

Making Sense of Colossians Col.1:1-14
Colossians 1:1-2 (use a few versions)

Today we begin a sermon series on the book of Colossians. I hope over the next few weeks you read this book at least once. Maybe even read a commentary or two. Jot your questions down as you read. You could share them with me and that will help me as I work on these sermons. I think a good change of pace for us is to study one book of the Bible in depth, going deep as our Lenten theme urged us to.

When I first came here, when I answered the phone, I didn't have a clue who I was talking to. Even if they told me their name. It's taken time to match names to voices. Even now, I don't assume I know who I'm talking to. I try to remember to ask the name of who is calling.

Over a year ago, when we were in the process of selling our house in Pennsylvania, I made many phone calls to find contractors, to fix up the town house so we could sell it at a better price. Plus I didn't want to sell a house without it being in somewhat decent shape. I made a lot of phone calls and had some fascinating conversations. Finally someone told me a major reason I was finding it hard to find a contractor.

The area recently had a storm that caused a lot of damage to a lot of houses. Many of them had their roofs & siding repaired. But many owners didn't want to or didn't think about or could not afford to spend the money to repair the water damage, inside the homes. So a significant number of people had to call a contractor back months later, to take out what was causing mold and other interior damage in their homes.

There is a sermon there somewhere about the importance of just looking good on the outside but not taking care of the inside. Actually there are a lot of verses in the Bible about this human habit. The letter to the Colossians was written because theological damage was occurring in the church there. False teachers were attacking, denigrating the deity of Jesus. They were teaching that Jesus was not actually God.

Though Paul had never been to the church itself, he addressed these issues head-on. The nature of Jesus Christ as Creator and Redeemer is nonnegotiable. So Paul wrote to bring his wisdom to bear on this difficult and trying situation. It was critical to him that this church know God in His greatness and glory, rather than in the deficient view given them by the false teachers. (Colossians 1:25; 2:1-2).

So I finally called a former parishioner, in desperation who had a contracting business. I didn't know his wife was also the company's secretary. Before my first sentence was finished, she yelled, "Dan Graber!" I know my voice is unique, but never expected someone who I didn't have much interaction with, even about 17 years ago, to identify me by my full name, that quickly. Surprise!

Well, Paul starts Colossians by **identifying himself**. Before Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Colossae, he had never been to their city (Colossians 2:1). This helps explain the personal greetings he included at the end of the letter. This was a practice he reserved for letters to churches he had not visited like the book of Romans. Paul worked hard to develop personal connections with the people he hoped to teach & serve. The personal tone at the close of this letter was significant in being accepted as an apostle by the Colossian believers. Paul's main reason for writing the letter involved calling out the heretical teachers who had infiltrated the Colossian church.

So Paul identifies himself as he does in all his letters in his opening greeting, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." This was the common practice in correspondence, in letters in the ancient world. Just like we identify who we are on the phone.

Let's just remind ourselves **who Paul was**. He could be called the most important influential person in Christian history since our Lord Jesus Christ. His personality was the remarkable combination of a brilliant mind, an impressive will, and a tenderized heart. He is credited with

writing 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. Paul made four missionary trips to plant churches as well as visit congregations.

His Jewish ancestry and education immersed him in Old Testament Scripture. The Bible calls him, a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), and a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). Paul was educated under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the leading rabbis of that time. He was also by birth a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28) and exposed to Greek culture in his home city of Tarsus. This background uniquely qualified him to communicate the gospel in the Greco-Roman world. It was largely his efforts, along with the Holy Spirit’s, that transformed Christianity from a small Palestinian sect to a religion with adherents throughout the Roman Empire. The church would be blessed to have a record of even one letter from such a man, let alone the thirteen found in the New Testament.

So that his authority in the Church would be recognized, Paul presents himself as being officially sent out by the Anointed Savior as an apostle of Jesus Christ. His appointment came directly from Jesus Christ. Apostle means “sent one.” In the New Testament it is used as an official title of the men God uniquely chose to establish His church. They were receivers, teachers, and writers of God’s revelation in the New Testament. But Paul is not simply a messenger. He was an official representative, an authorized spokesman for the Almighty God who sent him. What he writes is not merely his opinion, but God’s authoritative Word.

