

**COLOSSIANS:  
MORE THAN ENOUGH**

**LESSON THREE**

**COMMENTARY**

# COMMENTARY NOTES

## COLOSSIANS 1:21-29

**Michael Bird, in the *New Covenant Commentary*, discusses Paul's call to persevere and his labor for them in that regard:**

This section brings together both the thanksgiving of 1:3-14 and the Christ Hymn of 1:15-20 by providing further grounds for thanksgiving through the reconciling work of the Messiah as specifically applied to the Colossians. The train of thought in 1:21-23 appears to be: (1) the stark transition the Colossians have experienced in being transferred from enmity and hostility to holiness and hope, (2) the apparent need for the Colossians to remain faithful to the gospel, (3) and the cosmic scope of the gospel. These short verses are significant in so far as they summarize most of the epistle up to this point, including hope and gospel (1:5), worldwide mission (1:6), perseverance (1:11), salvation as transference to a new state (1:12-14), and reconciliation through Jesus's death (1:20). More broadly, the whole section of 1:21-2:7 constitutes a rhetorical *probatio* or logical argument that enumerates the main proposition. Paul here establishes the grounds for their continued adherence to the gospel (as opposed to their acceptance of the philosophy). He does this by setting forth the intrinsic value of what the gospel has already achieved in them, the divine honors accorded to the gospel messengers, and the privileges afforded to those who have been granted access to the divine mystery that centers on the Messiah.

With the mention of you, Paul applies the foregoing section to the Colossians directly by involving them in the cosmic saga of reconciliation. Their prior condition is described as alienated and enemies in thought, which denotes their active opposition and hostility to God as expressed by their evil deeds. These evil deeds probably consist of the set of inappropriate behaviors listed in Col 3:5-9 which typifies the unbelieving Gentile world. This dire condition is then markedly contrasted with the advent of reconciliation. The now marks a redemptive-historical transition in the state of the Colossians' relationship to God, which comes through the apocalyptic invasion of the cosmos by God's rectifying work to restore order and justice to the created realm (see Rom 3:21; 6:22; 7:6; 11:30; 1 Cor 15:20). They have been reconciled, hostilities and opposition ended, through the body of his flesh through death. The words for "body" (*soma*) and "flesh" (*sarx*) can sometimes be synonymous, but "flesh" normally has negative connotations related to human weakness, frailty, and sinfulness. Yet here they denote, almost crudely, the physicality of Jesus's work involving death as the termination of his human life (cf. NET; NIV; NJB).<sup>2</sup> The point is clear: the reconciler is the human Jesus, and the means of reconciliation is his cross. The purpose of Jesus's death is that the Colossians be presented before God as holy and without blemish and irreproachable. These three descriptions use sacrificial cultic imagery and relate to a particular status rather than to a moral state; it is the absence of guilt or blame that marks those who are reconciled. The him of before him is indeterminate, it could be Jesus or the Father, but given the preceding context it seems to be a reference to Jesus as the judge on the day of judgment (see John 5:26-30; Acts 17:31; Rom 2:16; 2 Tim 4:1).

This salvation is contingent upon perseverance, as they must remain firmly rooted in the faith understood as the received body of Christian teaching. Or, put negatively, not swerving from the hope of the gospel, or departing from the hope laid up for them in heaven (1:5). The nature of the Greek "if ... remain" is a conditional clause and assumes the truthfulness of the proposition set forth; in other words, Paul warns them of failure but seems to presume upon a positive outcome in their response. The gospel they are to hold on to is the same one that has been proclaimed in all of creation under heaven. Much like what Paul did in 1:6, he puts the Colossians' reception of the gospel in a global and even cosmic context. What is happening to them is a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere in the world. The phrase all of creation is certainly hyperbolic, since Paul's missionary endeavors only encompassed selected regions in the eastern Mediterranean from "Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum" (Rom 15:19). Nonetheless, through the work of Paul, God and God's Son were being proclaimed to peoples who knew only the domain of darkness. Indeed, Paul's service has a unique role in the unfolding of the mystery of God, which has recently been made known.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 60-62.

# COMMENTARY NOTES

## COLOSSIANS 2:1-5

**Douglas Moo, in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, explains the nature of Paul's struggle for the church at Colossae:**

2:1 It is possible that chapter 2 introduces a new stage in Paul's argument, but, as we have noted above, 2:1-5 is closely related to 1:24-29. Paul continues in this new paragraph to talk about his ministry. But his attention shifts a bit, from general discussion of himself and his ministry to the significance of his ministry for the Colossians and for the threat of false teaching that they are facing. Aletti discerns a chiasm in this paragraph, with vv. 1 and 5 focusing on the readers, vv. 2a and 4 on the reaction Paul hopes to stimulate from his readers, and vv. 2b and 3 on the central truth to which his readers need to respond: Christ, the mystery of God, the repository of "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Though not explicitly translated in the TNIV, v. 1 begins with a conjunction, *gar*, "for." It may suggest that 2:1-5 explain why Paul has written 1:24-29, but it more likely simply connects 2:1 to 1:29, as Paul illustrates and elaborates his apostolic "struggle." *I want you to know* draws attention to what Paul is about to say. The suffering and struggle attendant on Paul's apostolic ministry are not only directed to people with whom he has personally worked but also to people, such as the Colossians, whom Paul has never met. The close connection between 1:29 and 2:1 is signaled especially by the language of "contending," a form of the same word occurring here in 2:1 (the noun *agon*), which has also been used in 1:29 (the verb *agonizomai*). As in 1:29, Paul characterizes his ministry as involving hard work, often in difficult circumstances and against dedicated opponents.

