

Sunday, November 10, 2019—Introduction to the Book of Colossians, Part 2

Introduction

- Last week we celebrated the 12th anniversary of Grace Life Bible Church. In doing so, we applied Paul’s ministry, upon which this church founded, as a template to investigate the establishment of the church in Colosse.
- In summative we observed the following:
 - Colossians 2:1—Paul never meet the Colossians in the flesh i.e., he never visited the city on any of his Apostolic journeys. There is no record in the Acts chronology of Paul ever having gone to Colosse.
 - Colossians 1:4, 9—at the Colossians was written Paul had merely “heard” of the faith of the Colossians.
 - Given that Paul never visited Colosse himself, it seems reasonable to infer that the church was established there via converts from Paul substantial ministry in the province of Asia.
 - Acts 20:31—Paul spent three years teaching in Ephesus the capital of Asia.
 - Acts 19:8-10
 - Acts 19:14-17—the working of God in Ephesus was well known throughout the province of Asia.
 - Acts 19:26—Demetrius says that Paul’s ministry in Ephesus reached “throughout all Asia.”
 - Colossians 1:7-8—Epaphras appears to be the prime evangelist of the city of Colosse.
 - Colossians 4:12—Epaphras is from Colosse.
 - Colossians 4:13—his ministry seems to have extended to Laodicea and Hierapolis as well.
 - Colossians 1:7—presumably, Epaphras got saved under Paul’s ministry in Ephesus who then carried the contents of Paul’s preaching to Colosse. Paul calls Epaphras his “dear fellowservant.”

Canonical Placement of Colossians

- It is a well understood fact among Bible students that Paul’s epistles are not found in the New Testament cannon in the chronological order in which they were written.

Chronological Order	Canonical Order
Galatians	Romans—16 chapters
I Thessalonians	I Corinthians—16 chapters
II Thessalonians	II Corinthians—13 chapters
I Corinthians	Galatians—6 chapters
II Corinthians	Ephesians—6 chapters
Romans	Philippians—4 chapters
Philemon	Colossians—4 chapters
Colossians	I Thessalonians—5 chapters
Philippians	II Thessalonians—3 chapters
Ephesians	I Timothy—6 chapters
Titus	II Timothy—4 chapters
I Timothy	Titus—3 chapters
II Timothy	Philemon—1 chapter

- Most Evangelical Christians believe that Paul’s church epistles (letters addressed to churches not individuals) are simply arranged in descending order from longest to shortest in terms of length and that there is no significance to their order.
- Meanwhile, some mid-Acts Pauline Dispensationalists view Paul’s epistles as comprising a rigid “curriculum” that must be studied in canonical order to get the proper “sense and sequence” of doctrine. On this view believers must pass through certain “check points” before advancing to more complex material.
- In my view, both of these positions represent two extremes while the correct view resides in the middle.
- II Timothy 3:16-17—according to Paul all scripture of profitable for four things:
 - Doctrine
 - Reproof
 - Correction
 - Instruction in Righteousness
- It is recognizing these four applications of scripture as well as the overall theme and purpose set forth in each one of Paul’s church epistles that the significance of their canonical order comes into focus.
- In 1960, Christian author J. Sidlow Baxter wrote a book titled *Explore the Book*. In this book Baxter carried forward some ideas first set forth by E.W. Bullinger in both *The Companion Bible* and *The Church Epistles* (1898) regarding the canonical order of Paul’s letters addressed to the churches.
- According to Baxter, these 9 books are divided into “a quartet, a trio, and a pair.” “The first four cohere; so, do the middle three; so do the final two. In the first four the emphasis is on Christ

and the Cross. In the middle three it is on Christ and the Church. In the final two it is on Christ and the Coming. In each case the order in which truth is presented corresponds with the order of the wording in II Timothy 3:16.” (Baxter, 93)

- Doctrine—Romans
 - Reproof—I & II Corinthians—Christ and the *Cross*
 - Correction—Galatians

 - Doctrine—Ephesians
 - Reproof—Philippians—Christ and the *Church*
 - Correction—Colossians

 - Doctrine—I & II Thessalonians—Christ and the *Coming*
- Baxter is quick to point out that these distinctions are real but not absolute.
 - “This distinction, of course, is relative, not absolute, but it is really there. Accordingly, in the middle trio, while doctrine interpenetrates all three, in Ephesians it is presented normally and formally, whereas in Philippians and Colossian it reappears only *incidentally* to reproof or correction. This does not mean that Philippians and Colossians are necessarily less important to us than Ephesians. Nay, they all fill a vital place. We need to see truth only *statedly* but *relatedly*. It often becomes best defined when it is being *defended*. Especially do we need to see cardinal evangelical doctrine sharply silhouetted against its specious counterfeit; and *that is what we have in Colossians.*” (Baxter, 197)
 - Observing these realities “explains the likeness and unlikeness of Colossians to Ephesians.” According to Baxter,
 - “Colossians stands in the same relation to Ephesians as Galatians to Romans. The special characteristic in both Colossians and Galatians is “correction” of serious doctrinal deviation from the already-given standard. The affinity of Colossians with Ephesians is so close that, if E.W. Bullinger’s comparison is exact, 78 out of the 95 verses in Colossians have a “marked resemblance to verses in Ephesians; which means that, although Ephesians is two chapters longer, more than half its verses speak again here in Colossians, only now they speak with a new pointedness against the perilous deviation from the Ephesian norm.” (Baxter, 198)
 - The middle trio of epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians belong together in date as well seeing that they were all written during Paul’s first imprisonment at Rome. The other epistles in each Romans, Ephesians, and Thessalonians don’t seem to have been written to address any particular set of circumstances in the various churches. The same could not be said for Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians all of which were precipitated by the need to address a given set of circumstances present at the various churches.

- Regarding the middle trio of verses Baxter states the following:
 - “Ephesians sets forth the glorious mystery, even the “the Church which is His body” [this is an expanded treatment over things that were said in Rom. 16:25-26 and I Cor. 2:7-8, 15:51.] Christ is the Head (1:22, 4:15, 5:23); the Church is the body (1:23, 4:16); individual believers are “members of His body” (v. 5:30), and therefore “members one of another” (5:25). The incipient fault at Philippi was disjointedness of the members (Phil. 1:27, 2:3, 14, 4:2). The incipient Gnosticism at Colosse was a “not holding the Head” (Col. 2:19), which was a default far more serious.” (Baxter, 198)

Doctrinal Error in Colosse

- The specific error of doctrine that Paul is addressing in Colossians is characterized by the following components:
 - Colossians 2:8—philosophy
 - Colossians 2:23—it possessed a “show of wisdom” thereby appealing to Gentile propensity to worship wisdom, higher education, and intellectualism (I Cor. 1:22).
 - Colossians 2:8—it paid a high regard to “tradition”
 - Colossians 2:23—it also practiced asceticism false humility thereby giving it the appearance of superior sanctity and piety.
- “This strange mixture of Jewish traditionalism and Greek Philosophy stressed two things: reverence for angelic powers (Col. 2:18), and contempt for the body (Col. 2:20-23).” (Baxter, 200)
- The names of this egregious error containing a mixture of Greek philosophy, Jewish traditionalism, and Eastern mysticism, asceticism, was Gnosticism.
 - Read passages from Ironside & Gaebelein