Paul did not become an apostle through his own efforts. Neither was he appointed to the position by any human organization. Paul was called and anointed as an apostle by the will of God. God chose him at his conversion on the Damascus Road. He claims God called him out when he was on a trip to persecute Christians. (Acts 9:1–9). Paul ended up being set apart for missionary service by the Holy Spirit (At 13:2)

The name “Paul” means “little.” In Latin it means small or humble. The meaning of his

name, was probably a good reminder for such a successful man. He was nothing in himself but was called to be an “apostle of Christ Jesus.” The word “apostle” derives from a verb that means, “to send on a mission.” Paul was not one of the 12 original apostles, but he had a special commission by the “will of God.” He did not choose the career of an apostle but was selected by Jesus Himself. In Acts 9:15 we read, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”

Please notice that Paul was not writing Colossians alone but with “**Timothy our brother.**” It’s possible that Paul dictated this letter for Timothy to write. Paul understood the importance of partnership in ministry. Timothy was not an apostle but was extremely close to Paul – friend and co-worker. They didn’t have that much in common. Paul was older, more cultured, had more money, and was better educated. And yet, Timothy was called his brother, and a brother in the Christian faith.

The church understood itself from the very beginning as family. Jesus loves to break down natural barriers between people. When we share Jesus in common, we have everything in common! Isn’t it great to become good friends with another believer who is totally different than you are? As a result of faith in Jesus, we become members of the family of God and brothers and sisters with one another.

Colossians was probably written in AD 60–62, during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. There he spent at least 2 years under house arrest. (Acts 28:16-31) He dictated this letter to the Colossian church after he had received a report that they were struggling with a Christological heresy. The report probably came from **Epaphras**, who was likely the leader of the church at Colossae & a convert of Paul’s from his more than 2-year ministry in Ephesus. (1:7)

Epaphras had gone to Rome in part to serve Paul during his imprisonment (Philemon 1:23) and also to confide in him regarding the false

dangerous teachings the Colossians were hearing. So Paul sent this letter, along with the letters to Philemon and to the Ephesians, with Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus. (Colossians 4:7; Philemon 1:10–12). Tychicus was a coworker of Paul who would have been able to help the Colossian believers understand and apply the apostle’s teachings in the letter.

Let’s learn some things about **Colosse** – the city where the church is located. Verse 2 tells us who the original recipients of this letter were. **“To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae:”**

When Paul wrote the letter, Colossae had become a small city located in-land about 100 miles from the Mediterranean Coast, 120 miles east of Ephesus and 7 miles away from the city of Laodicea. It was part of the Roman province of Asia Minor, in what is now part of Turkey. It was located on the Lycus River, not far from its junction with the Maeander River. It’s near Hierapolis with its hot springs. Rose & I visited there when we were following the foot-steps of Paul. Hierapolis and Laodicea have major visible ruins today, but Colossae does not.

One of the features of the area around the River Lycus and its tributaries is a lot of chalk. It stands out in natural formations. It is fatal to vegetation. It covers over ancient monuments and fertile land. It gleams like glaciers on the hill side and can be seen for up to 20 miles. The most well know formation is called Pamukkale Travertine Terrace, or Cotton Castle. Rose and I had the opportunity to walk or slide down it but choose caution over risk taking. It’s drawn visitors for thousands of years. The Turkish name refers to the surface of the shimmering, snow-white limestone, shaped over millennia by calcite-rich springs.

We also know there was and is fertile volcanic soil around Colossae that makes it an excellent location for grass and vegetation. On its slopes grazed huge flocks of sheep making it a center for the manufacturing of wool garments.

It was a great city when the Persian king Xerxes, Queen Esther’s husband, marched through it in 481 B.C. Xenophon, a historian wrote in 401 B.C. “It’s a city inhabited and prosperous and great.” It was situated at the junction of the main trade routes running east from Ephesus and north to Pergamos. In Roman times, however, the road to Pergamos was rerouted through Laodicea, bypassing Colossae. That, coupled with the rise of its neighboring cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis, led to Colossae’s decline in importance.