Three groups are the beneficiaries of this apostolic "contending": *you* (e.g., the Colossians), *those at Laodicea*, and *all who have not met me personally*. The last phrase translates a Greek construction that would literally be rendered "as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." "Face" in the biblical languages often expresses the idea of personal presence; hence our idiom "face-to-face" (which is employed here in several English versions: NRSV; ESV; NET; NAB). The TNIV therefore accurately renders the metaphor into standard contemporary English. Laodicea was an important city, with a significant Jewish population, about twelve miles from Colossae. The church there (which is warned about spiritual lethargy in Rev. 3:14-22) was probably founded by Epaphras. The Laodicean Christians are referred to again in Colossians 4:13-16, where there is also mention of Hierapolis, another city of the Lycus valley. Why Paul fails to mention Hierapolis here is not clear. Some (noting the lack of reference to the church in Revelation 2-3 and the merely passing reference in Colossians 4) suggest that the gospel did not take root there as successfully as in Colossae and Laodicea. However, the church in Hierapolis is certainly known to have flourished in later years.<sup>65</sup> Others suggest, perhaps more plausibly, that the false teaching had not infected Hierapolis to the same degree as Colossae and Laodicea, so there was less need for Paul to assert apostolic authority over the church there. Nevertheless, the Christians in Hierapolis are certainly included in the last category, which includes "all" those who, like the Colossians and Laodiceans, have never met Paul.<sup>67</sup> Whether this group is restricted to other believers in the immediate vicinity of Colossae or includes in a general way Christians whom Paul has not met but for whom Paul feels some ministerial responsibility is not clear.<sup>69</sup>

2 Paul strives so hard for these converts with the purpose that *they may be encouraged in heart*. The word translated "encourage" in TNIV and in most English versions is *parakaleo*, a verb that occupies a wide spectrum of meaning. Paul often uses it to introduce a command, in which case it means "exhort" or "urge" (e.g., "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" [Eph. 4:1]). When he uses it absolutely, as here, the verb usually has the sense of "comfort" or "encourage." O'Brien correctly argues that "comfort," supported by some interpreters, is too weak here. He argues for "strengthen," but, in view of parallel texts, this may be too strong.<sup>71</sup> We should probably follow TNIV and most English versions and render "encourage." The Greek text has "their hearts" as the subject of the passive verb "be encouraged" (cf. NASB); the idea is captured accurately in the TNIV's *encouraged in heart*. References to the "heart" in the Bible require

# COMMENTARY NOTES

English speakers to “distance” themselves from their own culture. For the strong tendency in modern English is to use heart with reference to the emotions, whereas in Scripture “heart” designates the center of the personality, the source of willing and thinking in addition to feeling. Hence it is a new heart that God promises in order to transform his people’s basic orientation toward himself (Ezek. 36:26). “Encouraged in heart” or “to have hearts encouraged” is therefore a way of referring to an encouragement that touches the deepest part of our being and that affects every aspect of our persons.

A second purpose of Paul’s apostolic “striving” is that Christians would be *united in love*. A number of English versions, following the Greek literally, subordinate this verb to “encourage”; for example, ESV: “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love.”<sup>72</sup> But the Greek participle frequently adds a relatively distinct verbal idea to the verb it modifies, and this seems to be a case in point. Paul hopes that his ministry will both encourage these believers he has never met and foster unity among them at the same time. The concern for unity seems a bit unexpected in this context, particularly if it is a basis for the *full riches of complete understanding*, as the TNIV suggests. It is possible, then, that this verb (a passive form of *syμβιβάζω*), instead of being translated united, as in almost all the English versions, should be translated “having been taught.” The verb means “teach” in Acts 19:33 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 (quoting Isa. 40:13) and in all its LXX occurrences,<sup>73</sup> and “being taught in love” would provide a natural basis for *full riches of complete understanding*. However “being taught in love” is itself an odd combination, and Paul uses this same verb with the general sense “unite” in 2:19 with reference to the “body” of the church, “*held together* by its ligaments and sinews” (cf. Eph. 4:16). Moreover, the idea of love as a unifying force is clearly enunciated elsewhere in Colossians: “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (3:14). Overall, then, the usual English translation should be preferred. “Love,” then, will be either the means by which unity is achieved (as 3:14 would suggest; cf. NLT: “knit together by strong ties of love”) or, more likely, the sphere in which the unity exists. It is true that Paul has not touched on unity among believers yet in the letter. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Paul associates interaction among the members of the body with spiritual growth later in the letter (2:19). So a reference to the importance of unity is certainly not out of place.

