

Colossians

One good way of getting to grips with Paul's letter to the Colossians is by comparing it to Ephesians. The two cities were only a hundred miles apart, and while Paul was busy with his ministry in Ephesus in AD52-55 (Acts 19), the gospel spread through the whole region. It was Epaphras, who probably heard Paul preach at Ephesus, who spear-headed the mission at Colosse, and the ecclesia seems to have been formed without an actual visit by Paul (Col 1:7; 2:1; 4:12,13). There are many, many connections between Ephesians and Colossians, but it is important also understand the differences between them. This exercise of looking at the similarities and differences is a useful way of appreciating the wonderful message of Colossians.

The close links between Ephesians and Colossians cannot be disputed, and probably suggest that both were written around a similar time in Paul's life (probably during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome – Acts 28:30, AD 60-61). Clearly, Paul was thinking about many of the same topics – and in much the same terms – when through the Spirit the two letters were composed. The ecclesias at Colosse and the neighbouring towns evidently had need for a similar presentation on, for instance, the following areas.

- The 'mystery' of God's plan being revealed in Christ
- The need for disciples to grow in the knowledge of this plan
- The work of reconciliation accomplished in Christ
- The exaltation, glory, and God-like-ness of Christ
- The exaltation of disciples to 'heavenly places' in Christ

Links with Ephesians

Colossians 4:7-8 appears almost verbatim in Ephesians 6:21-22, and Colossians 1:23-29 is close to Ephesians 3:1-13, although these hardly demonstrate a case of literary dependency (it is often claimed that Ephesians 'borrows' from Colossians). A lot of vocabulary is common to the two letters. Here are some of the shared terms:

Fill/full/fullness, knowledge/wisdom etc, mystery, walk, inheritance, redemption, forgiveness, create/creation, principalities/powers, all (things), head/body, church, peace, then/now, riches, glory, mature/maturity, measure, old/new, put on

The following list of passages from Colossians are ones in which there is a rather obvious resonance with the language of Ephesians:

1:9,11,19,21-22,25,27,29; 2:2,9-10,13,19; 3:7,9-10; 3:18-4:1

Some commentaries provide a fully tabulated list of all the related passages.

Knowledge and the Mystery

"For this cause we ... do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." 1:9-10

"(I must fulfil the word of God...) even the mystery which hath been hid from ages, and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." 1:25-27

"That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." 2:2-3

"(You) have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him." 3:10

"(Pray) for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds." 4:3

[Other terms to do with knowledge, revelation, instruction, teaching and wisdom are also found in 1:6,8,28; 2:1,7,8,23; 3:2,16; 4:5,8]

- The need for a new walk and way of life
- The roles and responsibilities that disciples face in daily life
- The responsibilities of Paul as minister of the gospel to the Gentiles

These similarities are real and significant. But this does not mean that the letters and their goals are identical. Here are at least two ways in which the focus of Colossians is a little different. This may be something of an over-simplification, but it seems broadly true:

While both letters focus on the relationship between Christ and his ecclesial bride, in Ephesians the focus is more on the church and its role and responsibilities, whereas in Colossians the focus is more on Christ and his exaltation. The classic passage in 1:15-20 is the epitome of this (see the sidebar on this passage).

While Paul exhorts the Ephesians to restrain themselves from the morally abandoned and self-seeking ways of their old lives as Gentiles, in Colossians there is more emphasis on another danger: that of denying themselves too much by following a mystical path of asceticism and ritual that was in danger of leading only to pride rather than to Godliness.

Both letters refer to the revealed 'mystery' of the gospel, but Colossians unwraps that mystery more in relation to Christ, whereas the 'mystery' in Ephesians is about the entrance of the Gentiles into the God's purpose. When the two epistles talk about knowledge (as they both do), they may do so against the background of different alternative views. In Colosse there seems to have been a belief that ascetic practices

and the observance of ritual provided a route to esoteric and mystical knowledge not available to the average person. Angels and principalities and powers intermediated the communications between man and God, so it was falsely thought by some, and so rituals were necessary to ensure these channels remained ‘open’. In Ephesus people may have been more inclined to believe that carnal and worldly ‘knowledge’ was the better route to spiritual ‘understanding’.

