

Colossians 1:1-8

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Introduction:

Colosse was a small town situated in the Lycus valley around 200 km east of Ephesus and close to Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul never visited Colosse but he did spend three years in Ephesus and according to Luke his daily lectures in the hall of Tyrannus were so successful that Luke was able to write that “*so that people throughout the province of Asia – both Jews and Greeks – heard the word of the Lord*” (Acts 19:8-10). Most likely it was here that Epaphras heard the word of the Lord, was converted and returned to his native area to preach the gospel, as well as to Laodicea and Hierapolis which means that the church at Colosse was most likely formed around 52 – 55 AD. What we do know from this letter is that Paul was in prison at the time of writing so most likely it was written from Rome where he was under house arrest around 60 – 62 AD. By this stage the church at Colosse was fairly well established but was having issues with false teaching. Although the book of Colossians doesn't specify exactly what the issues were we can infer some the characteristics:

- 1) The false teachers were offering a spiritual fullness not previously experienced (2:10). There is a lot of emphasis in this book on the fullness and sufficiency of Christ.
- 2) The false teachers spoke of a new spiritual freedom which those who followed them would enjoy. Paul repeatedly reminds them of the deliverance that is already theirs in Christ (1:13, 2:15).
- 3) The false teachers seemed to have claimed particular insight into the powers of evil and to be able to give the believers special protection (2:10, 15).
- 4) The false teachers were known for their eating rituals and special days (2:16,18)
- 5) The false teachers offered a further initiation into a deeper knowledge of God (2:18).
- 6) The false teachers were inclined to be proud (2:18).
- 7) They were divisive in their influence..

Most likely these false teachers were not an outside group trying to take over the church – the church seems to have been too stable for that to be likely. Rather, they were mostly people within in the congregation itself who had been influenced by the pagan and Jewish religion they were living in and were attempting to find some middle ground between the gospel and these other religions. For us today this is also an issue. We get pressured by the local culture around us to conform to their ways and things were no different at Colosse.

Verses 1-2:

The letter is from Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God and from Timothy, our brother. Despite Paul labelling himself as an apostle we see no sign of rank here. Timothy is a brother in Christ and other places refers to him as a son.

Paul is writing to the holy people in Colosse, the saints as older versions would have. Notice that he calls them faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. Although they are dealing with false teachers there is not the concern (yet) we seen in Galatians for example (1:6) where Paul is quick to jump in and correct them. He sees the church at Colosse as faithful.

He wishes them grace and peace from God the Father. Overall this may appear a pretty standard greeting for Paul but as we continue into the rest of the letter we begin to see that it is much more than that. Paul is laying the foundation right at the beginning that they have nothing to fear or worry about – they are being faithful and they are holy ones. And they have the complete gospel – nothing further is required.



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Verses 3-8:

Paul reassures the Colossians they are true Christians (3-5a):

Faith

In these few verses Paul shows the Colossians that they are true Christians by pointing out the characteristics in their lives they are displaying – faith, love and hope. These are the marks of any true Christian anywhere – they are evidence of God's work in the life of a person. Do you have faith in Christ? Do you love the brethren? Have you a confident hope in the future stored up for us in heaven? If you can answer yes to all three of these questions truthful then you are a Christian as these are not things that you can bring about in yourself. They require the gracious working of God in your life.

Having faith is not sufficient. Many people believe in God and they may even have faith in him. But the mark of a Christian is not faith in God, but faith in Christ. Faith, as Ephesians tells us, is a gift from God so a genuine spiritual work of God can be recognised by the presence of faith, and more specifically, faith in Christ.

Love

Paul next mentions their love which is for all the saints, for all their fellow Christians. This is the love that binds people of different nationalities and cultures together into one church, one body. That is why we can go anywhere in the world and even if the worship is strange to us, we can feel at home if Christ is being honoured in that church.

Hope

And hope. Notice though that Paul here sees this faith and love as being a result of their hope. Their hope does not come about because of their faith in Christ, rather their hope for the future is what gives them faith. We are dead in our sins and need of a Saviour. We hear the word of God and God moves us to search for him - we hope he is a sufficient Saviour – and God takes mercy on his and brings us to himself and so we receive the faith to believe and the love for the fellowship of the saints.

Hope is not something that is talked about much these days. There are lots of books on faith and love but not many on hope. Partly this is because we have retreated from hope due to the pie in the sky when we die mentality. Although we receive many blessings for being in Christ now we are as Bunyan rightly pointed out merely pilgrims heading for the promised land. But much greater things are in store for us – see Romans 8:23b-25.

We, too wait with eager hope for the day when God will us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently).

Peter also said this as well – 1 Peter 1:3-5:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance – an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to



see.

