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The Letter and the Apostle

The Letter Itself

1. Who wrote it?
 - a. Paul (1:1) is the author of Colossians, and he wrote it from prison (4:18) in Rome probably around the year AD 61. A minority of scholars says Paul wrote it from Ephesus.
 - b. Tychicus (4:7), who was accompanied by Onesimus, carried the letter. This fact may mean Paul wrote his letter to Philemon at the same time.

2. Who received it?
 - a. The letter was written to the saints at Colossae (1:2), who were formerly estranged, alienated and hostile to Christianity (1:21).
 - b. Epaphras (1:7; 4:2), who was assisted by Archippus (4:17) founded the church at Colossae.
 - c. Colossae was in southwest Turkey and was near Hierapolis and Laodicea, a city known for its political, financial, and cultural activities. Colossae was in an area known for earthquakes, which may be the reason it no longer exists. Around AD 62 it had 50,000 inhabitants (Jews, Greeks, and Phrygians). Colossae was a highly commercial city at this time, mainly due to the wool industry.

3. Why write it?
 - a. Paul's letter concentrates on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Unlike his letter to the church at Ephesus, which stresses the relationship of Christ to the church, Paul focuses on Christ's place in the cosmos. This implies there were some within the church that sought to reduce the preeminence of Christ.
 - (1) Some tried to concoct a recipe that would have Christ and Moses as ingredients in a potpie.
 - "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day" (2:16).
 - Moses gave the Law. Some wanted to keep the ceremonial teachings and add it to the all-sufficiency of Christ.

- (2) Others believed angels were a means of access to God.
 - “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind” (2:18).
 - This may have come from the teachings of Plato, for some of his followers promoted angel worship as gleaned from the books of Dionysius on the Celestial Hierarchy.
 - (3) Still others were into a traditional philosophy, which promoted the secular mind above the teaching of the gospel.
 - “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (2:8).
 - Greeks loved philosophy; they loved to argue. Evidently, some Christians wanted to integrate Christ into the school of academics, which had the effect of relegating Christ to a lesser position.
- b. Paul was faced with many teachings that had crept into the church, which had the effect of eliminating the absolute eminence of Christ Himself. The major reason, therefore, for penning the letter was to expose the false teaching that had entered the Colossian church. Paul deals with the fusion of all the false teaching by presenting a positive approach, which was to concentrate on the person and work of Jesus Christ. By stressing the preeminence of Christ, Paul did not have to refute the false teaching point by point. The teachings he did expose are as follows:

- (1) Asceticism – This is the purging of self from worldly influence. Ascetics were people who subjugated their flesh by self-discipline and self-denial to the point of arrogance and then required others do the same in order to win favor with God. This teaching may have had roots in stoicism, which taught men should be indifferent to passion or emotion. The Christian version was to deny self to the point of abuse and therefore curry favor with the Lord. In his book, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, John MacArthur says, “Self-styled asceticism elevates the flesh and makes a person proud about his sacrifices, visions, and spiritual achievements. It takes away from Christ and enslaves the ascetic to fleshly pride” (p. 188).

Who would be some of the ascetics today?

- (2) Legalism – Judaizers sought to excel in religiosity by conforming to rules and regulations to a meticulous and burdensome point. Holiness became the scrupulous adherence to codes and rituals. These Messianic Jews became Christian Pharisees and introduced the idea of legalism, which is still practiced today. Legalism is the requirement that all believers strictly adhere to biblical regulations as defined by their promoter.

Who would be the legalists today?

In what way do you think legalism is defined in today's evangelical culture?

- (3) Gnosticism – Gnostics were those who claimed special revelation from God. They were “in the know” and were therefore not dependent on sacraments or the Bible for growing in grace or in the knowledge of God. They actually became arrogant in their intellectualism. Ordinary Christians had to live by faith, but the Gnostics had this “gnosis” (knowledge) that gave them a spark of the divine. Some of them believed in dualism, the belief that spirit is good and material is bad. Since the human body would be considered material and therefore bad, Christ could not have been human. He must have been an angelic creation of the Lord.

What religionists today claim to have a special knowledge?

- (4) Mysticism – This is the belief that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the human intellect and natural sense. It seeks truth by looking internally, by weighing one's feelings, by sensing one's intuition, and by interpreting Scripture by one's experiences. Mysticism creates a climate intolerant of a precise doctrine and a sound biblical exegesis.

Who are today's mystics?

Paul's Christology

1. Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians in order to emphasize the person and work of Christ.
 - a. The person – Christ was one with the Father as the image of the invisible God (1:15). As one in the Trinity, Christ was the Creator (1:16), eternal, not created (1:17). He was Himself deity as all the fullness of the Father dwelled in Him (1:19; 2:9).
 - b. The work – Christ came to deliver the elect from darkness (1:13), granting them redemption and the forgiveness of sins (1:14). His purpose was to reconcile man to God (1:20) by offering Himself a sacrifice for sin (1:22).

2. This theme of redemption is not new with Paul.
 - a. Romans 3:22-24 - the righteousness of God comes through faith in Christ for all those who believe; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Therefore, redemption is to justify men through the death of Christ.
 - b. 1 Corinthians 15:3 – Christ died for sins according to the Scriptures.
 - c. 2 Corinthians 5:21 – Christ was made sin for us.
 - d. Galatians 1:3-4 – Christ gave Himself in order to deliver us from this evil age.
 - e. Galatians 4:5-6 – Christ redeemed those under the Law that they might receive the adoption as sons, which gives them the right to call God, “Abba.”

3. Paul saw Christ preeminent in all things, which meant the death of Christ and the power of His resurrection have given us everything needed for life and righteousness. Nothing more, nothing less! Christ is all; there is need for nothing else.
 - a. Peter confirmed the all-sufficiency of Christ when he wrote the divine power of Christ “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Peter 1:3).
 - b. C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* demonstrated how the enemies of Christianity operated. Villainous Screwtape hated “mere Christianity” and desperately wanted to adorn it with trendy add-ons, which had the effect of drawing gullible Christians away from the all-sufficiency of Christ, who is “mere Christianity.”

What would be some “add-ons” to Christianity that take our focus away from the sufficiency of Christ and His Word?

- c. A widespread lack of confidence in the sufficiency of Christ is threatening the lifeblood of the evangelical church. The failure of Christians to understand and appropriate the riches of Christ has opened the door to all kinds of aberrant influences. Theology has become more humanistic with the focus shifting from God to man and his problems.

What does the sufficiency of Christ mean to you?