As we noted above, the TNIV suggests that the phrase *the full riches of complete understanding* is the result or purpose of both “encouraged in heart” and “united in love” (so also, it would seem, NRSV; HCSB; REB). However, in the Greek, a *kai* (often “and” in English) precedes the phrase so *that they might have the full riches of complete understanding*. This raises the possibility that this clause is not dependent on the first part of the verse but parallel to it. See, for example, NLT: “For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those in Laodicea.... I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have complete confidence....” Full riches of complete understanding translates another one of Paul’s “run-on” genitive phrases that are so common in Colossians. Dunn speaks somewhat disparagingly of an “awkward echo of the prayer already offered in 1:9–10, with a somewhat tautologous alliterative piling up of the thought of completeness.” The reference back to 1:9–10 is, indeed, quite clear, as is the alliteration: *pan ploutos tēs plērophorias tēs syneseōs*. But “awkwardness” is in the eye of the beholder (or the reader), and the repetition of ideas may be emphatic rather than simply repetitious. Paul is again piling up words in order to hammer home the truth that Christ, and Christ alone, is the source of every conceivable bit of spiritual knowledge worth having.

Still, this truth leaves the structure to be sorted out. The ESV reflects the Greek structure rather closely: “all the riches of full assurance of understanding.” This does not make for very comprehensible English, however, so almost all the other versions (including the usually very “literal” NASB) introduce other nuances. The two main issues to be settled are (1) the meaning of *plerophorias*; and (2) the semantic function of the two genitive expressions, *tes plerophorias* and *tēs syneseōs*. The word *plerophoria* occurs four times in the New Testament. Once it clearly means “full assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5), but in its other three occurrences it could mean either “full assurance” or simply “fullness” (Heb. 6:11; 10:22; and here). A number of possibilities emerge from the intersection of these two issues, but two options are particularly likely. First, *plerophoria* might mean “fullness,”

# COMMENTARY NOTES

so that it will function essentially to reiterate the completeness of the understanding that Paul is talking about (so, basically, TNIV).<sup>80</sup> Second, *plerophoria* might mean “full assurance,” in which case it will add the idea that true understanding brings with it an assurance; see REB, “the full wealth of conviction which understanding brings.”<sup>81</sup> A choice between these options is not easy to make, but the focus on the exclusivity of Christ might favor the former.

This exclusivity emerges explicitly at the end of v. 2, in a phrase in which Paul “defines” *complete understanding*: it consists in nothing more nor less than knowing *the mystery of God, namely, Christ*. This way of relating the two “knowing” phrases—having “full riches of complete understanding” and “knowing the mystery of God”—views the latter as repeating and elaborating the former. The TNIV, on the other hand, takes the second as the purpose of the former: *the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know ...* (cf. also NASB).<sup>83</sup> A third option is to view the latter phrase as parallel to the former, both indicating the purpose of the encouragement (and unity) (v. 2a) or of Paul’s contending (v. 1) (cf. RSV; NRSV; ESV; REB). We slightly prefer the first of these, since it appropriately highlights what appears to be the critical and summarizing point.

The ultimate purpose of Paul’s ministry, including this very letter to the Colossians, is that believers might *know the mystery of God, namely, Christ*. The Greek text underlying the last four words in this phrase is very confused, with a tangled web of textual variants facing the interpreter. But most scholars concur that the reading assumed in the TNIV translation—and in virtually all the other English translations—is the correct one.<sup>84</sup> If this reading is accepted, the Greek text again confronts us with a series of three genitives. But, in this case, the significance of each one is relatively clear. The first, *tou mysteriou—the mystery*—indicates the object of the verbal noun “knowledge” (TNIV, may know). The second is possessive: the mystery “belongs to” God. It is only with the third—*Christou*—that there can be any question. A very few commentators have attached the word to the immediately preceding word, God: “the mystery of the God who belongs to Christ” (cf. “the God of our Lord Jesus” in Eph. 1:17; “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” in 1:3). But, in light of the very clear lead given us in 1:28, where the “mystery” is defined as “Christ in you,” we should construe *Christou* as an exegetical genitive dependent on “mystery”: *the mystery of God, namely, Christ*; “God’s mystery, which is Christ” (ESV). Earlier in the letter, in a somewhat parallel passage, Paul made “God’s will” (v. 9) or “God” (v. 10) the object of our “knowing” (*epignosis*). Now, in light of the high Christology of 1:15–20, Paul makes “the mystery of God” the object of that knowing and identifies that mystery with Christ.

