upon the exclusive possession of religious secrets, the Essenes had their secret doctrines
which were the possession of an exclusive few, and these they refused to divulge except to initiates to their order. These false doctrines and practices had crept into the local church at Colossae. Paul’s letter to this church was designed to combat them. One of these errors was an intellectual oligarchy in religion, namely, the teaching that a select few had a monopoly in a superior wisdom. The apostle meets this by contending for the universality of the gospel message. But Paul, in maintaining this doctrine, has changed his mode of attack. He is not here contending against a national exclusiveness in religion, which was true of Pharasaic Judaism, but against the intellectual exclusiveness in religion of the Essenes which was even more fatal to the claims of the gospel because more specious and insidious. Paul warns every man and teaches every man in every wisdom, that he may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. The word “perfect” was the term applied by the Gnostics to members of the exclusive group which possessed the superior wisdom. The Gnostics made much of wisdom (σοφία), intelligence (συνέσις), and knowledge (ἐπιγνωσία). Paul takes up the language of the Gnostics and translates it to the higher spheres of Christian thought. Against the false wisdom of the Gnostics, the apostle sets the true wisdom of the gospel. The initiatory rites of these Gnostics in which certain were inducted into their order, were secret mysteries. Paul sets over against these the fact that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in that comprehensive mystery, the knowledge of God in Christ. Paul had also to combat the Gnostic teaching of successive emanations from deity, the angelic mediators who were responsible for the act of creation, and for the headship of the spiritual creation, which took the place of the Lord Jesus as Creator of the universe and Head of the Church. The apostle meets these false doctrines by showing that ‘all things were created by Him,’ and ‘He is Head of the body, the Church.’ As to the teaching of the Gnostic to the effect that the divine essence is distributed among the angelic emanations from deity, Paul declares that the plērōma, or plenitude of the divine essence is permanently at home in the Lord Jesus. For the totality of the divine essence, the Gnostics had this word plērōma (πληρωμα), ‘fulness’ or ‘plenitude.’ Paul says that Jesus Christ is not only the chief manifestation of the divine nature. He exhausts the God-head. In Him resides the totality of the divine powers and attributes. From the necessities imposed upon Paul by the character of the Gnostic heresy, it is easy to see that as Bishop Lightfoot says: ‘The doctrine of the Person of Christ is here stated with greater precision and fulness than in any other of St. Paul’s epistles.”

Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown have the following comment, they write “The OBJECT of the Epistle is to counteract Jewish false teaching, by setting before

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the Colossians their true standing in Christ alone (exclusive of all other heavenly beings), the majesty of His person, and the completeness of the redemption wrought by Him; hence they ought to be conformed to their risen Lord, and to exhibit that conformity in all the relations of ordinary life Col 2:16, ‘new moon, sabbath days,’ shows that the false teaching opposed in this Epistle is that of Judaizing Christians. These mixed up with pure Christianity Oriental theosophy and angel-worship, and the asceticism of certain sections of the Jews, especially the Essenes. Compare JOSEPHUS [Wars of the Jews, 2.8.13]. These theosophists promised to their followers a deeper insight into the world of spirits, and a nearer approach to heavenly purity and intelligence, than the simple Gospel affords. CONYBEARE and HOWSON think that some Alexandrian Jew had appeared at Colosse, imbued with the Greek philosophy of PHILO’s school, combining with it the Rabbinical theosophy and angelology which afterwards was embodied in the Cabbala. Compare JOSEPHUS [Antiquities, 12.3.4], from which we know that Alexander the Great had garrisoned the towns of Lydia and Phrygia with two thousand Mesopotamian and Babylonian Jews in the time of a threatened revolt. The Phrygians themselves had a mystic tendency in their worship of Cybele, which inclined them to receive the more readily the incipient Gnosticism of Judaizers, which afterward developed itself into the strangest heresies. In the Pastoral Epistles, the evil is spoken of as having reached a more deadly phase (1 Ti 4:1–3; 6:5), whereas he brings no charge of immorality in this Epistle: a proof of its being much earlier in date.”

S.L. Johnson writes “The nature of the heresy in Colosse may be described most simply as a mixture, an amalgam, of Jewish and Gentile elements. Lightfoot called it ‘Gnostic Judaism’ and related it to Essenism. The fundamental elements were Jewish (2:16), having to do with the Mosaic law and its ritual requirements. The elements of a gnostic character, however, were considerable. Gnosticism, ‘the pagan “Higher Thought” of the time,’ was a philosophy (cf. 2:8) with an intellectually exclusive spirit (cf. 2:4) and claimed to have the answer to the problem of the existence of evil. The world of matter was an evil kingdom antagonistic to God. But, since God cannot create evil, the existence of evil must be traced to divine self-limitation. A series of emanations, aeons, or angelic spirits, germinated from God, each being in the series possessing less of the divine element until ultimately contact with evil matter was possible. Creation, then, was to be traced to one of the angelic beings. The contacts with such a philosophy can be seen clearly in the epistle (cf. 2:8, 18 ). Gnostic thought led to two practical

77 Lightfoot, Colossians and Philemon, p. 96. C. F. D. Moule is more cautious. He suggests “a ‘gnostic’ type of Judaism or a Jewish type of ‘gnosticism’” (The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon, p. 31). The worship of angels, he thinks, may be simply Jewish.
78 Hunter, Galatians to Colossians, p. 113.
errors: (1) asceticism (cf. 2:21–23) and (2) license (cf. 3:5–17). If matter is evil, one may attempt to reduce contact with it (asceticism), or be indifferent to the world of sense and follow one’s own desires and impulses (license). The Colossian Epistle effectively refutes both the doctrinal and the practical errors of the heresy. The apostle’s answer to the doctrinal error is the presentation of the cosmic Christ, who is both Creator and Sustainer of the universe (cf. 1:16–17). He is no angelic emanation from God, but one who possesses in bodily form all the fulness of the Godhead, one to whom (to use Peter’s words) angels, authorities, and powers are subject (cf. 1 Pet 3:22; Col 2:10). There is no need for other mediation between God and man, since He is the only mediator and has reconciled all things to the Father by the blood of His cross (cf. 1:19–20). Thus, compelled by heresy to reflect upon and unfold the fuller implications of the incarnate Deity, Paul portrays a Savior who is resplendent in the glory of His supremacy in both creations, the old and the new, the universe and the church (cf. 1:18; 3:11 ). The practical errors are met simply and effectively. To asceticism the author opposes the doctrine of the believer’s death and resurrection with Christ and, therefore, his consequent removal to a new sphere of life, where worldly ordinances have no place (cf. 2:20–23). To license he opposes the doctrine of union with Christ and the demands of the new life (cf. 3:5–17). Therefore, contrary to the attempts of the heretics to limit Christ’s person and work, Paul exalts them; contrary to their attempt to reduce Him to the position of one among many, Paul, in agreement with the entire apostolic community, crowns Him Lord of all.”

Dr. Dan Wallace writes “One of the difficulties in trying to reconstruct the heresy which plagued the Colossian church is that we only have Paul’s response to it; that is, we do not have a record of Epaphroditus’ report. The difficulty in determining what the heresy looked like is akin to listening to one half of a telephone conversation—or worse, reading someone else’s mail when that person is writing a response. Consequently, any reconstruction must be quite tentative—and for this reason to deny apostolic authorship on the basis of what the heresy must have looked like is going far beyond the data. In spite of this, we can see traces of several tenets of this heresy in Paul’s response: (1) a defective Christology, especially in denying his humanity (a docetic tendency) (cf. 2:9), but apparently not subscribing to his full deity either (cf. 1:15ff.); (2) its philosophic character (“fullness,” “knowledge” etc. are terms which seem to be used in Colossians as buzz words—i.e., to reveal its nature) (cf. 1:19; 2:3); (3) its Jewishness, with an emphasis on circumcision (2:11; 3:11) and traditions (2:8); (4) its asceticism (2:21-23). All of these data suggest that ‘the heresy was of [a]

79 Lightfoot, Colossians to Philemon, pp. 74-79.
From this it certainly cannot be concluded that the heresy was full-blown gnosticism, such as is found in the second century. Further, in light of its strong Jewish element (which is not surprising given the large Jewish population in the Lycus Valley), ‘it seems undeniable that the heresy in question is closer to Essenism than to developed second-century Gnosticism’—or, in the least, some form of Jewish asceticism wedded to Greek (Stoic?) philosophy.

