

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

—Colossians 1:1–2, NRSV

Colossians is “at every point Christological, and it is the success of the author in disclosing Christ at the center of all reality that integrates and energizes the letter.”

—John Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*

LEARNING GOALS

1. To introduce the primary themes of the letter.
2. To highlight the controversy the Christ-followers faced in Colossae.
3. To consider the relevance of the letter for contemporary readers.

REFLECTION

Christ: The Integrating Center of Reality

In the first four verses of Colossians, the title “Christ” is used once in each verse in reference to Jesus: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1:1); “To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ” (1:2); “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3); and “for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus” (1:4). The word comes from Greek, *Christos*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word, *Mashiach* (Messiah). In Israel, the Messiah—Christ—is the nation’s anointed deliverer. In the New Testament, the

concept takes on a broader meaning. Jesus is not only the deliverer of Israel but also of the entire cosmos.

The primary theme in Colossians is the centrality and supremacy of Jesus in God's mission "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (1:20). This is most evident in what is referred to as the Christ hymn in 1:15–20. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (1:15). In him, through him, and for him, "all things in heaven and on earth were created" and "in him all things hold together" (1:16–17). Furthermore, "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (1:19–20). Finally, "Christ is all and in all!" (3:11). As this series places special emphasis on God's mission in and for the world and the church's participation within it, these are key texts to consider in describing this mission.

Spiritual Maturity in Christ

Another strong theme in Colossians is Christian formation, which is a vital part of the church's participation in God's mission. Paul speaks of a mutual indwelling between the believers and Christ. Christ is in the believer (1:27), and the believer is in Christ (1:2). In this new reality, there is already a sense of completeness. Believers were raised with Christ in baptism (2:12), and they were enthroned with Christ at the right hand of God where their "life is hidden with Christ in God" (3:1–3). Nevertheless, these Christ-followers are still in formation. For example, in chapter one, Paul expresses his prayers on their behalf that they would be "filled with the knowledge of God's will" and that they might "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him" as they "bear fruit in every good work" and as they "grow in the knowledge of God" (1:9–10). Furthermore, in chapter three, Paul urges them to mature in Christ by putting to death "whatever in you is earthly" (3:5) and by clothing themselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" and above all, "with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:12, 14).

Controversy in Colossae

The two central themes above, the supremacy of Christ and Paul's encouragement to mature in Christ, may be responses to a controversy facing the church. Often referred to as the "Colossian philosophy" or "Colossian heresy," the problem with the teaching circulating in Colossae was that Christ alone was insufficient; hence Paul's strong focus on the all-sufficiency of Christ throughout the letter.

Michael Gorman outlines the elements of the philosophy:

- Observation of Jewish diet and holidays (2:16)
- Self-abasement/extreme asceticism, probably including fasting and perhaps other disciplines (2:18, 21, 23)
- "Worship of angels," which may mean worship or veneration of angels, or participation *with* the angels at worship (2:18)
- Visionary experiences (2:18)
- Interest in the "elemental spirits of the universe," the forces that rule the cosmos and human life (2:8)

Marianne Meye Thompson believes that "the Colossians are being influenced by Jews or, perhaps better, Jewish Christians, who advocated certain ascetic practices and ecstatic spiritual experiences in order to attain to 'higher levels' of understanding the mysteries of God" (Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 7). Paul's response is that they already have all they need in Christ.

In *The Transforming Word* commentary, J. Paul Pollard sums it up nicely:

The Colossians church faced a crisis caused by dangerous cultural and societal influences and attempted to find security by obeying Jewish regulations or rites promising relief from the evil forces. In 2:8, Paul characterized the church as embracing a destructive "philosophy" involving human tradition and the elemental spirits, perhaps rejecting Jesus as their mediator and depending instead on angelic beings (2:18) for protection from a vengeful spirit world. (Pollard, *The Transforming Word*, 973).

It is good to practice spiritual disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer, in order to mature in Christ, to put to death the “old self,” to put on the “new self,” and to grow in love of God and neighbor. But all religious practices must be kept in their proper place, which is in the shadow of the cross of Christ. Otherwise, they become more detrimental than helpful to Christian formation.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. On a scale of one to ten, how competitive are you?
- b. What is the objective of competition?
- c. Explain that Colossians is a letter about competition. This is not a competition between people, but between two different narratives of reality. The church in Colossae was confronted with a narrative that competed with the narrative of Christ. To the question, “Is Christ enough?” some answered, “No.” This teaching and the practices that accompanied it suggested that Christ alone was not sufficient for human and cosmic redemption, formation, and flourishing. More was needed. In this letter, Paul emphatically claims that Christ is the center of reality and is all-sufficient for human salvation and cosmic flourishing. Ultimately, there is no competition. Jesus is not only enough; Jesus is more than enough.

2. Involve

- a. Discuss the “Colossian philosophy.” Have the class read Colossians 2:8, 16–23.
 - i. What were the elements of this teaching?
 - ii. Why was Paul opposed to it?
 - iii. Are all spiritual practices, such as fasting or observing special days, in and of themselves spiritually harmful? If not, how do you differentiate between helpful and harmful practices? Note: the difference lies in the theology (understanding of God) and the

intent behind the practices. You might need to spend extra time on this point.

- b. Discuss Paul's response that Christ is the center of all reality, and that Christ is supreme and all-sufficient.
 - i. Read the so-called "Christ hymn" in Colossians 1:15–20. How is this a counter-narrative to the philosophy/teaching being circulated in Colossae?
 - ii. One of the goals of this curriculum series is to pay special attention to the mission of God as it is articulated in this letter. What is at the heart of God's mission according to the Christ hymn? How was the Colossian philosophy a warped vision of God's mission in and for the world?
 - c. Note that while Christ is all-sufficient for salvation, this does not mean that believers are complacent and do nothing. They are in formation to be like Christ, and they are to embody this new reality in all aspects of daily life. They are to mature in the One in whom they live (1:2) and in the One who lives within them (1:27).
 - i. Read Colossians 1:9–10; and 3:5, 12–14.
 - ii. If the Christ hymn is an articulation of God's mission, these verses point to our participation in this mission. What does this participation look like?
 - iii. According to these verses, what are signs of Christian maturity?
3. Challenge
- a. What philosophies, doctrines, and/or traditions within the walls of the contemporary church compete against the centrality of Christ in God's mission today?
 - b. The concepts in Colossians of the supremacy of Christ, our formation and maturity in Christ, and the problem of the "Colossian philosophy" are all interrelated.
 - i. How does our formation in Christ (taking off the old/putting on the new) help us guard against destructive narratives and warped visions of God's mission?

- ii. When Paul speaks about taking off the old and putting on the new, he is talking about spiritual maturity. What practices have been most helpful to you in your personal faith formation?
- iii. Christian formation is about orienting our lives more and more around the true center of reality, who is Christ. What orienting practices do you plan to do this week to help you (and your family) become more Christ-centered?

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