3 This verse is the christological high point of the letter. It does not match the “hymn” of 1:15–20 for exalted language in reference to Christ, but it expresses beautifully and compactly the cutting-edge christological point that is Paul’s driving concern: Christ is the one in whom is to be found all that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God. The all-encompassing nature of the knowledge to be found in Christ is highlighted by yet another occurrence of “all” (*pas*) and by the use of the two terms “wisdom” (*sophia*) and “knowledge” (*gnosis*). The latter term occurs only here in Colossians, although its cognate compound form, *epignosis*, occurs frequently (1:9, 10; 2:2; 3:10; the verb *epiginosko* occurs in 1:6). It is unlikely that there is any difference in meaning between the two. Paul probably chooses the simpler form here because of its more biblical, and especially wisdom, orientation.<sup>88</sup> The simple form *gnosis* occurs almost forty times in the wisdom books of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Sirach), whereas *epignosis* occurs only once in these books. Moreover, *gnosis* is paired with *sophia* in several texts (Rom. 11:33; Eccl. 1:17; 2:26; 9:10; cf. Eccl. 7:12; 12:9; Sir. 21:13, 18), whereas *epignosis* is never used with *sophia*. This background quite adequately explains the presence of the word here, without recourse to a connection with an alleged “proto-gnostic” heresy in Colossae. At the same time, it is possible that Paul’s concern with true understanding stands in contradistinction to the claims that the false teachers were making. “Wisdom,” of course, refers to practical knowledge, the ability to understand reality from God’s perspective and to act on that understanding. “Knowledge,” on the other hand, has a more intellectual focus. But we should probably not make too much of the distinct ideas each term communicates. Paul connects the two words by using a single article to govern both of them, and he probably therefore wants us to focus on the entire phrase rather than on the individual words.

# COMMENTARY NOTES

Labeling “wisdom and knowledge” *treasures* may also reflect Old Testament wisdom tradition. Proverbs 2:1-8, for instance, includes many of the key words that Paul uses in this and related contexts in Colossians; and “treasures” is among them (we note parallel words in the LXX):

My son, if you accept my words and store up (*krypsēs*; “hide”; cf. v. 3) my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom (*sophia*; cf. v. 3) and applying your heart (*kardia*; cf. v. 2) to understanding—indeed, if you call out for insight (*sophia*; cf. v. 3) and cry aloud for understanding (*synesis*; cf. v. 2), and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure (*thesauros*; cf. v. 3), then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge (*epignosis*; cf. v. 2) of God. For the Lord gives wisdom (*sophia*; cf. v. 2); from his mouth come knowledge (*gnosis*; cf. v. 3) and understanding (*synesis*; cf. v. 2). He holds success in store (*thesaurizo*; cf. v. 3) for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.

Paul rarely uses the word “treasure” (*thesauros*; only elsewhere in 2 Cor. 4:7), making it even more likely that its presence here is owing to a reminiscence of this kind of wisdom teaching (see also Wis. 7:12-14; Sir. 1:25). It serves to underscore the value of wisdom and knowledge that is found in Christ. As the quotation from Proverbs 2 shows, Paul’s claim that these treasures are *hidden* in Christ might also depend on this wisdom tradition. However, Lightfoot and others have argued that the presence of hiddenness language again is a parry against a gnostic-type false teaching. And still others suggest, more plausibly, that the language is rooted in Jewish apocalypticism. This background seems clearly to lie behind the “hidden”/“revealed” language of 1:26, as we have seen, so we might expect this also to be the background here, where again Paul speaks of the mystery (v. 2). But it is also possible that we can read too much into the imagery. The combination of “hidden” and “treasure” is a natural one, then and now, since hiding the treasure was often the means of securing and protecting it.<sup>93</sup> And the use of “hidden” in this verse does not have an implicit contrast with “revealed,” since Paul’s point, of course, is that wisdom and knowledge are now freely available in Christ. They are “hidden” in Christ in the sense that they are “treasures” that have been deposited in him and are now stored up in him. Anyone who comes to know Christ by faith can draw from his store all the wisdom and knowledge that exists.

4 The transition between vv. 3 and 4 is abrupt, with no particle or conjunction linking the two verses. And for the first time, Paul warns explicitly about false teaching. These factors have led some interpreters to conclude that a new section of the letter begins with this verse.<sup>95</sup> Moule, for instance, argues that the pronoun *this* (*touto*) refers forward to the second part of v. 4, which he thinks might be imperatival in force: “What I mean is this: let no one lead you astray...” This is unlikely.<sup>97</sup> And, however we translate, it is likely, following most of the commentators, that we should view vv. 4-5 more as the conclusion to the section that begins in 1:24 than as the introduction to what follows. As we noted above in the introduction to this section, v. 5, with its expression of Paul’s personal concern and the language of “flesh,” returns to themes found in 1:24-25, suggesting that it closes off an argument that begins there. It also has clear connections with 2:1: “those who have not seen my face in the flesh”; “absent [from you] in the flesh” (my own translations). And it is v. 6, rather than v. 4, that marks the stronger transitional moment in the letter. Of course, this does not mean that vv. 4-5 have no relation to what follows. They are clearly transitional, as Paul moves from the initial christologically oriented rehearsal of the benefits the Colossians enjoy (1:3-23) and his own particular role in mediating these benefits (1:24-2:3) to direct address of the Colossians. In view of the climactic significance of v. 3, it is probably to Christ as the one in whom is found all wisdom and knowledge that *this* (*touto*) specifically refers. But that verse also summarizes the essential christological teaching of chapter 1. In this sense, Paul refers to all that he has written in the letter so far.