Richard Melick Jr. writes “The context addressed by the apostle shapes the concrete meaning Colossians has today. Indeed, the task of discovering the context has led to various suggestions which have rightly colored the presentations of both entire commentaries on Colossians and even Pauline theology as a whole. The quest for context began in earnest in the nineteenth century and developed into a science in the twentieth. Nineteenth-Century Contributions. Two significant works dominated the nineteenth century. The direction-setting work of F. C. Baur questioned the integrity of the epistle and dated it after the lifetime of Paul. This opened the door to many second-century contextual suppositions. He worked also for an evolutionary explanation of the phenomena of Christianity and its writings and invited comparisons between Christianity and non-Christian parallels. In many ways, all subsequent study reacts to Baur. Some support him, some modify him, and others counter him. By far the most lasting contribution of the nineteenth century was the work of J. B. Lightfoot in his *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Lightfoot’s conclusions remain viable one hundred years after his commentary, and many arguments simply repeat or expand his views. He saw the problem as an incipient Jewish Gnosticism which characterized the Essenes. The religious and philosophical parallels pointed to an early date of the epistle written by the apostle Paul. He left a twofold legacy: the idea of incipient Gnosticism and the Jewish nature of the heresy. Twentieth-Century Contributions. Twentieth-century interpreters develop and shape one or more of the ideas of the nineteenth century. Some, such as Dibelius and Lohse, reaffirm the Gnostic or ‘pre-Gnostic’ context. Others, such as S. Lyonnet, F. Francis, F. Guthrie, 569. Guthrie, 570. Guthrie, 570. Guthrie, 570. Guthrie, 570. Guthrie, 570.


Lohse’s comments, being more recent, reflect this tradition better. He says: “Consequently the adherents of the ‘philosophy’ cannot be considered Essenes, members of the Qumran community or proponents of heretical Jewish propaganda…. because of the emphasis placed on knowledge as well as its world-negating character, [but they] can be termed Gnostic or, if a more cautious designation is desired, pre-Gnostic” (129).


F. Bruce, W. Hendriksen, A. Bandstra, and O’Brien hold to a more Jewish context. The first major essay of the twentieth century was written by Dibelius. He studied the Isis initiation in Apuleius and, impressed particularly by a technical use of the term *embateuō*, determined that Colossians addressed a similar initiatory rite. For him, Colossians provides proof that Christianity joined with a mystery cult of the ‘elements’ by about A.D. 56. This occurred before the time of Paul. Paul’s task, therefore, was to demonstrate the distinction between the cult and Christianity. Many objections arise. Dibelius does not explain the distinctive element of Christianity that made it survive. He states its survival depended on its exclusivity, but the exclusive nature is unexplained. Further, Christianity dominated the Isis cult by offering a better solution to life. Lyonnet’s evaluation is representative of the reservations among contemporary scholars. He states regarding Dibelius’s analysis of the temple rites: ‘But the sense of the passage is one of the most controversial, the text itself is scarcely certain, and it would be imprudent at least to erect a whole theory on this single term.’ Later scholars modify Dibelius’s position. G. Bornkamm argues that the problem was a Gnosticized Judaism that added pagan elements. These included Iranian-Persian elements and Chaldean astrology. Thus syncretism resulted. Although the Gnostic position has faded in popularity, some still advocate it. The contemporary climate understands Paul’s letter in a Jewish context. Three significant writers contribute to this understanding, though they, in their own way, built on the work of Lightfoot. Lyonnet leads the way in several penetrating articles. He states that the terms used to support the ties between Christianity and Gnostic cults occurred outside Gnostic circles but persisted in other philosophies as well. Particularly, they often occurred in Jewish (Christian) contexts. He concludes that the opponents were Christians attracted to Judaism. Francis also sees a Jewish Christian context, but it was a context of mystical asceticism. The terms employed could well be Jewish rather than Greek, including ‘humility to the flesh,’ ‘entering [*embateuō*] into visions,’ and ‘worship of angels.’ These concepts and similar terminology appear at Qumran and, for Francis, may well represent a like religious group. Bandstra confirms Francis’s arguments and notes that the Gnostic influence at Colossae was not

90 F. F. Bruce, Ephesians and Colossians, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 165–69.
91 Hendriksen, Colossians and Philemon, 17–21.
93 O’Brien, xxxviii.
94 Dibelius, “The Isis Initiation.”
95 Ibid., 91.
96 Lyonnet, 150.
99 Francis, 163–95.

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clearly established. The prevailing view, therefore, is that the Colossian heresy was some form of Judaism. Most likely it was typical of reactionary Judaism, such as practiced at Qumran, since many of the terms occur in that literature. Little has been done, however, to trace the connection between Qumran and Colossae...Historical inquiry reveals a sizeable Jewish community in the Lycus valley at the first century. Josephus recorded that Antiochus the Great (223–187 B.C.) imported two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon to Lydia and Phrygia.\(^{100}\) Lightfoot calculated the Jewish population at A.D. 62 to be more than eleven thousand adult freemen, plus women, children, and possibly slaves.\(^{101}\) The entire Jewish population, however, ‘would probably be much larger than this partial estimate implies.’\(^{102}\) The attractions of the areas were of some concern to the Jewish scholars. Reflecting a concern for the northwestern migration to the area, one rabbi wrote, ‘The wines and the baths of Phrygia have separated the ten tribes from Israel.’\(^{103}\) The New Testament also bears witness to a sizeable community of Jews in the area. Acts 2:9–10 states that Jews from Asia and Phrygia were at Pentecost. Many of the books of the New Testament reflect Jewish Christian interests there. Paul’s writings are instructive in this regard. For example, Galatians counters the energetic activities of Judaizers; Ephesians obviously deals with two religious communities which had to realize their unity (2:1–11); and 1 Timothy may reflect theological problems prompted by study of the Old Testament and the law (1:8–11). The writings of John reflect the cultural mixture as well. The Gospel of John contains many elements intended to persuade a Jewish audience of the messiahship of Jesus, and the Revelation is similar in genre to the Jewish apocalypses of conservative Judaism. Significantly, all of these New Testament books address situations in Asia Minor and deal with problems which are, at least in part, Jewish. Many have also compared them with Gnostic elements assumed in their teachings. Clearly, a study of their contexts reveals there was a large and vocal Jewish element in the area. It also reveals that many Jews converted to Christianity. Finally, the ministry of John the Baptist spread quickly and significantly into this area. Although John lived a short time, his ministry enjoyed a worldwide impact. Acts 18:24–26 records the ministry of Apollos, who apparently advanced the teachings of John the Baptist at Ephesus. Apollos’s influence may have been significant by the time he met Priscilla and Aquila. Much later, about A.D. 85–95, John the apostle wrote his gospel from around Ephesus. A

\(^{100}\) See Josephus, Antiquities XII.iii.4.  
\(^{101}\) Lightfoot, 20. He came to this conclusion by noting that a contraband temple offering was taken by Flaccus, the propraetor of Asia. The contraband offering was twenty pounds of gold from the single district. He estimated the amount per family. 
\(^{102}\) Lightfoot, 20. He came to this conclusion by noting that a contraband temple offering was taken by Flaccus, the propraetor of Asia. The contraband offering was twenty pounds of gold from the single district. He estimated the amount per family. 
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 21. He pointed out that there were larger seizures from neighboring areas. 
\(^{104}\) B. Sabb. 147.b.
distinctive of this writing is the large space devoted to John the Baptist and his witness to Jesus. It would seem that forty years after Apollos the impact of John the Baptist would be diminished, yet the apostle John thought it significant enough to build upon it for his Gentile readers. The tie between the Essene Jews and the Colossian church may be the misunderstood influence of John the Baptist. Years ago Dibelius commented, ‘The Christian congregation probably borrowed baptism, as an eschatological sacrament, from the circle of John the Baptist. But the Christians of the hellenistic world felt the need to understand it as a hellenistic mystery.”104 There is an obvious connection between John the Baptist and the Palestinian Christian communities. Possibly, the relationship extended into Asia Minor, where disciples of John the Baptist turned to Christ. When they did, they brought their ascetic and strict ethical concerns with them into the church. Conceptual and theological factors support the strongly Jewish nature of the Epistle to the Colossians. Obvious ties existed between reactionary Judaism and Christianity in the Lycus valley. Naturally a conflict between them arose.”105

Major Themes

Christ

One of the major themes of Colossians is the all-sufficiency of Christ. In fact Wallace outlines the epistle around this them: (1) Sufficiency of Christ Explained (1:3-2:7) (2) Sufficiency of Christ Denied (2:8-3:4) (3) Sufficiency of Christ Experienced (3:-5-4:6). As Moo writes “Christology is the heart of Colossians, and like the spokes of a wheel, all the other themes of the letter radiate from it”106

The apostle asserts that Christ is the firstborn of creation expressing the supremacy of Christ over creation (Colossians 1:15). Since Christ has a unique relationship to God as His Son, Christ and only Christ possesses the power to bring all things in creation back under God’s sovereignty. Consequently, Christ provides the Christian the spiritual resources they need to live in a world which is governed by evil Satanic powers. Within the hymn to Christ, Christ’s relationship to God is emphasized in Colossians 1:19 with the claim that “all (God’s) fullness” dwells in Christ Himself. The apostle reiterates this point later on in the epistle in Colossians 2:9. The apostle declares that Christ reconciled all things to God in Colossians 1:20. Believers are complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10).

