

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

When we have read the Epistle through a number of times we will discover that Paul did not found the church, had not visited it (1:4; 2:1), but that this church of Asia Minor in the Lychnus Valley was linked with other churches (e.g. the seven churches in Revelation chs. 2 and 3). Paul had ministered at Ephesus for about three years (Acts 19:10), and his disciples had fanned out and churches such as at Laodicea, and Hierapolis, as well as Colossae had sprung to life. Epaphras seems to be the man who had ministered primarily (1:5-9). Archippus also was ministering (4:17). Churches were generally in homes (cf. 4:15). Paul was closely linked in prayer with the church at Colossae (1:28-2:2).

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE

Paul wrote the letter to a church he had never seen, though he had had contact with it. All his letters *generally* were to encourage, support and exhort congregations, and where necessary to correct heresy and rebuke those who were proceeding from deficient or *wrong doctrine* to inadequate or *wrong practice*.

Paul's letter was written to encourage the believers at Colossae. At Colossae also, there was heresy, so that Paul wrote *in particular* to correct that heresy or to deflect people from it. We think we can detect something of the nature of that heresy simply by the corrective teaching of Paul. That helps us to further understand the letter.

THE METHOD OF ATTACKING AND CORRECTING HERESY

The Heresies and Errors

Firstly we ask, 'What was the error or heresy?' The answer is that it seems to have been a form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism arose from dualism which saw matter as evil or of a lesser quality than that which is spiritual, or of spirit. Roughly speaking the body is material and the spirit is immaterial, hence of a higher order. God would not have created a material world, but rather this came from lesser deities or powers. There is a course of angelic beings from the height of God to the lowest of creatures, and these bring about creation. One deals with one's material being by either (a) indulging the flesh in scorn and contempt or (b) by asceticism, i.e. by subjecting the body to merciless repression and denial.

The heretics at Colossae had a number of elements in their thinking which were in error: (i) they listened to, and believed in a certain kind of philosophy (a system of human wisdom), (ii) they distributed the 'fulness of God' (*pleroma*) through the course or system of angels, (iii) they saw themselves as subjected to these angelic powers and their laws (iv) they worshipped angels, (v) they took their stand on visions. Doubtless there were other elements in their thinking which affected their practice of life.

The Method of Defeating Errors

Paul speaks of the fulness of Christ. Christ is God's fulness because God's fulness dwells in him. This is seen in that he created all things and is over them all, and all are one (unified) in him (1:15-17). In Christ are contained 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3). The believer is therefore 'filled full (i.e. complete in Christ' (2:9), and not in or by angels.. The outworking of Christ's fulness is not only his creative work (1:15-17), but the redemptive operation also (2:11-15). This redemptive operation has released the believer from the old (Gnostic) system, into a freedom in Christ.

This new freedom is through the Cross and the Resurrection. Paul is clear that to be 'hid with Christ in God', is to be able to live a life of holiness, defeat of sin, and the triumph of holiness which is expressed in true social relationships through love. Such relationships are in the church, in the family, and in the work of life in the community.

Thus error is refuted by teaching the fulness of Christ. Since practice is dependent upon the truth, the practice of Christian living depends upon the centrality and fulness of Christ.

AN OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE

Chapter 1:1-2	The Opening Greeting.
1:3-8	Thanksgiving: faith, hope and love. The truth, the Gospel.
1:9-11	Paul's prayer for the church. Its aim - knowledge and godly conduct .
1:15-20	The true nature of Christ as Lord of creation and redemption
1: 21-23	The principle and goal of reconciliation through Christ .
1:24 - 2:5	Paul's mission, and Paul's pastoral concern. (i) Paul's mission to the Gentiles (vs. 24, 25) (ii) The message he proclaims (vs. 26-29) (iii) Paul's exhortation and encouragement to the church (2: 1-5) .
:6-15	Paul's attack on error. His exhortation to understand Christ and his victory over evil powers : Christ stronger than the occult powers.
2: 16-23	The Cross liberates from evil powers and erroneous worship of angels. Asceticism is futile in gaining victory over the flesh .
3:1-4	The new freedom through death with Christ. This is the basis of freedom from legalism.
3:5-11	The life of mortification and vivification based on grace and the new life in Christ .
3:12-17	The way the new community lives in love and worship.
3:18 - 4:1	Family and societal life in the new community.
4:2-6	Prayer, thanksgiving, intercession for proclamation, and witness to the world.
4:7-18	Final words; personal greetings and news of the saints.