We also know the area was & is prone to earthquakes. Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were devastated by one about A.D. 60, though they were quickly rebuilt. In Paul’s day it was a small city, over-shadowed by its more prosperous neighbors. Largely abandoned by the eighth century, Colossae was destroyed in the twelfth century. Archaeologists have found the dim remains of the acropolis, theater, and church. The site is currently unoccupied.

I hope this isn’t boring you too much, because I think it’s important to understand what’s behind or beneath this letter. You might want to read this sermon to get familiar with some of this background as we go through Colossians. The spiritual health of the **people** of Colossae probably was similar to almost any city in Canada today. They had a hodge-podge of beliefs – a pluralistic society. There was a diversity of ethnic groups or different cultures with a variety of philosophies concerning religion, politics, and life.

Since Colossae was founded long before the expansion of the Greek and Roman Empires it was less Hellenistic than its neighboring cities. The population of Colossae was predominantly Gentile (2:13), but there was a sizable Jewish community. Antiochus the Great, 223–187 B.C., an heir of Alexander the Great, transported Jewish settlers to the region. Other Jews were drawn by the trade in wool and other business ventures. Still others came for the mineral baths at nearby Hierapolis.

Because Colossae had a mixed Gentile and Jewish population, it is not surprising that the heresy threatening the Colossian church contained Jewish and pagan elements. Many of these Jews had become idol worshipers as the Talmud, complained. “The wines and baths of Phrygia have separated the ten tribes from Israel.” The Talmud is a set of commentative and interpretative writings that hold a place in the Jewish religious tradition second only to the Old Testament Bible. There is also evidence that Jewish refugees from the Babylonian Empire had relocated in the area.

Having introduced himself, Paul next greets the congregation as “**the holy & faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse.**” The word “holy” means to be “set apart” by God. Some translations use the word “saints” here. We are not holy by our own efforts to please God, but are transformed into a holy people by a holy God. We are saints by virtue of our position in Christ. “Faithful brothers” refers to the fact that even in the midst of false doctrine, many of them were dependable and faithful to the truth.

I want us to notice that these believers were “in” Christ and “at” Colosse. In the Greek, this is the same preposition. They were in Christ and in Colosse. The same is true for us. We are in Christ and in Drake, or wherever we live. We’re called to live out our position in Christ in the context of where we live and work. Faithful believers are also public witnesses. Our position in Christ and our proclamation within our culture are inextricably linked. Because we belong to Jesus, we must call others to believe. We are citizens of heaven on site in the municipality of Usborne.

So right off in his greeting, Paul reminds his readers, their higher loyalty is to Christ. We are family, brothers and sisters with each other. And he offers his common blessing, “**Grace and peace from God our Father.**”

So we can summarize the first lines of Colossians in the words of Earnest D. Martin. No hint of any problem at Colossae can be found in

the greeting. Paul is not tentative in claiming apostolic authority as he writes to a church he presumably has not started or visited. But the reason for establishing his credentials is not immediately evident. However, affirmations made with a few key words and phrases stand out. The carefully worded greeting is more than a customary formality.

Notice the many reminders, assurances, or affirmations set out in the first two verses: Saints – Holy - affirmation of a special relationship with God.

Faithful – affirmation of loyal allegiance to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, Father – affirmation of the family nature of the church.

In Colossae and in Christ – affirmation of the tension with culture.

Grace and peace – affirmation of God’s blessings.

Our Father – affirmation of a common bond.

It’s a very nice kind affirmative way to start a communication with a group of mostly strangers. Especially since Paul thought he needed to correct a heresy. At the same time, it’s probable the believers at Colossae knew something about Paul. So it’s a nice start to a hand written letter that has lasted over the years and is helpful to us, today. It’s an example of how to greet and approach strangers, that you have a common faith bond with, but you need to impart some better theology. More to come about Colossians.