The hymn of praise to Christ signals that Christ is the heart of Colossians affirming and asserting the central place that Christ has in relation to the old

104 Dibelius, “Isis Initiation,” 95.
creation and the new creation. Throughout the epistle Paul points out often Christ’s unique relationship to God. He is the “image” of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). God is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:3). Jesus is also “the Son that He loves” (Colossians 1:13). Jesus is “the Word of God” (Colossians 1:25) which is also “the Word of Christ” (Colossians 3:16). The “mystery of God” is in fact Christ Himself (Colossians 2:2). God raised Jesus from the dead (Colossians 2:13). God provides the spiritual growth of the body through the Christian adhering to Christ’s teaching and their position in Christ (Colossians 2:19). Paul declares that Christ is now presently seated at “the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). The Christian’s life is hidden at the present time with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). Everything that the Christian does in life must be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17). The apostle requests that the Colossian church intercede in prayer for him so that God might open a door for him to proclaim “the mystery of Christ” (Colossians 4:3). Furthermore, the “kingdom of God” (Colossians 4:11) is synonymous with “the kingdom of the Son He loves” (Colossians 1:13). Everything Paul says about Christ in the Colossian epistle makes clear that Christ is God, He is divine if we consider the explicit references to Christ’s deity (Colossians 1:15, 19; 2:9) as well as these other references to Christ mentioned above.

Colossians teaches that since Christ is sufficient to save the sinner, He is also sufficient lead the justified sinner through life. It emphasizes Christ’s lordship over creation as well as the church. Though the death of Christ is mentioned in the epistle, it is the reign of Christ or sovereignty of Christ which is the emphasis. The other theme is that Christ is the basis of the Christian’s spiritual life. Colossians teaches that anything including Judaism which detracts from a Christ centered life is of the cosmic system of Satan and is to be rejected. Like so many of Paul’s epistles, Colossians is very concerned about the Christian living in a pagan culture in a manner that brings glory to God.

Christ’s sufficiency for the Christian way of life is expressed throughout Colossians. Their faith is in Christ (Colossians 1:4; 2:4). Epaphras is a “faithful minister of Christ” (Colossians 1:7; 4:12). At the moment of their conversion the Colossians were delivered from the kingdom of darkness led by Satan and now belong to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). Through His sinless human nature, Christ reconciled the Colossians to God (Colossians 1:22). It will be before Christ that the Colossians will be presented to God holy (Colossians 1:22). The apostle Paul declares that his ministry is in fact empowered by Christ Himself (Colossians 1:24, 28, 29). He teaches that the mystery to the church in these last days is “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27; cf. 2:2; 4:3). “All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in Christ (Colossians 2:3). “Christ Jesus our
Lord” is the content of the Christian tradition or apostolic teaching (Colossians 2:6). The Christian has died with Christ (Colossians 3:3) and have been raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1). They are “hidden with Christ” and they will all appear “with Him” in glory (Colossians 3:1-4). The Lord Jesus Christ is “all and is in all” in the new creation (Colossians 3:11). Paul expresses his Spirit inspired desire that the Colossians have the peace of Christ governing their hearts (Colossians 3:15). He wants the Colossians to have the Word of Christ richly dwelling in their hearts (Colossians 3:16). The Colossians are do everything “in the name of our Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). The relationships in Christian households are to be governed by Christ (Colossians 3:18-4:1). The ministry of Paul and his companions is bound to the Lord (Colossians 4:7, 17).

Interestingly, almost every statement about Christ in the Christ hymn is developed later on in dealing with the problem of the false teaching confronting the church at Colossae. It appears these false teachers were calling into question Christ’s sufficiency to provide for all the spiritual needs of the Colossian church.

F.F. Bruce writes “The teaching of the letter to the Colossians is concerned with those aspects of the gospel which were chiefly threatened by the Colossian heresy-the uniqueness of the person of Christ, in which the plenitude of deity was embodied; the perfection of the redeeming and reconciling work which he accomplished by his death on the cross, and the spiritual liberty enjoyed by all who by faith were united to him.”

J. B. Lightfoot writes “This Colossian heresy was no coarse and vulgar development of falsehood. It soared far above the Pharisaic Judaism of which St Paul refutes in the Epistle to the Galatians. The questions in which it was interested lie at the very root of our religious consciousness. The impulse was given to its speculations by an overwhelming sense of the unapproachable majesty of God, by an instinctive recognition of the chasm which separates God from man, from the world, from matter. Its energy was sustained by the intense yearning after some mediation which might bridge over this chasm, might establish inter-communion between the finite and the Infinite. Up to this point it was deeply religious in the best sense of the term. The answer which it gave to these questions we have already seen. In two respects this answer failed signally. On failure, the one hand it was drawn from the atmosphere of mystical speculation. It had no foundation in history, and made no appeal to experience. On the other hand, notwithstanding its complexity, it was unsatisfactory in its results; for in this plurality of mediators none was competent to meet the requirements of the case. God here and man there—no angel or spirit, whether one or more, being neither God nor man, could truly reconcile the two. Thus as regards credentials it was without a guarantee;

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while as regards efficiency it was wholly inadequate. The Apostle pointed out to the Colossians a more excellent the way. It was the one purpose of Christianity to satisfy those answer very yearnings which were working in their hearts, to solve that very problem which had exercised their minds. In Christ they would find the answer which they sought. His life—His cross and resurrection—was the guarantee; His Person—the Word Incarnate—was the solution. He alone filled up, He the world alone could fill up, the void which lay between God and man, church, could span the gulf which separated the Creator and creation. This solution offered by the Gospel is as simple as it is adequate. To their cosmical speculations, and to their religious yearnings alike, Jesus Christ is the true answer. In the World, as in the Church, He is the one only mediator, the one only reconciler. This twofold idea runs like a double thread through the fabric of the Apostle's teaching in those passages of the epistle where he is describing the Person of Christ.\textsuperscript{108}

Peter Davids writes “That culture is marked by the immoral lifestyle that the Christian has been delivered from, but it is still the culture in which one lives. Thus, Paul is concerned about how one lives as a Christian in the context of this culture without appearing to undermine the good order of society. This means that Colossians is marked by what has been referred to as an already/not-yet perspective: While Christ already reigns and no power is superior to him, his reign is not yet fully visible on earth. Thus one must come to terms with living in the middle of a society that does not recognize him as Lord, and forces of evil that are very real and do not appear to be under his sway.”\textsuperscript{109}

Reconciliation

Another major theme in Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is that of reconciliation. In Colossians 1:20, Paul teaches that Christ’s death reconciled all things in creation to God. Then, in Colossians 1:21, he reminds the Colossian church that they have been reconciled to God through the body of Christ on the cross.

Colossians 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, 1:16 for all things in heaven and on earth were created by him—all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers—all things were created through him and for him. 1:17 He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him. 1:18 He is the head of the body, the church, as well as the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, so that he himself may become first in all

things. 1:19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son 1:20 and through him to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross—to through him, whether things on earth or things in heaven. 1:21 And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds, 1:22 but now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before him—1:23 if indeed you remain in the faith, established and firm, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has also been preached in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become its servant. (NET)

Reconciliation is God’s peace treaty with the entire human race. Reconciliation removes the Barrier, which separates God from man (Eph. 2:14-16). The peace offering in the Old Testament depicts reconciliation (Lev. 3; 7:11-38; 8:15). The peace offering emphasizes the Person of Christ. The peace offering sets forth God as propitiated and the sinner reconciled.

The Author of the Peace Treaty is God the Father (2 Cor. 5:18a; Eph. 1:3-7; 2:14-16). Man was the enemy of God (Rom. 5:6-10; Eph. 2:1-5). God the Father is the Initiator of the peace treaty with man. Man is totally helpless to make peace with God (Rom. 3:10, 23; 8:5-8; Eph. 2:1). The Lord Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the Peace Treaty (2 Cor. 5:18b; 1 Tim. 2:5). The Lord is the peacemaker (Eph. 2:14). This peace treaty took place inside the Person of Christ, the God-Man (2 Cor. 5:19a; Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 1:22; 1 Pet. 2:24).

God offers the entire world a full pardon of their sin through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:19b; Acts 13:38; Eph. 1:7; 4:32b; Col. 1:14; 2:13; 1 John 2:12). Every believer in the Church Age has been an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20a). The terms of the Peace Treaty is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31; John 3:16, 36).

Reconciliation is totally the work of God. It is God’s peace treaty with the entire human race or the removal of the Barrier, which separated God from man and is a result of the finished work of Christ on the Cross (2 Cor. 5:18; Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 1:20-21).

The reason why mankind needs to be reconciled to God is that God is holy and the human race is sinful by nature and by practice. The Bible teaches that each and every member of the human race is a sinner by nature as well as by practice.

The Bible teaches that every person born into the world without exception received the imputation of Adam’s original sin in the Garden of Eden and the nature of Adam. This nature is always disobedient to God and making them all physically alive but spiritually dead, having no capacity whatsoever to have a relationship with God.
The first man, Adam, brought sin and death into the human race resulting in a curse whereas the “Last Adam,” Jesus Christ, brought life and blessing to the human race and so therefore, the entire human race boils down to these two men (1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:12-21).

Because of the imputation of Adam’s original sin to the genetically formed old sin nature, every member of the human race is born physically alive but spiritually dead. Adam’s original sin plus Adam’s sin nature equals “spiritual death,” which means that every member of the human race is separated from God and has absolutely no capacity to have a relationship with God who is holy. This is what we call in theology “real spiritual death” meaning that Adam’s original sin is imputed to the genetically formed old sin nature, thus, the need for everyone to become born-again by believing on the Lord Jesus. The Lord taught in John 8:34 that the human race is enslaved to sin and that only He could set them free.