The theology, and especially the high Christology, of 1:1-2:3 has, then, a direct practical purpose: to keep believers from being deceived by *fine-sounding arguments*. This phrase translates a single Greek word (*pithanologia*), which has a neutral meaning, “plausible arguments” (ESV); “persuasive argument” (NASB). But the context here obviously requires a negative connotation, such as is reflected in the TNIV (see also RSV, “beguiling speech”; NJB and NAB, “specious arguments”; NET, “arguments that sound reasonable”). And there is some lexical basis for this nuance, since Plato

# COMMENTARY NOTES

associates *pithanologia* with “popular oratory” and warns about accepting conclusions on this basis rather than on the basis of a “cogent proof” (*apodeixis*; *Theaetetus* 162E). So for us: paying too much attention to *fine-sounding arguments* can deceive us about religious and spiritual truth. Paul has no doubt about the vital importance of spiritual truth, and he knows how perilously easy it is for believers to be led astray by high-flown rhetoric (or, in our day, by “multimedia presentations”). The antidote for such false teaching is the “cogent proof” of Christ’s absolute supremacy and exclusivity.

5 In this verse Paul explains (*gar*; “for”) why he thinks it appropriate for him to issue warnings, such as we have in v. 4, to the Colossian Christians. Part of the explanation has already been implicitly given in 1:24–29: Paul has been called to minister to the entire “body,” the church, and especially to Gentiles. He therefore has “authority,” in some sense, over the Colossians. In this verse he meets another objection: his physical absence from Colossae. What gives Paul the right, under house arrest in Rome and far removed from the Colossians, to warn and rebuke them? The answer is his presence with them “in spirit.” Paul sets this in contrast to his absence from them “in the flesh (*sarx*).” The TNIV’s *in body* captures well the sense that the elusive word *sarx* has here (almost all the English translations do the same). The contrast with “body” would naturally suggest that “spirit” (*pneuma*) refers to the human spirit. Indeed, the language is popular in our own culture as a way of indicating a nonphysical, empathetic “withness.” However, as Gordon Fee has argued, it is doubtful whether Paul ever uses the language of “spirit” without some reference to the Holy Spirit. Here, then, while the immediate reference may be, indeed, to Paul’s own “spirit,” it is his spirit as taken up into the Holy Spirit. His “presence” with the Colossians, then, is not a simple “you will be in my thoughts and prayers,” but involves a profound corporate sense of identity, based on and mediated by the Spirit of God. It is on the basis of this union, effected in and by Christ and mediated by the Spirit, that Paul can address the Colossian Christians.

But the communication that takes place in “S/spirit” goes both directions. Not only does Paul, by letter, warn the Colossians; he also is “delighted to see” that they are at present doing well in the faith. The TNIV’s *delight to see* translates two parallel Greek participles: *chairon kai blepon*, literally, “rejoicing and seeing.” Some interpreters insist that the two participles, because of the *kai* between them, must be given independent force: “rejoicing because he sees” or “rejoicing and [then] looking”—in the sense that Paul continues to look because “he derives satisfaction from it.” But it makes better sense of the verse if the two participles function within a mutually interpreting hendiadys, such as the TNIV and all the other English versions assume.

Paul’s seeing is accompanied by rejoicing. And what he rejoices to see is *how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is*. The TNIV freely renders the Greek, which would be literally translated “your order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.” Both “order” (*taxis*) and “firmness” (*stereoma*) are used in military contexts, and a number of interpreters think that Paul uses them in this sense. Paul is like a general, inspecting his troops and rejoicing to see that they are displaying the disciplined formation (*taxis*) and strong force (*stereoma*) that they will need to fight the false teachers. Interpreting the words in this fashion makes for good preaching, but it is dubious lexicography. Both terms do, indeed, occur as technical military terms, but they also occur much more widely in the general sense simply of “order” and “firmness.” The Greek does not make it clear whether we should construe “your faith in Christ” with both words or only with “firmness.” The English translations, explicitly or implicitly, take the latter view, as do most of the commentators.<sup>108</sup> If this is correct, then the genitive *tes ... pisteos* could be subjective—“firmness created by faith”—or, more probably, loosely possessive—“the firmness that belongs to your faith,” for example, “your strong faith” (NLT).<sup>109</sup> Paul’s affirmation of the solid spiritual state of the Colossians might seem surprising in light of the urgency of his concern about false teaching in the community. Dunn suggests that Paul here expresses “more ... of what he would hope to see were it possible.” But there is little reason to introduce such a hypothetical notion. Paul’s commendation of the Colossians is in keeping with his other direct reference to their spiritual state (1:4–6). And the language he uses later in this chapter suggests that the false teaching is something to be resisted, not something that has already infected the church. The Colossian Christians have started well (1:7–8), and they are continuing well. It is the future for

# COMMENTARY NOTES

which Paul is concerned. As Wink puts it, “The epistle is a vaccination against heresy, not an antibiotic for those already afflicted.”<sup>2</sup>

## COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

**In the *Cornerstone Bible Commentary*, Harold Hoehner expounds upon Paul’s conclusion to the letter:**

The conclusion of the letter falls into three parts, the commendation of the messengers, the greetings, and Paul’s final requests and blessing.

Paul has ended the body of his letter. He has come to the conclusion, where he will finish as one appropriately ends a Greco-Roman letter. First, he will attest to the trustworthiness of the letter bearers (4:7-9). Then he will send greetings from various leaders around him (4:10-15). Next he will give a couple of final instructions (4:16-17). Finally, he will take up the stylus himself and write his personal greeting and blessing (4:18). I will look at each of these in turn.