The Situation

There is a certain ‘generality’ about Colossians (like Ephesians) in that it was intended for more than one individual church. This

The Intellectual and Ascetic Challenges

[These quotes are all from ESV]

“I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.” (2:4)

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” (2:8)

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” (2:16)

“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind...” (2:18)

“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ‘do not handle, do not taste, do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (2:20-23)

is made plain towards the end of the letter:

“And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” (4:15)

Nevertheless, Colossians is more specific than Ephesians – that

is, it is more tied-in to the particular needs of a local situation, with more personal greetings and allusions (4:7-17), and addressing particular threats that the brothers and sisters faced quite directly. Epaphras, the native ‘missionary’ to Colosse, was evidently with Paul at the time of writing (4:12) and may well have traveled to Paul to explain some of the developing trends in the ecclesia and his concerns about them. As a relatively new convert himself, he may have felt somewhat out of his depth addressing these, so the chance of having the great apostle tackle them was an opportunity not to be missed.

What, then, were the specific local dangers which Paul wished to avert? He gets round to this in detail in chapter 2, and the

Remaining faithful

There are several passages which speak about the importance of holding on to the true faith:

“If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven, whereof I Paul am made a minister.” (1:23)

“As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgivings.” (2:6-7)

“Holding fast the Head...” (2:19)

relevant passages are all set out in the panel. There are four principal dangers:

- false knowledge
- of an intellectual / rational kind (‘arguments’)
- of a religious / spiritual kind (‘visions’), mysticism
- worship of angels (see footnote 3) and spiritual powers (‘principalities and powers’)
- ritual and rule-making (a partial return to Judaism, perhaps: 2:14)
- asceticism

The first point perhaps undergirds all the others, and explains why Paul begins chapter 2 as he does by insisting that in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge – there is no other name by which we must be saved, nothing else we need to know, but to understand God’s purpose in him. He is our everything. Where, then, intellectual debate? Where claims of visions and insights which supplement God’s already full and complete revelation in Christ? Man’s ability to rationalize and intellectualize are at best a mere distraction in the face of what God has done in Christ. His claims of religious experience which marginalize the gospel message and the uniqueness of what God has done in Christ are an insult to God’s very saving work.

As soon as people start to consider themselves ‘smart’ or ‘inspired’ (in both senses) by looking away from what God has done – as some of the Colossians were in danger of doing – then they start to lose the plot. God’s mystery has been revealed – the central wonder of both Ephesians and Colossians! – so why turn away to something else? This is Paul’s most powerful contention.

And such threats are still present in the modern time. Never have there been so many other places to look, so many distractions, such confidence in the capacities and philosophies of man! Now more and more people claim to be in touch with their ‘spiritual side’, but is this taking them towards gospel truth? Paul would doubtless be as strident in a message for the modern day. There is no wonder he labours the point that the revelation

Christ and the New Creation

Paul's presentation of the role and status of Christ in Col 1:15-20 is justly famed. The passage has a highly elaborate structure, as the table below hints, and Paul's repetition of the term all (eight times or so) to show the extent of Christ's significance and the reach of his work is striking. His description is sometimes said to present the 'cosmic Christ', which is true enough, provided we understand that it is the new creation that is being spoken of. The contrasts with Genesis in the passage are just as important as the similarities. The structure is an important clue to a proper appreciation:

Who is the image ... (v15)

The firstborn of ...

For in him ...

Heaven and earth

All things

Through him, to him (AV by and for)

Who is the beginning ... (v18b)

The firstborn of ...

For in him ...

Heaven and earth

All things

Through him, to him (AV by and unto)

and knowledge of the gospel message – His revealed mystery in Christ – is the central thing (see the panel on p2 for the passages).

The other dangers which Paul addresses grow out of this. There were various belief systems about angels in the ancient world, including in Judaism, and some brethren were being drawn away by the mystique and intricacy of these fabricated schemes. But all they do, says Paul, is lead away from the truth in Christ. There is debate about the particular nature of the threatening Colossian 'heresy', but it seems that there were

elements of Judaism in it (though circumcision is a less central issue than, for instance, in Galatians). It seems it was a sort of Judaism which lent towards mysticism. While it is not possible to fully reconstruct exactly what the false doctrines were from the data we have, some elements are recognizable from what we know of the Judaism at Qumran, and some from the Gnosticism of later times, perhaps in nascent form.

Rules and regulations, whether related to Judaism or not, when they are multiplied and indulged become only an end in themselves, another distraction which conceals the wonderful liberty that Christ has made possible. Ascetic practices such as fasting and other forms of self-denial carry the same danger, and can lead to the obsession with self and one's own determination (or inability, as the case may be) to keep the strictures which have been imposed. 'Do not be deceived,' says Paul. This is not the essence of true Christianity; human pride is what Christ came to address and remedy. He had no intention of pandering to it.