The book of Genesis and the book of Romans both teach that the sin nature entered the human race through Adam’s original sin in the Garden of Eden when he disobeyed the divine prohibition to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The apostle Paul in Romans 5:12-21 gives us an extensive treatment of the origins of the sin nature and its consequences and how God has dealt with it.

**Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. (NASB95)**

“**And death through sin**” presents the result of the sin nature entering into the human race through Adam’s disobedience.

“**Death**” is the articular nominative masculine singular form of the noun *thanatos*, which refers to “real spiritual death” and is the result of the imputation of Adam’s sin to our genetically formed old sin nature at the moment of physical birth (Gen. 2:17; Prov. 14:12; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 2:1, 5). Therefore, in Romans 5:12 is presenting a progression-Adam’s original sin plus Adam’s sin nature equals “spiritual death.” “Spiritual death” means that every member of the human race is separated from God and has absolutely no capacity to have a relationship with God who is holy.

There are five major consequences for “Spiritual death”: (1) Slavery to the sin nature and the devil and his cosmic system. (2) Physical death (Genesis 5:5). (3) Imprisonment in Torments after physical death prior to the Great White Throne Judgment (Luke 16:19-31). (4) Eternal condemnation in the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15). (5) Unique voluntary substitutionary spiritual and physical deaths of Christ (Matt. 27:45-46; Mark 15:34; Phlp. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14).

Spiritual death in the human race resulted in the Father sending His Son to die spiritually and physically on the cross as a substitute for members of the human race in order to deliver them from spiritual death and the sin nature. The problem
of “real spiritual death” is resolved when God gives life to those members of the human race who exercise faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16-18).

“Through sin” is composed of the preposition *dia*, “through” and the articular genitive feminine singular form of the noun *hamartia*, “sin.”

As was the case earlier in Romans 5:12, the noun *hamartia* is in the singular referring to the old Adamic sin nature. The preposition *dia* is used with the genitive form of the noun *hamartia* as a marker of personal intermediate agency and does not indicate means or instrumentality since the sin nature is being personified by the apostle Paul. This indicates that the sin nature is the personal intermediate agency through which spiritual death entered the human race.

Not only does Romans 5:12 teach that the sin nature entered into the human race through Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden and spiritual death through the sin nature but also this passage teaches that spiritual death spread to each and every person in the human race because of the imputation of Adam’s sin to each and every member of the human race.

“And so death spread to all men, because all sinned” presents the result of spiritual death entering the human race through the sin nature. Adam’s original sin in the Garden of Eden resulted in the sin nature, which in turn “resulted in” spiritual death.

“So” is the adverb of manner *houtos*, which is drawing a comparison with the preceding statement and the one to follow. In the preceding statement Paul taught that through Adam, the sin nature entered into the human race and consequently spiritual death entered through the sin nature. In the statement to follow, he teaches spiritual death spread to each and every human being without exception or distinction. Therefore, *houtos* draws a comparison between the manner in which spiritual death entered the human race and the manner in which spiritual death spread to the entire human race.

The manner in which spiritual death entered the human race and the manner in which spiritual death spread throughout the entire human race is one and the same, namely, through Adam’s act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

The emphatic position of the prepositional phrase *di’ henos anthropou*, “through one man” clearly indicates this to be the case. The fact that Paul is emphasizing that Adam’s act of disobedience was the manner in which spiritual death entered into the human race and spread to the entire human race is clearly indicated by the context.

We have to remember that in Romans 5:12-21 Paul is making a comparison between the consequences of Adam’s act of disobedience and the results of Christ’s act of obedience to demonstrate to his readers the destiny of each member of the human race is tied up with these two.
So we can see that Adam’s act of disobedience that brought condemnation to his posterity in comparison with Christ’s act of obedience that resulted in justification of life to all men underlines the entire discussion in Romans 5:12-21. Therefore, the adverb of manner houtos is comparing the manner in which the sin nature and spiritual death entered the human race with the manner in which spiritual death spread to the entire human race.

Adam’s act of disobedience was the manner in which both the sin nature and spiritual death entered the human race and also spread to each and every member of the human race without exception or distinction.

**Romans 5:12** Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

“Death” is the articular nominative masculine singular form of the noun thanatos, which refers once again to real spiritual death.

Although, in Romans 5:12, thanatos is used of spiritual death, we must be aware of the fact that spiritual death also resulted in three other categories of death: (1) Physical death is the separation of the human soul (and in the case of the believer, the human spirit also) from the body (Matt. 8:22; Rom. 8:38-39; 2 Cor. 5:1-8; Phil. 1:20-21; 2:27, 30). (2) Second death is the perpetuation of spiritual death into eternity or eternal separation from God and it is the final judgment of the unbelievers in the human race and fallen angels whereby they are cast in the Lake of Fire (Matt. 25:41; Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20:12-15). (3) Unique voluntary substitutionary spiritual death of the impeccable humanity of Christ in hypostatic union on the cross (Matt. 27:45-46; Mark 15:34; Phlp. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14).

Christ’s spiritual and physical deaths on the cross were needed to resolve the first three categories of death since physical death and the second death are the result of spiritual death.

“Spread” is the third person singular aorist active indicative form of the verb dierchomai, which is a compound word composed of the preposition dia, “through” and the verb erchomai, “to go,” thus the word literally means, “to go through, to pass throughout.”

In Romans 5:12, the verb dierchomai denotes that spiritual death “spread throughout” the entire human race. As many commentators believe, the word has a distributive force to it meaning that spiritual death spread to each and every member of the human race. This is correct since the adjective pas is obviously used in a “distributive” sense modifying the noun anthropos, “person.” Therefore, the verb along with these two words indicates that through Adam’s act of disobedience, spiritual death “spread to each and every person” in the human race.

In the same way, a deadly contagious virus can spread completely throughout an entire population so spiritual death spread throughout the entire human race.
Spiritual death infected the entire human race because each person receives a sin nature that is received through imputation at the moment of physical birth and is passed down through sex. This sin nature is the result of Adam’s original sin in the Garden of Eden and manifests itself through the function of human volition.

The imputation of Adam’s sin at physical birth results in every person having the nature of Adam, which resides in the genetic structure of the physical body and can never please God but is selfish and self-centered and always disobedient to God. This imputation means that every person born into the world is born physically alive but spiritually dead, yet qualified for the imputation of divine righteousness through faith alone in Christ alone.

“To all men” is composed of the preposition eis, “to” and the accusative masculine plural form of the adjective pas, “all,” which is modifying the accusative masculine plural form of the noun anthropos, “men.”

The noun anthropos denotes a “person, human being” and is used in a generic sense for the human race. It is modified by the distributive use of the adjective pas referring to “each and every” member of the human race without exception, both Jew and Gentile. Therefore, Paul is saying that spiritual death resulting in physical death spread to “each and every person in the human race without exception and without distinction.”

The preposition eis is employed with the verb dierchomai, “spread” as a marker of extension indicating the extent to which spiritual death spread among members of the human race.

The fact that the statement houtos eis pantas anthropous ho thanatos dielthen, “in this manner (through Adam’s sin), spiritual death spread to each and every member of the human race without exception” refers to the imputation of Adam’s sin to each member of the human race at the moment of physical birth is clearly indicated by the context.

Romans 5:12 also teaches us that the result of God imputing Adam’s original sin to the entire human race was that the entire human race was under the headship of Adam.

Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. (NASB95)

“Because” is composed of the preposition epi and the dative neuter singular form of the relative pronoun relative pronoun hos.

The expression eph’ ho has been said by some as being the most mistranslated expression in the Greek New Testament. It has been translated “in whom” by Augustine and others.

For this to be the correct rendering of the expression, its antecedent would have to be the expression henos anthropou, “one man” a reference to Adam, which
appeared earlier in the verse. If this is the case, then this would mean that “in Adam all sinned.” However, grammatically and syntactically this does not make sense since the distance between the expression henos anthropou, “one man” and the prepositional phrase eph’ ho is too great for this to be correct.

Also, the relative pronoun hos is neuter in gender and not masculine, which it would need to be if it were referring to Adam. Furthermore, Paul would have used a simpler or more obvious construction, which would be en ho.

The fact that eph’ ho does not mean “in whom” is further substantiated in that this expression is usually used as a conjunction. In fact, it is used as a conjunction in Philippians 3:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:4 and in the papyri.

As a conjunction, this expression has been rendered “from which it follows, with the result that, inasmuch as,” or “because.” The last rendering is the most popular among modern Bible scholars.

Many modern exegetes contend that the prepositional phrase eph’ ho is not looking back at any antecedent but rather is functioning as a causal conjunction meaning that it is introducing a statement that gives the reason why spiritual death spread to each and every member of the human race. This would mean that spiritual death resulting in physical death is universal for the precise reason that committing acts of personal sin is universal. This would emphasize that personal sin is the result of this sin nature. We are not responsible for what Adam had done but for what we have done.

Wallace says that this interpretation finds support in the papyri and in the rest of the Pauline corpus (cf. 2 Cor. 5:4; Phlp. 3:12). However, this interpretation emphasizes the human race committing sin. The context does not support this interpretation since Paul is comparing the results of Adam’s disobedience with that of Christ’s act of obedience. He is emphasizing Adam’s actions and not his posterity!