Tychicus was the primary letter carrier (4:7). The job of a letter carrier was not simply that of a postman. The job included reading the letter to the congregation, explaining and expanding anything that needed it, and answering the questions that arose, whether about the content of the letter or about the writer and his situation (Richards 2000). This is the reason why the commendation of the letter carrier was so important and why the authors sometimes say that the person was “faithful” or would explain how things went with the author, for that let the hearers know that the explanations and expansions of the letter carrier were authorized. The letter carrier was authorized to be the first exegete and to expand and fill in as needed. In the New Testament letters, mention is often made regarding such letter carriers, both men (e.g., Titus, some of the Corinthian correspondence; Silvanus, 1 Pet 5:12) and women (Phoebe, Rom 16:1-2). They were the first interpreters of Peter and Paul.

Furthermore, the Pauline churches were bound together not by organizational structure but by personal relationships. Men and women who had worked with Paul as co-workers for periods of time remained behind in this or that city to assist churches in the area, carried letters from Paul to churches or from churches to Paul, or returned to their home communities, bringing with them a web of relationship that bound the various Christian communities together. In the case of Colossians, the letter carrier was Tychicus, whom Acts identifies as an Asian (Acts 20:4), perhaps from the same river system on which Colosse was situated. Since he first appears with Paul at the end of his final visit to Corinth and then as an Asian delegate on Paul’s trip to Jerusalem, it is possible that Tychicus became Paul’s co-worker while Paul was in Ephesus. At the least, he was an Asian and so native to Asian culture and dialect.

Tychicus was identified as the letter carrier not only for Colossians but also for Ephesians (Eph 6:21) and possibly the Epistle to Titus (Titus 3:12). Paul’s point, however, is that he was not only more or less local but also part of the Christian family. The Christian family was viewed as more significant than one’s natural family and was treated as a real family. Tychicus is also recognized as a co-worker (“faithful helper” or, better, “faithful minister” and “fellow slave” or co-worker “in the Lord”). The expression “in the Lord” was added by Paul to make it clear that his status in this world was not that of a slave, which was important to state especially since Onesimus, a slave, was part of the group coming to the Colossians (4:9). This is how he described the Colossians themselves in 1:2 and how he described Epaphras in 1:7, which puts Tychicus on a par with Epaphras as a full member of Paul’s closest group of companions.

Along with Tychicus went Onesimus, who was commended in similar terms, although not called a co-worker (4:9). Onesimus was certainly the same Onesimus about whom Philemon was written since he is “one of your own people,” so presumably he returned from carrying that letter to Philemon. I do not think Colossians and Philemon were carried at the same time because there are some significant

<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 163-175.

# COMMENTARY NOTES

changes in the situation of those around Paul in the two greetings. Perhaps Paul omitted the “fellow slave” or co-worker term because Onesimus was new on his team and thus still an apprentice. Or perhaps Paul did not add this term because, given Onesimus’s legal status as a slave, it would have been insensitive and perhaps confusing to use this designation for him. Or perhaps Paul did not add it because Onesimus was Philemon’s slave and thus Paul did not feel at liberty to call him his fellow slave without a release from Philemon. Whatever the case, these two men, Tychicus and Onesimus, had the same duty: They were to report to the Colossians in detail about Paul’s situation, certainly including the situation of the church in the city where he was imprisoned. Since this is repeated three times, it is clearly very important to Paul, even though he had never personally met the members of the believing community in Colosse. Personal relationships rather than church structure bound the early church together. The other job that the letter-carriers had was to encourage the Colossians (4:8; literally to “comfort your hearts”), which probably was intended to come from their personal reports about Paul, as well as from the letter and its interpretation by these two Christian workers.

Having said what he could to make sure that his messengers would be well received, Paul then turned to relaying the greetings from those known to the Colossians. Here again is an indication of the importance of personal relationships in uniting the church. Furthermore, this is another indication that the various Christian communities saw themselves as parts of an extended family and took their family relationships seriously.

The first person to send greetings is Aristarchus, a co-worker of Paul’s (4:10; Phlm 1:24). He had come from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4) and had been with Paul during his Ephesian ministry (Acts 19:29). It is probably during this period of ministry that Aristarchus came in contact with some of the Colossians, either because of a trip to Colosse or because some Colossians had visited Ephesus. When Paul wrote Philemon, Aristarchus was not in prison, but at this time he too was a prisoner like Paul.

The second greeting is from “Mark, Barnabas’s cousin” (4:10). Barnabas is mentioned because John Mark was closely identified with his cousin throughout the New Testament. According to Acts 13:5, John Mark went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, probably due to Barnabas’s influence (they were also going to Barnabas’s home territory first). Later (Acts 13:13), however, Mark abandoned the mission party—we are not told why. When Paul and Barnabas started to set out again from Jerusalem, Barnabas wanted to take Mark again, perhaps giving him a second chance. Paul was so opposed to this and Barnabas so strongly for it that the missionary pair split, and Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus (Acts 15:36–39). Perhaps Barnabas was right and Mark redeemed himself on that trip. Whatever the case on that missions trip, in the years since Mark (and most likely Barnabas also; see 1 Cor 9:6) reconciled with Paul and became and would remain a trusted co-worker. He was also with Paul when Paul wrote Philemon and was there referred to as Paul’s co-worker (Phlm 1:24). However, it is likely that Mark had not yet visited Colosse, for Paul had to instruct them to “receive” or “welcome” him, which they might have been reluctant to do if they had only known his early history with Paul and the conflict that this had caused (Acts 15:36–39). Paul was not certain at this time whether Mark would travel to Asia, but apparently they were discussing the idea, for Paul viewed it as expedient to mention the possible trip. At what point he had previously instructed the church to welcome Mark, we do not know. Perhaps there was a previous letter to the Colossians that we know nothing about. What we do know is that 2 Timothy 4:11 pictures Mark as being in or close to Asia and also as being very valued by Paul.

