

DID PAUL FOUND THE COLOSSIAN CHURCH?

Among students of *Colossians* there is a division as to whether or not Paul founded the church at Colosse. On the basis of ch 2: 2 some hold that Paul had never been to Colosse and therefore could not have been the founder of the church in that city. Their explanation is that *Epaphras*, apparently the pastor of the Colossian church, and *Philemon*, in whose house the Colossian church met, were both converted under Paul's ministry elsewhere and then returned to Colosse to pioneer the work of Christ there.

Other writers propose that Paul must have visited Colosse because his journey from Galatia to Ephesus (see Acts 18: 23 – 19: 1) would have taken him right through Colosse. Such writers pose the view that while could not have spent much time in Colosse, it was sufficient to see Epaphras and Philemon saved contributing to the commencement of the Lord's testimony. But, due to the brevity of his visit, most of the Colossian converts had never seen Paul's "*face in the flesh*."

THE COLOSSIAN CHURCH – WELL-ESTABLISHED

Whatever view is right, it is clear that the church in Colosse had continued to be established over the time from its inception. See ch 1: 2 – it was a church with a holy and faithful people; the word "saints" literally meaning *holy ones* – a people called out of the world of heathenism to live for Christ and serve him faithfully. Ch 4: 2 & 3 – it was a praying church for Paul exhorts the saints to "continue in prayer" implying that they did pray and were continue to do so; and that they had power in prayer in that Paul solicits their prayerful support. They had a godly pastor, ch 1: 7, a man who was noted for his intercessory ministry, ch 4: 12. They were also privileged to have the ministry of other godly men, such as *Tychicus*, another faithful minister of Christ sent by Paul to edify the church, ch 4: 7 & 8; and *Onesimus*, v.9, who, as this verse and the epistle to *Philemon* show, was a Colossian and had developed after his conversion through Paul to the stage where he was recognised as a faithful & beloved brother. *Archippus* was obviously another minister serving Christ among the Colossians, ch 4: 17, with a ministry to discharge and fulfil among the Colossians, obviously to their benefit. It was a congregation made up of families, ch 3: 17-21; containing also slaves and their masters, ch 3: 22 & ch 4: 1 – yet both labouring together for the cause of Christ, teaching us powerfully the point that grace can enable people from all kinds of backgrounds to live in harmony and serve Christ together.

THE HERETICAL DANGER IT FACED

Thus, the Colossian church presented the picture of a well-established church, with members mainly from Gentile paganism growing into strong Christians. But, like all NT churches it faced satanic attack, especially in the form of a strange & complex error or philosophy. NT scholars have wrestled with the issue of giving a precise analysis of this particular heresy, though some of the main elements may be discerned.

First, there was *intellectualism*, ch 2: 8. Literally these words read "*Beware lest any man make a spoil of you (or make you his prey) through philosophy, namely, vain deceit.*" Note how Paul proceeds to show that this philosophical deceit was according to human tradition & worldly thinking – but there was nothing of Christ in it. It was an intellectualism that obscured Christ, that had nothing of the Gospel in it – rather, was obviously ashamed of the Gospel. Such intellectualism prevails still in many quarters, projecting itself as something mighty and to be sought. But intellectualism that obscures and is ashamed of Christ is dark & dangerous, making a prey of souls and is to be avoided & rejected. Witness the prevalence in the visible church today of psychology-based seminars in which men claim to bring the believer into great spiritual satisfaction & fulfilment – but without any true exposition of the Scriptures & especially without any unfolding of the person & work of Christ. What is the end result? Hosea 4: 6 – "*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*"

Second, there was *legalism*, the dangerous teaching of Judaism, with its insistence that Gentile converts should submit to the ceremonial law, ch 2: 16 & 17. The terms of these verses refer to various ceremonial laws & feasts, all of which, as Paul makes so clear were but the shadow of the substance, namely Christ Himself. That which merely shadows the substance and the reality is of no lasting spiritual benefit to the soul

Third, there was *mysticism*, a danger that again was driven by fleshly pride, ch 2: 18. This mysticism was comprised of an investigation into the unseen world, involving the worship of angels or a worship that imitated the manner in which angels supposedly worship, namely in humility. In other words it was a heresy that sought to give the impression of super-piety and super-spirituality, but again it had nothing of Christ in it, v.19. The words "intruding into" mean *to investigate*, denoting the idea of prying into that which is forbidden – intruding, therefore, into the unseen realm. While no one can be exactly sure of what this mysticism altogether included, yet the point is that it was most dangerous to the soul – as it always is. Paul's warning here is most appropriate today and should be heeded by the evangelical world where there is such a fixation with the world of the unseen, especially in the form of dangerous speculation about the occult & demonism – witness the number of books on the subject in most Christian bookstores. But this is unbiblical, Rom 16: 19. Believers are not to experts on the dark world of the evil; rather, they are to be experts on Christ.

Fourth, there was *asceticism*, ch 2: 20-23. What Paul outlines here is essentially that empty notion that holiness can only be gained by withdrawal from the world and living according to certain strict standards of behaviour. In a real sense, the matter under scrutiny in these verses is that of sanctification. In whatever form it may appear, there is the belief that true holiness may be gained by adhering to certain rules and regulations – and this is totally wrong. Never mind religions that teach some form of “monasticism” – literally and physically withdrawing from society – there are those within the visible church who essentially teach that people can make themselves holy by adherence to a set of rules. The result of course is that they are frustrated and defeated, because again this is not God’s way. It is through the merit and sufficiency of Christ’s work that God’s people are sanctified. When believers grasp who and what they are in Christ then out of love and desire for Him they gladly turn from all that is illicit & worldly.

PAUL’S ANSWER TO THIS HERESY

It is seen in ch 2: 9 & 10. In v.9 the word *fulness* is the noun form of the verb translated “ye are complete” in v.10. So it reads “*in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are made full in Him.*” The point is that since God’s people are in union with Christ they are in union with the fulness that there is in Christ and thereby they are recipients of that fulness. That is Gospel truth – by such live in victory over every false notion and enjoy God’s blessing on the soul.

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