

In our session today we will run the gamut, from fearful holiness to heretical corruption. (This should be fun.)

Read Colossians 1:1-2.

FROM...

Although his tone is different—softer, less accusatory—in this letter, I am reminded of Paul's opening words to the Galatians, where, by v6, he is already laying into them.

Read Galatians 1:6.

In Galatians Paul wasted no time or ink before he got right to the point. It is true that vs1-2 (and v3) in Colossians comprise a rather standard greeting for one of Paul's letters, but when one reads all of Chapter One and even into Chapter Two, one can see that by the first few verses he is off and running with his primary message to the church at Colossae. By v3 he is already laying the groundwork for his main argument.

an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God

No one wakes up in the morning and says, "Hey, I think I'll be an apostle. Yesterday I wanted to be a fireman. The day before that I wanted to be a cowboy. But now I think I'd like to be an ex cathedra messenger for Christ."

And if one did, it wouldn't take. One is (was) a true "apostle of Jesus Christ" only "by the will of God." One does not *apply* to be an apostle; one is *called* to be an apostle. And while I have stated some of this in the present tense, we believe there are no literal, modern apostles.

apostle = *apostolos* = from <G649> (*apostello*); a **delegate**; specially an *ambassador* of the Gospel; officially a *commissioner* of Christ ["*apostle*"] (**with miraculous powers**) :- apostle, messenger, **he that is sent**; "delegate" implies speaking *ex cathedra*, for Christ without error. [*ex cathedra* = Latin phrase for "from the chair," meaning infallible teaching.]

God's word is closed; His revelation is complete.

an apostle... , and Timothy our brother.

Note how the sentence is organized. Timothy is a faithful disciple and helper of Paul's, a great guy and integral to the work of ministry—but he is *not* a fellow apostle.

To...

Read v2.

Grace to you and peace...

R. Kent Hughes makes an excellent point about this:

Paul created a Christian blend of Hebrew and Greek greetings. The customary greeting in the ancient Greek world was *chairen*, a form of “grace” meaning “greetings.” But in Paul’s hands it became the freshly minted Christian salutation *charis*, “grace.” Greeting fellow-believers with this word celebrated the work of grace in their lives.

The other half of the greeting, “peace,” came originally from the Hebrew *shalom*, which meant more than simply the absence of trouble, but well-being which springs from the presence of God.

There must be grace before we experience the *shalom* of God. Grace (God’s work) comes before peace (our new relationship). Among the tragedies of our time is humanity’s pursuit of personal peace apart from God’s enabling grace.

to the saints and faithful brethren

Reading again the definition of this word translated “saints,” I was reminded of the typical first words out of the mouth of a visiting angel.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30

The angel said to the women [at the tomb], "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified." Matthew 28:5

Holy angels were often frightful visitations; remember Isaiah’s reaction when in his vision he stood before the throne of Almighty God: he was scared out of his wits. This is the root source of the word translated “saints.”

saints = *hagios* = from **hagos** (an *awful* thing) [compare <G53> (*hagnos*), <H2282> (*chag*)]; **sacred** (physical *pure*, moral *blameless* or *religious*, ceremony **consecrated**) :- (most) **holy** (one, thing), saint.

We are “saints” not because we attend church, not because we are perfect. We are saints because in every believer there is an almost symbiotic relationship with the person and spirit of Christ Jesus. Symbiosis implies *mutual* benefit, and for that reason it is not quite accurate, since we contribute nothing to the perfection of the Godhead beyond our devotion and praise. But it does describe reasonably well the level of *intimacy* in the relationship—something that it is hard for the temporal mind to grasp.

I wonder if we too often forget that we, as believers *in Christ*, are made sacred, consecrated, *awful* things. Paul addresses this letter to “saints and faithful brethren *in Christ*.” Believers are *in Christ*—inside Him—a mystical relationship that goes beyond the necessary “faith in” (v4). We are in Him and He is in us, as Paul states in Chapter Three, taking it a degree further:

When Christ, who is our [or your] life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Colossians 3:4 (emphasis added)

Paul states the same thing in a slightly different way in Philippians.

Read Philippians 1:21.

In Romans 6 Paul goes into this in finer detail, but certainly the most eloquent version of this truth is found in Galatians 2.

Read Galatians 2:20.

So on a surface level, Paul greets those who are, like him, “in Christ”—that is, those of his ilk, those in the same belief system. He is not writing to unbelievers; he is not writing to those who are *not* “in Christ.” He is writing to family. But the small word “in” goes far beyond this when the belief system is “in Christ.”