The Flow

But how do these points fit into the flow of the letter as a whole? What is the overall design of the letter to the Colossians? Like a number of his letters there is a fairly obvious division between the more theological or doctrinal part of the letter (the first two chapters in this case), and the points of practical behaviour and outworking (chapters 3 and 4). But it is probably worth briefly sketching in a more thorough way how Paul's reasoning unfolds.

He begins by giving thanks for the wonderful faith of the Colossian brethren (although this is common to most of his letters, the praise and the prayer that they will continue to grow in the knowledge they have and bear fruit in Christ is relatively fulsome here). From this he precedes to remind them of the essence of the gospel (that they have been 'translated' into God's kingdom) through the reconciling work of Christ. This leads

A Sense of Place

The notion of time (then, now, and future) as a way of thinking about the purpose of God and one's own life in relation to it is found in Colossians, though not as fulsomely as was the case in Ephesians. In Colossians, the notion of space and place comes more to the fore – where we have been (estranged Gentiles, in the world), where we are (translated in to his kingdom), and where we must be in our hearts (concerned with the things of heaven, where our life is hid with Christ in God). It's a motif that would repay further study:

- The hope which is laid up for you in heaven (1:5)
- The gospel is come unto you, as in all the world (1:6)
- He has delivered us from the power (domain?) of darkness, and hath translated us to the Kingdom of His dear Son (1:13)
- For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth (1:16)
- By him to reconcile all things unto himself.....whether things in earth, or things in heaven (1:20)
- And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh by his death (1:21-22)
- If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel...which was preached to every creature which is under heaven (1:23)
- The mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations (1:26)
- Walk in Christ rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith... abounding therein (2:6-7)
- Buried with him in baptism, wherein ye are also risen with him (2:12)
- If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth (3:1-2)
- For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory (3:3-4)
- Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth ...In the which ye also walked sometime, when ye lived in them (3:5,7)
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (4:16)

to a description of the wonder and centrality of Christ in God's purpose which dominates the second half of chapter 1.

Paul thus begins with the positive teaching about the wonderful knowledge of the massiveness of Christ and the status of believers in him. This vision fills the whole screen, as it were (if only they could see it as large as he!). Only then does he turn to address the opposing threats to such a conception in chapter 2. As we've already seen, chapter 2 explains that everything is about Christ, so there must be no turning aside to any alternative theorizing, schemes, and practice. The true gospel does not need modifying, refining or supplementing by 'clever' or 'enlightened' human beings.

With that, Paul moves forward to his practical exhortations which comprise 3:1-4:6 (the remainder, 4:7-18 is personal greetings, future plans and signing off). His introduction to these exhortations is wonderful, for it pulls together so much of what he has been demonstrating in the first two chapters (3:1-2). If we have been raised with Christ and now belong to 'heaven' rather than 'earth' (this is a variation on the more common flesh/spirit pairing), we need to leave behind all worldly practices (whether indulgent or ascetic, ritualistic or liberal, intellectual or fake-spiritual). We need to behave in an appropriate way, waiting for Christ to return (3:3-4). This means death to the old way, and the putting on of the new life of Christ. The verses which follow are a fantastic summary of the essence of discipleship, a sort of compact version of what is more fully elaborated upon in Ephesians 4-6. Again, there is a consideration of roles and responsibilities (wife, child, master, etc: 3:18-4:1), there is a list of vices which must be avoided, and the virtues of the spirit to be developed. And there is a wonderful sense of opportunity and excitement that God has brought us in Christ to such a wonderful calling: that we should put on, in our own lives, the amazing life of His son.

Footnotes (to be located in the text)

Although the exact term 'heavenly places' does not appear in Colossians, there are many references to heaven, and the language of being translated into Christ's kingdom and to be being 'hid' with Christ is a related concept.

Colossians mentions this danger too, but dwells on it less. By contrast, Ephesians has nothing to say of the Colossian danger of asceticism.

Passages like 2:18 and especially 2:23 are notoriously difficult to translate and interpret. Paul's description of the Colossian heresy uses language that occurs nowhere else (he may well be quoting their own technical terms), and the text/grammar is difficult. It may be that the 'worship of angels', for instance, refers not to the worshipping of angels as objects of worship, but rather a mystical belief that they were enabled through their rites to participate in the angelic worship (= 'worship of angels') of God.