The third greeting is from Jesus Justus (4:11). He, along with Mark and Aristarchus, was identified as a Jew. If we are correct in viewing the false teaching that was threatening the Colossians as essentially Jewish, this indication that three of Paul’s co-workers were Jews would demonstrate to the Colossians that some Jews held Paul’s point of view. That they alone were with Paul indicates that Timothy, Silvanus (Silas), Aquila, and Priscilla were not then present in Paul’s company. This would be surprising if Colossians were written in Rome, for Aquila and Priscilla were last heard of as leading a house church there (see Rom 16:3–5). However, this “only” along with the fact that these three were a comfort to Paul may also indicate Paul’s sadness that large numbers of Jews had not joined the Jesus movement, a sadness that he expressed in Romans 9–11. These three, however, were

# COMMENTARY NOTES

his co-workers, to which title he added the unusual expression “for the Kingdom of God.” When Paul speaks of the Kingdom (14 times in the Pauline corpus, half of them in the main Pauline letters), as he has already done once in Colossians (1:13), he normally speaks of inheriting the Kingdom or of the characteristics of the Kingdom, rather than working for the Kingdom. What this indicates is that Acts is correct in characterizing Paul’s mission and ministry as revolving around the announcement of the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 28:23). In fact, the last we hear about Paul in Acts is that he is “boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). The announcement of the reign of God and Jesus as the agent of that reign was central to Paul’s gospel.

The fourth greeting comes from Epaphras (4:12). When Colossians was written Epaphras was not in jail, but when Philemon was written he was (Phlm 1:23). We learned earlier (1:7) that he had brought news about the Colossian believers to Paul and that he had previously ministered in Colosse, from which many hypothesize that he had planted the church there. Here he is identified as a Colossian, which would explain his previous work to see the church established in his city and his present concern for that church. What Paul makes clear is that Epaphras’s prayers echo Paul’s own. As Paul struggled for them (1:29; 2:1), so does Epaphras; Paul’s term refers to wrestling in prayer, a vivid metaphor. As Paul wanted them to be mature and confident, so did Epaphras (1:28; “mature” is better translated “perfect”; cf. “confident,” 2:2). And as Paul viewed confidence and maturity as measured by the will of God (cf. 1:9), which, of course, for Paul was found supremely expounded in the life, teaching, and present leadership of Jesus, so also did Epaphras. Here we have a true Pauline co-worker, a Colossian in origin, but of one heart with Paul, presumably having learned how to pray from Paul. Since he was from the Lycus Valley, the focus of his prayers was specifically directed there (4:13). Paul said that he bears witness to the fact that this “slave of Christ Jesus” did not just say that he prayed for his fellow believers at home but did in fact do so. In fact, he labored intensely in prayer, not just for those in Colosse, but also for the two nearby cities Laodicea and Hierapolis. There was certainly a church in Laodicea; however, this is the only mention of Hierapolis in the New Testament. Epaphras might be a long way from Colosse, but his heart was true, and he was doing everything he could for the good of the Colossians, a good that coincided with what Paul wished for these people.

The final greetings come from Luke and Demas (4:14), who also sent greetings in Philemon 1:24. Virtually all we know about Luke comes from this brief passage, except for 2 Timothy 4:11 (“only Luke is with me”), where Paul’s love for him was mirrored in Luke’s love for Paul. Luke’s designation as a physician indicates that he had some learning, although given the unsystematic state of medicine at that time it would be hard to say how much education he had. Nor can we say anything about his status in that slaves were often highly educated by their masters if a particular expertise were needed in the household. Luke could have obtained what training he had as a free man or been trained as a slave and later received his freedom, perhaps as a reward for healing received through his hands. Whatever his previous history, Paul thought highly of him, which contrasts with the negative cast given to physicians in other biblical texts.

Paul’s reference to Demas is the shortest of all. Did Paul already suspect that Demas would abandon him (2 Tim 4:10) and so omitted the friendly comments he had for the others, or was Demas hardly known by the Colossians so that Paul just mentioned him as a companion? The answer is unclear from the text.

