

COLOSSIANS: THE CITY AND THE LETTER

(Robert W. Wall)

The Congregation in Colosse

The ancient city of Colosse was located in the fertile valley forged by the river Lycus in the Asian province of Phrygia. Centuries earlier, Colosse had served as a center for the valley's prosperous wool and textile industries; its place on a major trade route only enhanced its economic advantage. But by the time of Paul its influence had waned. Neighboring Laodicea (2:1; 4:13, 15) had replaced Colosse in economic and political importance, while Hierapolis (4:13), some fifteen miles away, had grown in prominence as a tourist town, famed for its mineral baths and as a sanctuary for members of the prominent Phrygian mystery cult. (Hence the name Hieropolis means "holy city" in Greek.) In all likelihood, then, this letter first addressed a small congregation in a rather unimpressive town.

In fact, there is no indication from Paul's writings or from Acts (cf. Acts 19:10) that Paul ever reached Colosse during his evangelistic campaign in the Lycus valley. Paul's strategy was to visit only the most prominent urban centers of a particular region, to recruit mature colleagues, such as Epaphras (1:7-8; 4:12-3; c.f. Philem 23) and Tychicus (4:7-8), and to advance his Gentile mission to additional places and people. Significantly, the pivotal references to Epaphras, himself a Colossian (cf. 4:12), indicate that this congregation was founded through his preaching ministry (1:7-8) rather than through Paul's. Obviously the apostle was pleased with its results. Not only does he express confidence that the gospel Epaphras proclaimed conformed to his own (1:23, 28; cf. 2:6), but he also commends the Colossians for their faithfulness to it (1:2-6; 2:5-8) and often alludes to the radical change brought about by their growing confidence in God's transforming grace (1:13-14; 2:7, 13). Specifically, Paul notes that because of their vital faith they now have a share in Christ's destiny as heavenly Lord (1:15-20; 3:1-2) and will participate fully in God's final triumph over evil when Christ returns to earth (3:3-4).

Paul's Response to the Colossians

Paul's letters all contain a practical theology. And his practical theology is rooted in a practical wisdom: he considers theology's results, or "fruit" (1:5-6, 9-10), important. In the letter to the Colossians, the apostle is primarily concerned to correct a Christianity whose "hollow and deceptive" sophistry has reproduced an untenable discipleship among the believers in Colosse. The influence of Phrygian Judaism upon certain Christian teachers, however peripheral, threatens to produce a faith that denies the inherent goodness of God's creation and the potential power of God's new creation, the church.

In a sense, Paul is concerned with how believers define and understand the working of divine grace. According to Paul, the theological center of "true" religion must never be shifted from our ongoing participation in the life of the Risen Lord, because it is "in Christ" that God's grace transforms people from death to life. To shift the center of faith from Christ to the intellectual domain of philosophical speculation and ascetic piety is to understand divine grace in terms of "human tradition" (2:8) and "rules" (2:20-21); a Christless version of Christianity is self-deception. Its foolishness is evident in its inability to mediate God's saving grace, which comes only through our participation with Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25).

Paul's worry in this regard is also that the Colossians have lost interest in the work of evangelism, replacing it with the legalistic observance of religious traditions (2:16) and moral codes that restrict what is handled, tasted and touched (cf. 2:21). Paul's



polemic repeatedly draws attention to the arrogance of such asceticism (2:18, 23), supposing that people can put off the "sinful nature" (cf. 2:11) by human activity rather than by trusting in divine grace (cf. 2:12.15). In fact, Paul worries that this preoccupation with the flesh, although seeking to deny it, actually indulges its power over their lives (cf. 2:23). When believers locate evil in "things," they tend to imagine that they are not personally responsible for sin. Sin exists outside the self; holiness is objectified and codified as rules that demand abstinence from a particular food or a certain kind of music or a "worldly" appearance, and is set up as a closed system of theological dogma.

While I prefer that my children listen to classical music and wear conservative dress, I must never make my personal taste the measure of their relationship with God. A Christian spirituality focused on the rejection of "things" and the acceptance of certain ideas rather than on relationships rejects the essentially covenantal and concrete character of true religion. For Paul, the species of spirituality that results from God's triumph over sin and evil by the cross (2:13-15) is demonstrated by transformed human relationships (3:5-4:6) which are held together by the exalted Christ (2:19) and not by "written codes" or "the basic principles of this world" or invisible "powers and authorities."