It requires an atypical thought process for us to think of ourselves as “holy,” “sacred,” “consecrated.” Such a perspective goes against everything we know about ourselves. But Paul uses a word that reminds us that we are, indeed, holy things because we are in Christ.

For this reason we can easily see this as far more than just an obligatory greeting—just a few polite words with which to open a letter. Paul has already begun addressing the problem in Colossae. He wants the Colossians to see themselves as God sees them: sacred, holy, even awful things—saints who have no business trafficking in heretical belief systems that seek to supplement Christ Jesus.

Look at how Chapter Two begins.

Read Colossians 2:1-4.

Read v6.

Read vs9-10a.

complete = *pleroo* (play-rah'-oh) = from [<G4134>](#) (pleres); **to make replete**, i.e. (**literal**) **to cram** (a net), **level up** (a hollow), or (figurative) to *furnish* (or *imbue, diffuse, influence*), *satisfy, execute* (an office), *finish* (a period or task), *verify* (or *coincide* with a prediction), etc. :- accomplish, × after, (be) complete, end, expire, fill (up), fulfil, (be, make) full (come), fully preach, perfect, supply.

You are crammed full of Christ! What are you doing playing around with all this stuff that seeks to add to what He already is? You are already full; you don't need anything else!

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

All right. Just what was going on in Colossae? What was this heretical philosophy—or, perhaps more accurate, false teaching—threatening the integrity of the church?

You may recall that in Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches he addressed a similar situation—similar, but not identical. In Galatia the attack on the churches came from Jews seeking to amend the gospel of Christ with some of the regulations of Judaism. That is, righteousness and justification could not be by faith alone, but must also include circumcision, observance of certain feasts and holy days, adherence to dietary laws, etc. In other words, in Galatia the Judaizers were saying that the gospel must include adherence to the Mosaic Law.

The situation in Colossae is more confusing. It is similar to Galatia (a region, not a city) in that the gospel is being corrupted by outside influence. But in Colossae the corrupting influence was a mish-mash of philosophies coming from several directions. Scholars call this *syncretistic*—i.e., “a mix of two or more religious and/or philosophic traditions” (Moo). And, once again, not everyone agrees what these were. But there is a reasonable consensus.

Let's first look at the clues Paul leaves in the letter itself—all in Chapter Two:

2:8	a hollow and deceptive philosophy
2:11, 16-17	emphasis on ritual circumcision, diet, observance of holy days
2:15, 18	mixing in various supernatural powers that should be worshiped, thus diminishing Christ
2:18, 20-23	asceticism [rigorous self-denial; austerity; disciplining the body]
2:4, 8	heretical teachers calling themselves "Christian"

Now, based on these and other references in the text, can we deduce the sources of the corrupt teaching in Colossae? Just what was going on?

The important thing to keep in mind is that each of the corrupting influences in the church at Colossae was *itself* a mish-mash.

1. There was indeed **a Jewish element**—but it was not the same strict Pharisaic element seen in Galatia. There was some of that, but mixed into it was a certain Jewish mysticism that included among other things (perhaps) worship of angels or (perhaps) participation with angels in the worship of God.
2. There was **a pagan element**: an early form of **Gnosticism** (codified as a coherent system only in the second century, later than this letter). More on this later, but for now Gnosticism included such beliefs as
 1. the evil of matter, flesh [belief in the inherent evil of matter made it impossible for Gnostics to accept the real incarnation of Christ];
 2. mediating beings;
 3. Salvation through knowledge [hence the term; the Greek *gnosko* means "to know"].

(Is it any wonder Epaphras went to Paul?!)
3. Finally there was **a corrupt "Christian" element** that seemed to be a blend of Judaism and paganism that did not deny Christ, but dethroned Him; it gave Christ a place, but not the supreme place.

No explanation for the false teaching in Colossae is perfect; problems can be found in each one of them, but perhaps Clinton Arnold summarizes it best:

The Colossian "philosophy"... represents a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and Christianity. The local folk belief has some distinctive Phrygian qualities, but it also has much in common with what we could also describe as magic or ritual power.

As we progress through the letter we will address some of this more fully. For now, in my opinion, the situation in Colossae is far more pertinent to ours today than the situation in Galatia. After all, when was the last time you were compelled to add in circumcision and observance of Passover or Yom Kippur to your faith? But when was the last time someone tried to offer a harmless-sounding variant of Christianity to your faith? Yesterday? [**"Sure, Jesus was a great prophet, but no better than, say, Moses, or Mohammad."**]

We will address much of this in greater detail as we progress through the text, but for now this gives us a brief overview of the situation in Colossae.