Mounce offers another interpretation saying that the prepositional phrase ep’ ho functions not as a causal conjunction but rather has a consecutive sense, he writes, "the primary cause of our sinful nature would be the sin of Adam; the result of that sin would be the history of sinning on the part of all who enter the human race and in fact, sin of their own accord." Moo commenting on this view, writes, “Death, then, is due immediately to the sinning of each individual but ultimately to the sin of Adam; for it was Adam's sin that corrupted human nature and made individual sinning an inevitability.”

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110 Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, page 342
111 The New American Commentary, volume 27, page 142; Broadman and Holman Publishers
112 The Epistle to the Romans, page 325
Though this is true theologically, it is not the correct interpretation. The aorist tense of the verb *hamartano* is speaking of a particular point of time in the past, which the context indicates is Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

Interpreting *eph’ ho* as introducing a result clause emphasizes the personal acts of sin by each member of the human race. However, the context clearly indicates that Paul’s is comparing the results of Adam’s disobedience with the results of Christ’s obedience and thus emphasizing Adam’s actions and not his posterity. Therefore, not only does it make more sense grammatically and syntactically that *eph’ ho* should be taken as a causal conjunction but also the context supports this interpretation. This interpretation emphasizes that God considered the entire human race as sinning the moment Adam committed his act of sin in the Garden of Eden. We will translate *eph’ ho*, “*because*.”

“All sinned” is composed of the nominative masculine plural form of the adjective *pas*, “*all*” and the third person plural aorist active indicative form of the verb *hamartano*, “*sinned*.”

The adjective *pas* is again used in a distributive sense referring to “each and every” member of the human race without exception, both Jew and Gentile.

The verb *hamartano* is used intransitively (without a direct object) and refers to any mental, verbal or overt act of sin that is contrary to the will and law of God.

The distributive of *pas* along with this constative aorist tense of the verb *hamartano* indicates that Paul is teaching that each and every member of the human race sinned the moment Adam sinned. In other words, Adam is both the “federal” and “seminal” head of the human race, we thus became sinners by nature, the moment Adam sinned.

The verb *hamartano* means, “to miss the mark,” and which mark is the absolute perfection of God’s character, which is His holiness. Each and every member of the human race has missed the mark of the absolute perfection of God’s character, i.e. His holiness that was perfectly manifested by the Lord Jesus Christ during His First Advent.

The aorist tense of the verb *hamartano* is a “constative” aorist describing in summary fashion that the entire human race without exception or distinction sinned the exact moment Adam disobeyed the Lord’s prohibition to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and which disobedience involved his posterity.

Some like Calvin contend that in the verb *hamartano* is referring to the personal sins of each person in the human race. However, the verb *hamartano*, “*sinned*” is in the aorist tense and not the present tense.

The present tense could emphasize a habitual or continuous or repetitive action. The aorist tense emphasizes that this action of sinning took place at a particular point in time in the past. The context clearly indicates that the aorist tense of the verb is referring to Adam’s act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden.
Some maintain that all sinned in the sense that the human race follows the example of Adam in sinning but our sin is our own. Again, the aorist tense of *hamartano* refutes this interpretation since the verb would be in the present or imperfect tense if Paul was writing about the continued, habitual or repeated acts of sin committed by members of the human race. The aorist tense does not say we were imitating Adam.

Also, again, the statements 5:15b, 16a, 17a, 18a and 19a do not mean that the human race is following Adam’s example. Paul’s emphasis in Romans 5:12-21 is to compare the results of Adam’s disobedience with Christ’s act of obedience. This means that in the same way that we are declared justified by God and reconciled to God through one man’s act of obedience, the God-Man, Jesus Christ so also we were condemned by God through man’s act of disobedience, Adam’s. This does not imply that Paul is teaching that each person is not responsible for his own actions since this is not his emphasis. He is concerned with what Adam did and the consequences of his actions in the Garden of Eden.

Therefore, the aorist tense of the verb *hamartano* along with the distributive use of the adjective *pas* and Paul’s statements in Romans 5:15b, 16a, 17a, 18a and 19a indicate clearly that the entire human race was condemned by God the moment Adam sinned. This interpretation emphasizes that Adam’s sin brought condemnation upon Adam’s posterity and the only way to be delivered from this condemnation is through One Man, Jesus Christ.

So when Paul says that “all sinned” he is referring to the fact that the moment Adam sinned, he not only died spiritually and then eventually physically but also his posterity did the same. Therefore, in Romans 5:12, Paul is saying that because of Adam’s act of disobedience each and every member of the human race possesses a sin nature, which through the function of human volition produces mental, verbal and overt acts of sin resulting in spiritual death and eventually, physical death and the second death for those who reject Jesus Christ as Savior.

**Romans 5:12 Therefore, based on this (principle), just as, through one man, the sin nature entered into the human race so that spiritual death entered through this sin nature. Thus, in this manner, spiritual death spread to each and every member of the human race without exception because each and every member of the human race sinned (the moment Adam sinned).**

*(Author’s translation)*

Paul is teaching in Romans 5:12 that each and every member of the human race—past, present and future, are sinners by nature since they are under both the “federal” and “seminal” headships of Adam. The entire human race was condemned before they ever committed an act of sin because of Adam’s sin. Again, God condemned the human race through one man so that He could save the
human race through one man. So in Romans 5:12-21, Paul presents Adam and Christ as “federal heads” of two groups of people.

In Romans 5:12, Paul is teaching his readers of the “total depravity” of mankind. “Total depravity” means not only that the corruption has extended has extended to all aspects of man’s nature, to his entire being as well but also that because of that corruption mankind has no merit with God. The implications of depravity are critical in relation to salvation in that man has no ability whatsoever to save himself or justify himself before a holy God.

The Lord labeled His disciples evil in Matthew 7:11 because of their depraved nature. Romans 1:28 and Ephesians 4:18 teach that the mind of mankind is affected and Hebrews 9:14 says that the conscience is unclean. The heart is deceitful according to Jeremiah 17:9 and by nature mankind is under the righteous indignation of God, i.e. His wrath according to Ephesian 2:3 and Romans 1:18. Depravity affects the soul (Mark 7:20-23), thus defiling man’s thought process, which manifests itself in sinful words and actions.

The concept of total depravity does not mean that mankind cannot perform actions that are good or helpful to others or in God’s sight. What it does mean is that man can perform no action that could gain him merit with God.

Total depravity means that man has absolutely no merit with God since he does not measure up to God’s perfect standards. It also means that man’s conscience has been affected by the Fall of Adam so that it cannot be a safe and reliable guide. Nor, does total depravity mean that people will indulge in every form of sin or any sin to the greatest extent possible.

The fact that the entire human race is totally depraved is manifested through the practice of sin among both Jew and Gentiles. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul demonstrates that the Gentiles are unrighteous and totally depraved by virtue of their sinful conduct and failure to worship God in light of God’s self-revelation in creation as well as their failure to obey the moral law inherent within them. In Romans 2:1-29, he demonstrates that the Jews are unrighteous and totally depraved as well as manifested in their failure to obey perfectly the written Law of God and committing the same sins that the Gentiles committed. In Romans 3:9-20, Paul summarizes his statements in Romans 1:18-2:29 and teaches the totally depravity and universal unrighteousness of mankind, both Jew and Gentile.

The Church

Another major theme which is found in Colossians is that of the church. The term *ekklesia*, “church” appears in Colossians 1:18, 24, and 25. The church is also referred to with the “body” metaphor in Colossians 1:18, 24, 2:19, and 3:15.
In Colossians 1:18, Paul affirms that Christ is the head of the body, which he explicitly describes as the body. In Colossians 1:24, he states that he rejoices in his sufferings for the Colossians and fills up in his physical body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of Christ’s body, the church. In Colossians 1:25, the apostle says he became a servant of the church. In Colossians 2:19, Paul teaches that the apostate Christian who adheres to the false teaching in Colossae is not holding fast to the head (Christ) from whom the whole body (the church) is supported and knit together through its ligaments and sinews and grows with a growth that is from God. Lastly, in Colossians 3:15, Paul reminds the Colossian church that they were all called as one body.

The term “church” in the New Testament designates a totally unique group of believers who at the moment of conversion were called out of the cosmic system of Satan and were placed into union with the Lord Jesus Christ through the baptism of the Spirit. Consequently, they have been provided with totally unique privileges, responsibilities and opportunities to glorify God.

This term “church” is synonymous with other terms in the New Testament, which also designate this same group of believers, e.g., citizens of heaven, body of Christ, bride of Christ, branches, kingdom of priests, stones of the building, etc. This group of believers was first prophesied by our Lord in Matthew 16:18. They are totally unique by virtue of what God has provided them under His policy of grace. They are the beneficiaries of at least sixty things at the moment of conversion. Therefore, the church age is called the “dispensation of grace” (Ephesians 3:2). It began on the day of Pentecost fifty days after the Lord Jesus Christ’s resurrection as recorded in Acts 2.

The dispensation of the church age is divided into two categories: (1) Pre-Canon: Before the New Testament was completed (Book Acts 30-96 A.D.) (2) Post-Canon: After the New Testament was completed (Epistles of New Testament 96 A.D.-Rapture).

