

The Letter of Paul to the Colossians

An Overview

The Letters of Paul

- How life in Christ transforms daily life.
- 13 out of the 27 New Testament books are attributed to Paul.
- Paul's ministry lasted from A.D. 32 to 60. The letters were written between A.D. 49 – 58.
- Letters were written to a specific congregation (1 Corinthians), group of congregations (Galatians) and at least one to an individual (Philemon).
- Paul addresses very specific situations; his instruction on specific matters has been extrapolated to general convictions.
- In the New Testament, the letters are generally in order from longest (Romans) to shortest (Philemon).

Letters with general consensus on Paul's authorship:

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians.

Mixed consensus:

Colossians and 2 Thessalonians.

General consensus on letters written by Paul's followers:

Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

Colossians

Authorship and Date:

- The style and vocabulary of Colossians differs from those found in the unquestioned letters of Paul. If written after Paul's death, it is dated A.D. 60 – 64. If written by Paul, it is grouped with other letters Paul wrote from time in prison in Ephesus (Philippians and Philemon) and dated A.D. 54-55 or in Rome and dated A.D. 56-58.
- Unlike other unquestioned letters of Paul, Colossians is composed of long, complex sentences that the NRSV breaks into shorter segments.
- Women's roles are diminished, indicating a later time of authorship (see 3:18 and 3:11 vs Gal 3:28).

Contents:

- 1: 1-14 Paul offers thanks for the faith of the Colossian Christians and prayers.

- 1: 15-23 Paul announces universal preeminence of Christ and the reconciliation accomplished through Christ.
- 1:24-2:7 A description of Paul's ministry to the church in the context of God's eternal plan.
- 2:8 – 3:4 A shift to warning; Paul warns of the danger of succumbing to false teaching.
- 3:5- 4:6 An appeal to live in a way consistent with the preeminence of Christ. Life in Christ is love, peace and good relationships among members of the Christian household.
- 4:7-18 Final greetings and signature.
- The central issue of Colossians is whether what has been accomplished in Christ has liberated the Christians and given them access to God. The opponents of Paul seem to be teaching worship of celestial powers as a means of gaining wisdom and access to God.
- Paul disputes the need for anything other than the "Christ in you" (1:27) that they already know. Paul further describes the stance of life in Christ and appropriate behavior reflecting that status.
- Important claims: Christ's relationship to God (1:15), Christ's role in creating all things (1:16), Christ's authority (1:18) and Christ's role in reconciliation (1:20).

Distinctive Features:

- Three themes: 1) The Christian has insight into God's mysterious plan for salvation revealed in Christ. 2) The universal status of Christ (see 1:15-20). 3) Our lives are in Christ, who is raised to a new existence and not anchored to the ways of the world.
- Colossians asserts that believers already share in Christ's resurrection (2:12-13) while elsewhere Paul affirms death in Christ but not resurrection.

Purpose:

- The Christians in Colossae were under the influence of teachers that were considered to be dangerous to Paul. These teachings of "philosophy and empty deceit" are mentioned in 2:8. Paul directs his audience to the status and work of Christ, who is superior to all forces of the universe.

Background:

- The congregation in Colossae was established not by Paul but probably by a person named Epaphras (see 1:7).
- Colossae was an ancient city of Phrygia (west central modern Turkey), on the Lycus river, which is a tributary of the Maeander River. It was situated 12 miles from Laodicea and near a major road from Ephesus to the Euphrates.