Paul then instructed the Colossians to greet their neighboring church, that in Laodicea, a three-hour walk across and down the river valley (4:15). The Laodiceans were also part of the family of God (and thus Paul used brother-sister language), and perhaps the Christians in Laodicea were closer parts of the “family” in more than proximity if that church were also started by Epaphras. What we know about Laodicea (besides the references in Rev 3:14–22) is that the church was large enough to consist of more than one house church and that one of the house churches was led by a person whom Paul knew. It would be surprising for Paul to greet the church in general and then specifically greet the only house church in Laodicea, but it would be quite understandable if he greeted the whole church generally and then the one house church specifically whose leader he knew personally. Nympha was apparently a woman of some means since it was usually the wealthier members of the church who

# COMMENTARY NOTES

hosted the gatherings. She was either single or had a particularly tolerant husband who was not a Christian since her husband was not named. Given that she had met Paul, the former seems more likely since that would have given her the freedom to travel on business, which would be the most likely way that she came across Paul. As host of the church and its common meal, the Lord's Supper, she was also its leader. Paul knew three other leaders in Colosse: Apphia, Archippus, and Philemon (perhaps wife/mother, son, and father/husband respectively). That limited personal knowledge fits with what he said earlier about having never visited the churches in the Lycus Valley. No church or individual believers were greeted in Hierapolis, which probably means that there was as yet no church there, even if the people there were regularly prayed for by Epaphras. Whatever believers were in that city probably worshiped in one of the house churches in Laodicea.

Paul directed the Colossians to send their greetings, and the letter we know as Colossians, to the church in Laodicea; in turn the Colossians were to ask for the letter Paul had written to Laodicea, and both letters were to be read aloud in the sister churches (4:16). In antiquity it was normal for letters to be read aloud to their recipients. Here we see the beginnings of the formation of the Pauline corpus—that is, the recognition that something written to one church with its particular problems could be helpful to another church. This recognition must have driven the later collection of the Pauline letters. But here we also see the problems involved in such a collection since the letter to Laodicea has apparently not survived (unless it was a circular letter and comes to us via the Ephesian copy). Paul apparently thought that this letter was helpful enough that it should be read in a second church, yet we do not have the letter. Either the later church did not share that perspective and so did not preserve the letter or else some accident destroyed it. Either way, it means that neither apostolic authorship nor widespread usefulness were enough to get documents into the canon. The Holy Spirit selected the documents that he wished to be preserved in the canon of Scripture, whether or not they were written by apostles, and allowed others that we might wish to see for ourselves pass into oblivion.

Having made clear that the letters were to be exchanged, Paul turned to Archippus, who was clearly a leader in Colosse, having previously been a companion of Paul (4:17; cf. Phlm 1:2). He was possibly part of Philemon's household, perhaps his son. Whatever the case, Paul knew that Archippus had received some specific commission from the Lord. While some have speculated that it had to do with Onesimus, that seems unlikely in that Onesimus was with Paul when Colossians was being written, and he did not need some ministry in Colosse at that time. It was surely not some general ministry such as preaching or teaching. The fact is we will never know what it was nor how Archippus received the commission from the Lord, although apparently it came during the time he was around Paul since Paul knew about it. What is clear is that he needed some authority or encouragement to carry this ministry out. We must remember that Colossians would be read out loud before the whole church, so everyone would know that Archippus had received some commission from the Lord and had Paul's full backing in carrying it out. It does not matter the reason for Paul's words: whether Archippus was personally reluctant to carry it out or whether Paul was concerned that the church might resist him and so wanted the church to know that Archippus was fully authorized to do what he was doing. In either case the letter would serve to give Archippus the communal encouragement and backing that he might need. Ministry is not simply an individual activity but an activity carried out with the support and encouragement of a community since believers are members of a single family.

Paul had finished his letter. As the custom was, he reached out his hand to take the stylus from the scribe so that he could pen his signature and a few words in his own handwriting at the end of the letter (4:18). While the use of the scribe made the letter more readable, the personal greeting at the end made it more personable, and the author's penning of the final greeting was the custom for papyrus letters in Paul's day—a custom he pointed out on three other occasions (1 Cor 16:21-24; Gal 6:11-18; 2 Thess 3:17-18). After writing "Paul," he then wrote with his own hand: "Remember my chains." This request added to the persuasive force of the letter both because of its pathos and because it pointed to Paul as one who was suffering due to his commitment to Christ and his Kingdom. Yet it was also a genuine request that they could fulfill through prayer, through physical support, and through sending assistants like Epaphras, Onesimus, and Archippus back to Paul. In

# COMMENTARY NOTES

Paul's world, "remember" did not mean simply to think about something but to take appropriate action because one had thought about something.

Paul ended the letter in a typically Pauline way: "Grace be with you." Philemon 1:25 has a longer version of this short benediction, but some form of the longer version is found in other concluding verses (1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 6:18; Eph 6:24; 1 Thess 5:28; 2 Thess 3:18). The identical short form is found in 1 Timothy 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:22; Titus 3:15. Grace was what Paul had experienced from God. Grace was how he began the letter (1:2). Grace was how he ended it: "May God's grace be with you."<sup>3</sup>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC  
Douglas Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar NT Commentary  
David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT  
Robert Bratcher and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook of Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, UBSH  
Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentary  
Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Application Commentary  
James D. G. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIGTC  
Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, The Bible Speaks Today  
Clinton Arnold, *Colossians*, Word Biblical Commentary

---

<sup>3</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, Philip W. Comfort, and Peter H. Davids, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, Philemon.*, vol. 16 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 304–310.