The church age ends with a resurrection just as the dispensation of the hypostatic union. It is a unique dispensation because it is between the first two resurrections in history. The resurrection of the church is called by many as “the rapture.”

The Gospel

Another major theme found in Colossians is the gospel as evidenced by the fact that the term euangelion (εὐαγγέλιον), “the gospel” appears five times in this epistle (Colossians 1:5, 6, 7, 23 twice). Euangelion appears primarily in Paul’s writing where it is used in an absolute sense meaning without any qualifying definition.
In Colossians 1:5, Paul reminds the Colossian church that their faith and love have come about from the confident expectation of reward and blessing for them in heaven which they had heard about in the message of the truth, the gospel. In Colossians 1:6, the apostle encourages them that the gospel is bearing fruit throughout the Roman Empire and not just among them. He reminds the Colossian church that they learned the gospel from Epaphras. The gospel is mentioned twice by Paul in Colossians 1:23 where he exhorts the Colossian believers to remain faithful and firm without shifting from the confidence produced by the gospel so that they might be rewarded. He states in this verse that the gospel has been preached throughout all creation under heaven and that he has become its servant.

For the apostle Paul, there was only one gospel. Paul’s ministry was distinctively that of the propagation of the gospel. Unto this gospel he was set apart (Rom. 1:1) and made a minister according to the grace of God (Eph. 3:7). His special sphere of action was the Gentile world (Rom. 16:16; Gal. 2:7).

Since Paul accepted the gospel as a sacred trust (Gal. 2:7), it was necessary that in the discharge of this obligation he speak so as to please God rather than man (1 Tim. 2:4). The divine commission had created a sense of urgency in Paul where he cried “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). For the sake of the gospel Paul was willing to become all things to all men (1 Cor. 9:22-23). No sacrifice was too great since eternal issues were at stake.

By the time he wrote his epistles, the word was a technical term for the Christian proclamation. In the Synoptic Gospels *euangelion* and *euangelizo* denote the message and teaching of the Lord Jesus. The Christian message of salvation is both a proclamation of and an interpretation of the facts of salvation history. Thus, one word, *euangelion*, summarizes the Christ event: (1) His incarnation (2) His earthly life (3) His death on the cross (4) His resurrection (5) His ascension (6) His session.


In addition to the above qualifying descriptions, other phrases are used in the New Testament to describe the gospel. The content of the message is “the preaching of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18) and also the “witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). It is also called the “word of God’s grace” (Acts 14:3), “the word of salvation” (Acts 13:26), “the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), “the word of truth” (Eph. 1:13), “the word of faith” (Rom. 10:8), “word of life” (Phlp. 2:16).

The main emphasis of the message is contained in the phrase “preach Christ” (cf. Acts 8:5; Col. 1:28). The content of the gospel message is further explained in Romans 1:17 which states that “in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.”

Evangelion was the central concept of Paul’s theology. For Paul, evangelion was not only the content of what is proclaimed, but also the act, process and execution of the proclamation. Content and process of proclaiming the message are one for him. The gospel is not of human origin but the word of God (1 Pet. 1:12). It was entrusted to Paul as an apostle and teacher (2 Tm. 1:11). Its message of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, and descended from David (2 Tm. 2:8) is not limited to a single, past event, but rather is experienced as a word charged with power in the present so that it cannot be fettered by human chains (2 Tm. 2:9).

This message of Christ’s victory at the Cross of Calvary produces regeneration and eternal life. It brings peace (Eph. 2:17; 6:15) and incorporates both Jews and Gentiles under the Headship of Christ (Eph. 3:1-9). It not only gives salvation but has “brought life and immortality to light” (2 Tm. 1:10).

The Gospel is the manifestation of divine glory in history. It is the presence of Christ. The gospel is divine power (Rom. 1:16) and as an instrument of the Holy Spirit it convicts (1 Thess. 1:5) and converts (Col. 1:6).

Although it is good news, it is strenuously opposed by a rebellious unregenerate world (1 Thess. 2:2). Opposition to the message takes the form of opposition to the messenger (2 Tm. 1:11-12; Phlm. 13). Yet those who proclaim it must do so boldly (Eph. 6:19) and with simplicity (2 Cor. 4:2), not with eloquence lest the cross of Christ be robbed of its power (1 Cor. 1:17). To those who refuse to respond to the gospel it is both foolishness and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:18 ff.), but to those who respond in faith it proves itself to be “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

“Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David” (2 Tm. 2:8) may well stand as a summary of what the entire New Testament means by “gospel.” It has to do with the Person of Christ, though with an equal stress on Christ’s saving work centered in the cross and resurrection. The advent of salvation is depicted in
the Old Testament terms of promise and fulfillment (Rom. 3:21; 15:4-9; 1 Cor. 10:11). The present availability of that salvation is offered “by grace alone, through faith alone.”

The work of reconciliation is both complete meaning God in Christ has effected the salvation of the entire cosmos (2 Co. 5:19, 21) and incomplete meaning that God has entrusted the gospel to His servants who as ambassadors for Christ call men and women to accept all that has been accomplished (5:20).

In Romans 1:16-17, the apostle Paul describes the gospel in that it is the power of God for salvation and that it reveals the righteousness of God, who is Jesus Christ. In Romans 1:16, the apostle Paul reveals three principles: (1) The effect of the gospel is salvation. (2) The extent of the gospel is that it is for all men. (3) The condition attached to the gospel is faith in Christ.

Now, we must make clear that when the New Testament uses the term euangelion, “gospel” it does not always referring to communicating the gospel to the unsaved but at times refers to communicate the plan of God to believers.

Depending upon the context the noun euangelion, “gospel” refers to: (1) The gospel presentation to the unbeliever. 

Ephesians 1:13 And when you heard the word of truth (the gospel of your salvation) – when you believed in Christ – you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. (NET Bible)

(2) The communication of Bible doctrine to the believer.

Romans 16:25 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that had been kept secret for long ages. (NET Bible)

Notice, in this passage, Paul is addressing the Christians in Rome and reveals his desire that the gospel that he communicating to them in the Roman epistle would be able to strengthen them spiritually, thus indicating that euangelion, “gospel” is used in relation to the saved and not just the unsaved.

Ephesians 6:15 Also, I solemnly charge all of you to make it your top priority to strap on your own feet combat boots and do it now, equipped with a firm foundation, namely, the Gospel, which produces a peace that is divine in quality and character. (My translation)

Paul is addressing the Ephesian believers and commanding them to fit their feet with the preparation that comes from the good news of peace. They were to strap on their combat boots, equipped with a firm foundation, which is the gospel, which produces a peace in the believer that is divine in quality and character. So again the gospel is used in relation to the believer.

Colossians 1:5 Your faith and love have arisen from the hope laid up for you in heaven, which you have heard about in the message of truth, the gospel. (NET Bible)
In this passage, Paul is again addressing believers and teaches them that their faith and love have arisen from the hope that is laid up for them in heaven, which they have heard about in the message of truth, the gospel.

In relation to the unbeliever, the noun *euangelion* is God’s victorious proclamation of God’s love in delivering the entire human race from sin, Satan, his cosmic system and eternal condemnation and has reconciled them to Himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In relation to the believer, the Gospel message is God’s victorious proclamation regarding the believer’s deliverance and victory positionally from the power of Satan, the old sin nature and the cosmic system of Satan (See Romans 5-7). In relation to the unbeliever, the noun *euangelion* is God’s victorious proclamation of God’s love in delivering the entire human race from sin, Satan, his cosmic system and eternal condemnation and has reconciled them to Himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). This reconciliation with God and deliverance and victory over sin, Satan and the cosmic system that God accomplished through His Son’s crucifixion, burial, death, resurrection and session is received as a gift and appropriated through faith in Christ (John 3:16-18; Acts 16:31; Romans 5:1-2). In relation to the believer, the Gospel message is God’s victorious proclamation regarding the believer’s deliverance and victory positionally from the power of Satan, the old sin nature and the cosmic system of Satan (See Romans 5-7). By positionally, I mean that God views the believer as crucified, died, buried, raised and seated with Christ, which was accomplished at the moment of salvation through the Baptism of the Spirit when the omnipotence of God the Holy Spirit placed the believer in an eternal union with Christ.

The Baptism of the Spirit identifies the believer with Christ in the sense that the omnipotence of God the Holy Spirit causes the believer to become identical and united with the Lord Jesus Christ and also ascribes to the believer the qualities and characteristics of the Lord Jesus Christ. It identifies the believer with Christ in His crucifixion (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20), His death (Romans 6:2, 7-8; Colossians 2:20; 3:3), His burial (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12), His resurrection (Romans 6:5; Ephesians 2:6; Philippians 3:10-11; Colossians 2:12; 3:1) and His session (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1). The believer can experience this victory and deliverance by appropriating by faith the teaching of the Word of God that he has been crucified, died, buried, raised and seated with Christ (Romans 6:11-23; 8:1-17; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:5-17).

*The Christian’s Position in Christ*

Another major theme that appears in Colossians is that of the Christian’s union with Christ and position in Christ which means that the Christian is identified with
Christ in His crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection and session at the right hand of the Father.

