

**Early Church Writings**  
**Letter to the Colossians**

**Context**

1. Situation presupposed by Colossians – Paul is a prisoner with Epaphras who founded the Colossian community as part of Paul’s larger mission among the Gentiles.
2. Paul does not know the community personally.
3. He and Epaphras hear of problems caused in the young church by troublemakers.
4. Paul takes the occasion of the return of Onesimus to his owner Philemon to have Tychichus report to the Colossians and Laodiceans on his condition, delivering his letter to be read aloud to the troubled assembly in Colossae.
5. Church in Colossae, East of Ephesus and near Laodicea and Hierapolis
6. Letter responds to new teachings regarding both belief and practice
  - a. Christ on same level as angels
  - b. Elemental spirits of the universe
  - c. Insisted on food practices, asceticism, and Sabbath rules and new moon observances

**Issue of Authenticity**

1. Often seen/treated as a witness to traditions developing after the apostle’s death.
2. Many believe written at least one generation after Paul by one of his followers- creates another Captivity Letter
3. Reasons to think it is Paul
  - a. Greek is well within the range Paul displays elsewhere, especially if the sample of comparison includes the Captivity Letters
  - b. As in Philippians and Philemon, he does not cite Torah.
  - c. As in Philippians and 2 Timothy, he uses hymnic material
  - d. Much of his vocabulary is affected by the use of liturgical traditions, above all those associated with Baptism.
  - e. Colossians presupposed no elaborate or hierarchical church order
  - f. The governing image of the church is that of the Body of Christ.
  - g. Colossians makes no reference to authority in the community, apart from calling Epaphras a slave.
4. Reasons to think it is not Paul’s writing
  - a. Ethics in the letter lack the typical Pauline eschatological edge.
  - b. The table of household ethics in 3:18-4:6 is offered in evidence
  - c. The use of this stereotypical teaching, however, has less to do with the passage of time and the “routinization of charisma” than it does with Paul’s audience.
  - d. He is writing to a community that does not know him personally. His ethics fall into “household ethics”
  - e. Other ethics rely on the baptismal traditions shared by gentile churches.
  - f. Most serious charge of inconsistency is leveled at the eschatology of Colossians.
    - i. On basis of 2:12 “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him, through faith in the working of God.”—argued that Colossians has a “realized eschatology” that destroys the delicate balance of “already and not yet” typical of Paul’s statements elsewhere

- ii. Paul speaks of justification and sanctification in the present but reserve “salvation” for the future; for Colossians, salvation is a present reality and justification has no place at all.
- g. Inclusion of hierarchical description of the household relations called household codes.
  - i. In authentic letters, Paul’s description of marital relations is remarkably non-hierarchical

### **Cosmic Christ- preeminent, cosmic rule**

1. Church is body of Christ. Christ is the head of the church, with members comprising the body.
2. Christological Hymn (1:15-20 – praises Christ’s preeminence, role in creation, and the role of his death in reconciling God and humankind. Baptism therefore is the only ritual practice necessary. Letter encourages readers to put aside their sinfulness of the pre-baptismal lives and devote themselves to virtue.

### **Development of thought**

1. When Paul wrote Galatians, whether Gentile believers needed to observe distinctive Jewish rituals (especially circumcision) but also dietary regulations, purity codes and Sabbath observances) was subject to debate in the churches. Gentiles do not have to become Jewish to be a believer/follower;
2. In Colossians, the author takes church member’ interest in observing such rituals as antagonistic to the rule of Christ; he has moved beyond the point where Jewish observance is an option for anyone within the churches.
3. This letter is a window on a period in the history of Christianity when church leaders turned away from Judaism, even while some church members continued to find Jewish practice meaningful.

### **Interesting points to unpack**

1. Prayer for Spiritual wisdom and understanding
  - a. Considers “spiritual things” the goal of life
  - b. Wisdom here is positive and involves knowledge, right living, and patience.
  - c. God’s will – in both Paul’s authentic and the Deutero-Pauline letters – but extremely rare in Jewish Scriptures – conventionally contrasts divine with human will.
  - d. Spiritual wisdom = Greek Sophia
2. Hymn to the Christ (1:15-20)
  - a. Highly developed HIGH Christology, borrowing themes from both Paul and the Septuagint, perhaps from the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel, offered in terms accessible to the letter’s Gentile readers
  - b. The Christ more than rules the world- he is both the first thing created and the principle of creation, the head of the world and the head of the church.
  - c. Resembles the description of personified Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31, present with God at creation; here the Christ has a much greater role than does Wisdom in Proverbs.
  - d. Image of the invisible God – refers to “invisible and disorganized” formless void – for Colossians, the invisible God creates invisible things
  - e. Firstborn of creation, firstborn of the dead – meaning first person raised from the dead

- f. The body, the church – means something larger than the believers gathered in a particular location (which is the meaning in Paul’s letters)
- 3. Proper meaning of the Crucifixion**
- a. “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.
- 4. General thoughts/purposes**
- a. Letter’s main concern is to promote a particular ecclesiology (understanding of the nature of the church) and to oppose other views.
  - b. Elemental spirits of the world – used to describe the powers that enslaved the Gentile Galatians before they received the good news about the Christ.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. The author wants the Colossians to be mature “in Christ”. He understands that their further growth and perfection will come through an ever-deepening recognition of what they already have been given and who they already are.
  - a. Name 3-5 words or phrases to describe who you already are or what you already have been given – and then imagine how you could grow “in Christ” by leaning more fully into your current reality. How might you want to shape the next years or seasons of your life to contain or become more of the essence of Christ? (In other words, what would you bring into your life, surround yourself with, gather around you that would help you know and be Christ more fully?)
2. The author wants the Colossians to have a recognition of Christ the mystery of God as a protection against the wiles of false teaching (2:4)
  - a. How does your knowledge of Christ keep you focused or centered on the truth of Christ when the forces of the world try to draw you away?
  - b. How would you identify false teaching?
  - c. How do you discern what false teaching is from new teaching (in other words, can new teaching be false or true—how do you know?)
3. The crisis in Colossae was one of confidence or assurance (4:12: is what they have been given in Christ enough for perfection or do they require more for maturity?
  - a. The agitators saw “perfection” as the achievement of new levels of spiritual status, marked by observance of law, sexual asceticism, and above all initiation into the higher mysteries of visionary experiences. – Christ +; Paul said, only Christ is needed.
  - b. When does ritual help or hinder us to be in the presence of Christ? What is an experience you had when ritual was VERY helpful to centering yourself and when is it a hindrance?