Paul recognised that we need to balance experience with expectancy. We don't get everything now – if we did the Christian life wouldn't be a life of faith, for after all faith is:

Hebrews 11:1 – *Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen, it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.* (NLT)

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (NIV)

Paul reassures the Colossians they have heard the full gospel (5b-8):

The True Gospel Heard

Because Colosse had never had a visit from an “official” apostle (as far as we know) it was most likely that the false teachers were saying, well Epaphras has taught you well but he didn't include the whole picture and we have the bit you are missing. Sound familiar? So Paul in this section is telling them they are not missing anything – they have all they need for salvation – ever since they first heard the truth of the good news. Notice that Paul here says they first heard the good news. Talking, teaching, preaching and gossiping the good news is generally the primary way people get to hear about it. The internet is a more modern way this can happen but in general most people are converted by someone talking to them. Miracles by themselves prove the power of God but they don't necessary prove God so someone who doesn't believe as an alternative explanation can generally be found. We only believe what we want to believe.

The Truth

Notice also that Paul says it is the truth of the good news. The message of Christ is the truth. That's not something most people like to hear. Everyone should be allowed to believe whatever they like and so to make that work belief has to become private – you can believe whatever you like provided it doesn't actually impact your everyday life when in reality we all live our lives according to what we believe. Just because we don't call it a religion it doesn't mean that it is still what we believe.

Changing our lives

Notice also that Paul equates the word of truth with the gospel. For him there was no distinction. If we want to grow in our faith then we need to know what we believe and how to apply that to our lives. Although the Spirit can transform us miraculously and does in some instances, most of the time God lets us use the brain he has given us to work through Christian principles into our lives and that is done by hearing (and reading) and figuring out what we need to change. No, it may not be very spectacular but sanctification is unfortunately hard work. We have to put to death the old self. Christ came into the world to die for our sins.

Expansion and Bearing Fruit

Paul then tells the Colossians that the gospel they heard is the same one that is going all over the world and more that that – it is the one that is bearing fruit where ever it goes and that fruit is changed lives, just as in the same way it changed the Colossians lives when they first believed – the day they first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace.

So this is a way in which we can see whether a particular “variant” of Christianity is real or not. Does it bear fruit and change lives over the long term. Does it increase faith, hope and love? We may need to wait 10 or more years to see what the outcome of a particular trend is but in the long term if it is not of God it will eventually die and disappear and the church will continue. But if it is genuine then it bear fruit and grow. Witness the growth of the church in South America, Africa and



Asia over the past 50 years. Although initially it may have started as a result of Western missionaries, that is definitely no longer the case – in fact these are the countries that are looking to send missionaries to the West!

From a survey published in 1973 about Christianity in Kenya¹:

Statistical analysis shows very clearly that although the first seed was original a foreign import, the resultant Christianity in Kenya cannot be thought of as a foreign transplant, but rather must be seen as an indigenous plant from the very first. Its expansion has not been due primarily to external forces (foreign missions, colonial pressures, western education or civilisation); it has been due primarily to internal forces within the African churches themselves.

It is interesting to note that Jonathan Edwards, one of the great American theologians who was alive during the time of the great Awakening puts forward these evidences that this movement was a work of God²:

1. When the spirit that is at work raises esteem for the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. When the spirit that is at work works against Satan's kingdom by encouraging people away from sin.
3. When the spirit that is at work causes men to have a greater regard for the Scriptures.
4. When the spirit that is at work causes men to have a greater regard for the truth.
5. When the spirit that is at work causes men to have greater love for God and for man.

Grace – What It's All About

The Colossians had heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace. They understood from the beginning that we can make no claim upon God (what would we offer – we are his anyway – he created us and the whole universe) – it's not our commitment to God but rather his free and merciful offer to commit himself to us in Christ; that our acceptance of the Saviour is meaningless unless God has already freely accepted us in him; that the very essence of the story is not that of men striving to make Christ their Lord but of Christ in sheer goodness and pity (mercy), undertaking for his own sake to make us his servants, and even more, his children, despite the fact that we never cease to be unprofitable and undeserving of such a privilege.

That was that had learned from Epaphras – they didn't need anything more – they had Christ in all his fullness. Epaphras had not come to them with only part of the truth – he had come with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He had been a faithful servant of Christ and he was helping them on behalf of Paul and the other brothers.

And Epaphras knew that as well for he could tell Paul of the love for others the church at Colosse had that the the Holy Spirit had given them. It wasn't a man made love – a church doesn't survive if Christ is not part of it, but rather it was the love for the brothers given to them by the Holy Spirit that shone within them.

Conclusion:

So what does it mean to you and I practically for this week.

Do we pray for others? Paul could say he always prays for the people at Colosse. And to who does he pray – God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Kenya Churches Handbook (Evangel Publishing House, Kenya, 1973), pp. 166f.

2 Edwards, Jonathan The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 2 - The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God (Banner of Truth Trust, 1834, 1979), pp. 366f.



Do we thank God for those who brought us the Good News?

Well, firstly, if you have doubts about your faith go and meditate on whether you have faith, hope and love, faith in Christ, hope for the future – the resurrection and the new heavens and the new earth, love for the saints. And if that doesn't work go to a brother or sister in Christ who knows you well and ask them whether they see these three marks in you. God doesn't want us to have doubts about our faith but he understands. Like Peter sometimes it boils down to *Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.* John 6:68.

May God our Father give you grace and peace.



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