In Colossians 2:12, the apostle teaches the Colossians that they have been raised with Christ through their faith in the power of God who raised Christ from the dead. In Colossians 2:20, Paul reminds the Colossian believers that they have died with Christ to the elemental principles of the world. In Colossians 3:1, he reminds them that they have been raised with Christ. In Colossians 3:3, the apostle reminds the Colossians that they have died with Christ.

During the dispensation of the church age when a sinner exercises faith alone in Christ alone, the omnipotence of God the Holy Spirit places that person in an eternal union with Christ, thus identifying the believer positionally with Christ in His crucifixion, death, resurrection and session. This results in making the believer a permanent member of the royal family of God, a new spiritual species and eternally secure (Mark 16:16; John 7:37-39; 14:20; Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26-28; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:11-13; 1 Pet. 3:21). This is called the “baptism of the Spirit.”

To be identified with Christ means that the Holy Spirit has made the justified sinner identical and united with the Lord Jesus Christ and also means that the Spirit ascribes to the believer the qualities and characteristics of the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the believer becomes the second person of the Trinity, but rather it means that God views the believer as having been crucified, died and buried with Christ two thousand years ago as well as raised and seated with Him.

The baptism of the Spirit results in positional sanctification and the potential to experience sanctification in time and the promise of ultimate sanctification at the resurrection of the church.

“Positional sanctification” is the direct result of the baptism of the Spirit. It results in the believer’s “entrance” into the plan of God for the church age resulting in eternal security as well as two categories of positional truth (1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 Thess. 5:23; Eph. 5:26-27; Heb. 2:11; 10:10; Acts 20:32; 26:18; Rom. 6:3, 8; 2 Thess. 2:13).

By positional, I mean that God views the believer as crucified, died, buried, raised and seated with Christ since at the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit placed the believer in union with Christ, identifying him with Christ’s crucifixion (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20), His death (Romans 6:2, 7-8; Colossians 2:20; 3:3), His burial (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12), His resurrection (Romans 6:5; Ephesians 2:6; Philippians 3:10-11; Colossians 2:12; 3:1) and His session (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1).

“Retroactive” positional truth is the church age believer’s identification with Christ in His death and burial (Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 2:12). In other words, when Christ, died God considers the believer to have died with Him.
“Current” positional truth is the church age believer’s identification with Christ in His resurrection, ascension and session (See Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 3:1-4). In other words, when Christ was raised and seated at the right hand of the Father, the Father considers the believer to have been raised and seated with Christ as well.

“Positional sanctification”: (1) What God has done for the church age believer. (2) His viewpoint of the church age believer. (3) Sets up the potential to experience sanctification in time. (4) Provides the believer with the guarantee of receiving a resurrection body.

“Experiential sanctification” is the function of the church age believer’s spiritual life in time through obedience to the Father’s will, which is revealed by the Spirit through the communication of the Word of God (John 17:17; Rom. 6:19, 22; 2 Tim. 2:21; 1 Pet. 3:15; 1 Thess. 4:3-4, 7; 1 Tim. 2:15).

Experiential sanctification is only a potential since it is contingent upon the church age believer responding to what God has done for him at the moment of salvation, therefore, only believers who are obedient to the Word of God will experience sanctification in time. It is obeying the command of Romans 6:11 to consider oneself dead to the sin nature and alive to God.

“Perfective sanctification” is the perfection of the church age believer’s spiritual life at the Rapture, i.e. resurrection of the church, which is the completion of the plan of God for the church age believer (1 Cor. 15:53-54; Gal. 6:8; 1 Pet. 5:10; John 6:40). It is the guarantee of a resurrection body and will be experienced by every believer regardless of their response in time to what God has done for them at salvation.

All three stages of sanctification refer to the process of conforming the believer into the image of Jesus Christ, which is the Father’s plan from eternity past (Romans 8:28-30).

The Christian Way of Life

Lastly, the Christian way of life is another major theme which appears in Colossians. As we noted earlier Paul in Colossians 3:1-4 reminds the Colossian church of their position in Christ in that they have died with Christ and have been raised and seated with Him at the right hand of the Father. Consequently he exhorts them to appropriate by faith their position in Christ in order to experience victory over the sin nature (Colossians 3:5-11). He brings out another consequence of their position in Christ, namely that they are the elect of God and holy people who are
the object of God’s love and thus are to live accordingly exercising God’s love toward each other which will produce unity among them (Colossians 3:12-17).

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, the apostle Paul presents instructions for wives, husbands, children, slaves and their masters in the Colossian church. Husbands were to love their wives and not be bitter toward and wives were to obey their husbands in all things as unto the Lord. Children were to obey their parents. Fathers and by way of implication mothers were not to provoke their children so that they will not become disheartened. Slaves were to obey their masters in every situation as unto to the Lord whom they were in reality serving. Masters were to treat their slaves fairly and with justice because they will be held unaccountable by the Lord for any unfair treatment of their slaves. This section is rounded off with injunctions for the church to pray and to be wise in their behavior with the non-Christian (Colossians 4:2-6).

Paul makes clear in Colossians that Christian living must be rooted in Christ and in particular the result of appropriating by faith their position in Christ. They are to consider themselves dead to the sin and the cosmic system of Satan because they have died with Christ. They are consider themselves raised with Christ because they have in fact been raised with Christ through the baptism of the Spirit. This new position in Christ and new identity is referred with the phrase “in him,” the “new self,” or “new man.” (Colossians 3:10). Paul teaches in Colossians 2:19 that Christ is the head of the church who supplies the church with the power to live like Him and He does this through the Christian’s union and identification with Him.

There is a great implication for the Colossians in relation to the false teachers, namely that adherence to a legalistic system of rules does not constitute the Christian way of life nor is it the means to spiritual maturity. The false teachers in Colossae who were Jewish as we noted, apparently were promising spiritual power to those who adhered to their rules (Colossians 2:16, 20-23). The apostle informs the Colossians that even though these rules have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility accomplished by a severe treatment of the body, they are not wisdom. They have no spiritual value and will in reality result in fleshly indulgence.

We must qualify this by saying that Paul is not teaching the Colossian that there are no rules for the Christian to obey. He is not dismissing the value of all rules from the conduct of the Christian life because throughout his writings he makes clear that there are rules such as loving God and loving one’s neighbor as oneself, loving each other like Christ loves, appropriating by faith their position in Christ and considering themselves dead to sin and alive to God. He commands Christians to pray as well and so on.
So what is the problem with the rules of the false teachers and why is Paul’s rules ok? The answer is simply that the rules of the Jewish false teachers were nothing but traditions which originated with men and thus the sin nature whereas Paul’s teaching was inspired by God. His rules originated from God Himself. That is the issue Paul is making clear with the Colossians. He adhered to his Spirit inspired apostolic teaching and reject the false teaching of the Judaizers since their teaching originated from men and ultimately from Satan and the kingdom of darkness since these rules are used by Satan to keep people from obeying God.

In Colossians 2:6 Paul affirmed the association between correct theology and correct living. The apostle reminded the Colossians to live according to the truth they had been taught. Paul was concerned that the Colossians might turn away from his apostolic teaching and adhere to the false teaching.

In Colossians 2:1, he said he wanted his readers to know of his willingness to suffer for the saints. He did this so the Colossians would come to experience “all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself” (v. 3). He wanted to prevent their being led astray by “persuasive” speech.

In Colossians 2:6, Paul urged them to live in accord with the fact that they had received Jesus Christ: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” His concern was not that they simply possess the right Christology and theology, but that they also live their lives in accordance with it (Colossians 2:7). The Colossians were to be rooted and established in the truth.

The Colossians were also warned not to allow anyone to take them captive through philosophy and empty deception. Paul wanted the Colossians to be established in Christ Jesus and to grow in Him. Christ was to be the basis of every aspect of life. The only way to ensure this was to commanding them to reject any doctrine or teaching that did not have Christ as its foundation. In addition the teaching concerning Christ had to do with what they had received originally (Colossians 2:6). Thus this would keep out any false teaching which would attempt to infiltrate the church.

The Colossian believers were to live the Christian life by adhering to the soundness of the apostle’s Christ-centered message. Furthermore, when one’s life is based on Christ, the result is virtue and not “false humility” associated with the worship of angels (Colossians 2:18). Christ is to be regarded as superior to all. The Colossian believers needed to know that Christ is superior to all, even above the angels who were the objects of worship for the heretics. Since Christ is God possessing in Himself “all the fullness of Deity,” He is to be revered, honored, and obeyed by the Colossian church. This fullness was not shared with angels. Because believers are in Christ, who has forgiven them, they are to conduct themselves in a
Two of the many benefits of being in Christ are treated in Colossians 2:11–12. The first benefit was that of having a circumcision “not done with hands” (ἀχειροποιήτῳ). Circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of consecration. However, the circumcision mentioned here in Colossians was different. The circumcision of the Jews was but a shadow of things to come, but the circumcision Paul discussed here was the real thing, namely, spiritual consecration. The circumcision of Christ which every member of the Christian community has experienced at conversion is a reference to being identified with the death and resurrection of Christ.

A second benefit of being in union with Christ and identified with Him is that the believer participates in the death of Christ (“buried with Him”) and the resulting ramifications of His resurrection (“raised up with Him,” Colossians 2:12). Therefore since the Christian, at the moment of conversion, participates in Christ’s burial, the penalty for his or her sin is considered paid. No further charges can be brought against the one who believes in Christ (Romans 8:11, 31–34). Christ’s resurrection, then, indicated that all matters of divine justice were settled and a new day could commence. The believer therefore is to live according to his resurrected life, because his old life met its demise in Christ.

God’s forgiveness of the believer is the impetus for a new position and outlook on life. Paul’s perspective was that although “you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions” (Colossians 3:13). The forgiveness provided for by Christ is final (Colossians 3:14). The mention of the certificate of indebtedness was nailed to the cross was notification that the Christian’s sin debt was paid in full by Christ’s death.

In Colossians 2:16-23, the apostle Paul made clear that adherence to the false teaching would never result in godly conduct and thus a live honoring to God. Because of the believer’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and his victory over “the elements of the world,” he is to “keep seeking the things above.” This is to be the direct result of having “been raised up with Christ.” For Paul there was no reason for anyone to be “seeking the things above” if he had not been raised with Christ. The road to the heavenly realm was through Christ, not through asceticism or mysticism or Judaism.

The believer’s position in Christ is his confident expectation of glory. The believer is to “set” his “mind on the things above” (v. 2), that is, to seek spiritual wisdom and guidance from the One who sits “at the right hand of God” (v. 1). This wisdom from above is superior to the traditions of men and “the elementary principles of the world” (2:8).
The believer’s death in Christ terminated his relationship with the old sin nature and the things of the earth. To ensure its safety, the new life is protected in the person of Christ. As Paul wrote, “your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

In light of their eternal security, believers pursue righteousness while putting to death (νεκρώσατε) “the members of [their] earthly body” (literally, “the members that are on the earth”). This command is accomplished by appropriating by faith one’s position in Christ and considering oneself dead to sin and alive to God because of dying with Christ and being raised with Him.

Believers are to discard their old repulsive habits like a set of worn-out clothes. Αποτίθημι, meaning to “put away,” was used literally with reference to clothes at Acts 7:58 (cf. 2 Macc 8:35; Jos[e]phus Ant[iquities of the Jews] 8, 266) and in a metaphorical and ethical sense at Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:22, 25; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:21; and 1 Peter 2:1.

The believer’s new life, based on his status in Christ, means that every relationship and activity is to be patterned after the model set forth by Christ. Believers are to “put on” righteousness.

The phrase “as God’s chosen ones” means that the Christian community has been set apart to serve God exclusively. The Christian is demonstrate “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

Furthermore they are to be tolerant of each other and forgiving in the same manner as Christ forgave them (Colossians 3:13). Love is to be their supreme virtue (Colossians 3:14). This is the same love God manifested on the Cross (John 3:16) which is reproduced in the Christian by the Holy Spirit when the Christian obeys the Lord’s Spirit inspired command to love one another as He loves them.

Christians who appropriate by faith the blessings from their union with Christ are characterized as harmonious and peaceful with others. Their lives are characterized by gratitude (Colossians 3:15-17). Their lives are also characterized by appropriation of God’s Word (Colossians 3:16) which results in worship that expresses itself in music as well as conduct that is focused on “the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17).

The believer’s position in Christ transforms the nature of human relationships. Appropriating by faith one’s position in Christ is to be accomplished in the home of the Christian. Thus, for this reason Paul set forth rules of conduct for Christian households in Colossians 3:18-4:1. The Christian household, however, was to have no such discord (Colossians 3:20-21).

The impetus for maintaining better parent-child relationships rests on the fact that Christian fathers and sons are to exhibit Christ-like qualities already addressed in Colossians 3:12-17.
Wives should respect their husbands because “it is fitting in the Lord.” The objective is to accomplish what the Lord desires and not what society accepts. Husbands are commanded to love their wives and not to treat them with bitterness or harshness.

The master-slave relationship was also to differ from the secular order (Colossians 3:22-4:1).

The Christian way of life is to be characterized by thanksgiving and devotion to prayer (Colossians 4:2-4). Paul implored the believers at Colossae to live wisely before “outsiders” which of course, is a reference to unbelievers (Colossians 4:5). They were to make the most of every opportunity for spiritual gain “by redeeming the time.”

Outline

I. Salutation (1:1-2)
II. Introduction (1:3-23)
   A. Thanksgiving (1:3-8).
   B. Prayer for the Colossians (1:9-12).
   C. Praise to the Father and Son for Salvation (1:13-23).
III. Hymn of Praise to Christ (1:15-20)
IV. Colossians Response to the Gospel of Christ (1:21-23)
   A. Response at Conversion (1:21-22)
   B. Response after Conversion (1:23).
V. Paul’s Commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:24-29).
VI. Paul’s Commitment to the Colossians (2:1-2)
VII. Warnings Against False Doctrine and False Teachers (2:3-5).
VIII. Theme of Epistle (2:6-7).
IX. Explanation of Theme (2:8-4:6).
   A. Paul expresses his concern regarding false teaching (2:6-8).
   B. Christ’s sufficiency (2:9-15).
   C. Warning against submitting to false teaching (2:16-20).
X. Christ is the center of the Christian’s life (3:1-4:1).
   A. Theological Implications of Theme (2:8-23).
      3. Christian has died with Christ, thus Jewish laws don’t apply to Christian (2:20-23).
      2. Ethical implications of the Christian’s position in Christ (3:5-17).
4. Exhortation to Pray for Paul (4:2-4).
5. Instructions regarding behavior toward non-Christian (4:5-6).

XI. Concluding Remarks (4:7-18).
   A. Tychoicus will deliver news about Paul (4:7).
   B. Final greetings (4:8-18).

Dan Wallace’s Outline is helpful as well.

I. Salutation (1:1-2)
II. Orthodoxy: The Sufficiency of Christ Explained (1:3–2:7)
   A. Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Colossians (1:3-14)
      1. Thanksgiving for the Colossians’ Faith (1:3-8)
      2. Prayer for the Colossians’ Knowledge and Growth (1:9-14)
   B. Hymn to Christ the Lord (1:15-20)
   C. Affirmation of Christ the Reconciler (1:21-23)
   D. Paul’s Commission concerning the Mystery of Christ (1:24–2:7)
      1. Paul’s Past Labors Aimed at Perfection in Christ (1:24-29)
      2. Paul’s Present Concern regarding Defection from Christ (2:1-7)

III. Heterodoxy: The Sufficiency of Christ Denied (2:8–3:4)
   A. The Sufficiency of Christ Restated (2:8-15)
      1. Statement against Heretics (2:8)
      2. Restatement of Christ’s Sufficiency (2:9-15)
         a. Christ our Authority (2:9-10)
         b. Christ our Power (2:11-12)
         c. Christ our Victor (2:13-15)
   B. The Colossians’ Practices as a Denial of the Sufficiency of Christ (2:16-19)
   C. The Colossians’ Practices as a Contradiction of their Corporate Life in Christ (2:20–3:4)
      1. Death with Christ Means Death to Human Regulations (2:20-23)
      2. Resurrection with Christ Means New Perspective (3:1-4)

IV. Orthopraxy: The Sufficiency of Christ Experienced (3:5–4:6)
   A. Experienced Individually (3:5-17)
      1. Negative: Putting off the Old Man (3:5-11)
      2. Positive: Putting on the New Man (3:12-17)
   B. Experienced in the Home (3:18–4:1)
      1. Wives and Husbands (3:18-19)
      2. Children and Parents (3:20-21)
      3. Slaves and Masters (3:22–4:1)
   C. Experienced in Relation to Others (4:2-6)
1. In Relation to Paul (4:2-4)
2. In Relation to Unbelievers (4:5-6)

V. Final Greetings (4:7-18)
A. Commendation of Tychicus (4:7-9)
B. Greetings from Paul’s Co-Workers (4:10-14)
C. Greetings from Paul (4:15-18)

M.J. Harris’ outline is also excellent.

I. Introduction (1:1-14)
A. Introductory Greeting (1:1-2)
B. Paul’s Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)
C. Paul’s Intercession for the Colossians (1:9-14)

II. Christ’s Work and Paul’s Mission (1:15-2:3)
A. The Supremacy of Christ in Creation and Redemption (1:15-20)
B. Reconciliation and the Colossians (1:21-23)
C. Paul’s Stewardship of God’s Mystery (1:24-29)
D. Paul’s Spiritual Struggle (2:1-3)

III. Error and Its Remedy (2:4-3:4)
A. Warning Against Specious Philosophy (2:4-8)
B. Christ, the Remedy Against Error (2:9-15)
C. Warning against Mystical Legalism (2:16-19)
D. Consequences of Death with Christ (2:20-23)
E. Consequences of Resurrection with Christ (2:20-23)

IV. Exhortation to Holiness (3:5-4:6)
A. “Putting Off” Vices (3:5-11)
B. “Putting On” Virtues (3:12-17)
C. Household Relationships (3:18-4:1)
D. Prayer and Witness (4:2-6)

V. Personal Notes (4:7-18)
A. Paul’s Two Representatives (4:7-9)
B. Greetings and Final Instructions (4:10-18)