

Intro to Colossians

Introduction to NIV Study Bible

That Colossians is a genuine letter of Paul ([1:1](#)) is usually not disputed. In the early church, all who speak on the subject of authorship ascribe it to Paul. In the 19th century, however, some thought that the heresy refuted in ch. 2 was second-century Gnosticism. But a careful analysis of ch. 2 shows that the heresy referred to there is noticeably less developed than the Gnosticism of leading Gnostic teachers of the second and third centuries. Also, the seeds of what later became the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century were present in the first century and already making inroads into the churches. Consequently, it is not necessary to date Colossians in the second century at a time too late for Paul to have written the letter.

Instead, it is to be dated during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, where he spent at least two years under house arrest (see [Ac 28:16–31](#)). Some have argued that Paul wrote Colossians from Ephesus or Caesarea, but most of the evidence favors Rome as the place where Paul penned all the Prison Letters ([Ephesians](#), [Colossians](#), [Philippians](#) and [Philemon](#)). Colossians should be dated c. a.d. 60, in the same year as Ephesians and Philemon (see chart, p. 2261).

Colosse: The Town and The Church

Several hundred years before Paul's day, Colosse had been a leading city in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). It was located on the Lycus River and on the great east-west trade route leading from Ephesus on the Aegean Sea to the Euphrates River (see map, p. 2288). By the first century a.d. Colosse was diminished to a second-rate market town, which had been surpassed long before in power and importance by the neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis (see [4:13](#)).

What gave Colosse NT importance, however, was the fact that, during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, Epaphras had been converted and had carried the gospel to Colosse (cf. [1:7–8](#); [Ac 19:10](#)). The young church that resulted then became the target of heretical attack, which led to Epaphras's visit to Paul in Rome and ultimately to the penning of the Colossian letter.

Perhaps as a result of the efforts of Epaphras or other converts of Paul, Christian churches had also been established in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Some of them were house churches (see [4:15](#); [Phm 2](#)). Most likely all of them were primarily Gentile.

The Colossian Heresy

Paul never explicitly describes the false teaching he opposes in the Colossian letter. The nature of the heresy must be inferred from statements he made in opposition to the false teachers. An analysis of his refutation suggests that the heresy was diverse in nature. Some of the elements of its teachings were:

Ceremonialism. It held to strict rules about the kinds of permissible food and drink, religious festivals ([2:16–17](#)) and circumcision ([2:11](#); [3:11](#)).

Asceticism. “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” ([2:21](#); cf. [2:23](#)).

Angel worship. See [2:18](#).

Depreciation of Christ. This is implied in Paul’s emphasis on the supremacy of Christ ([1:15–20](#); [2:2–3:9](#)).

Secret knowledge. The Gnostics boasted of this (see [2:18](#) and Paul’s emphasis in [2:2–3](#) on Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom”).

Reliance on human wisdom and tradition. See [2:4,8](#).

These elements seem to fall into two categories, Jewish and Gnostic. It is likely, therefore, that the Colossian heresy was a mixture of an extreme form of Judaism and an early stage of Gnosticism (see Introduction to [1 John](#): Gnosticism; see also note on [2:23](#)).

Purpose and Theme

Paul’s purpose is to refute the Colossian heresy. To accomplish this goal, he exalts Christ as the very image of God ([1:15](#)), the Creator ([1:16](#)), the preexistent sustainer of all things ([1:17](#)), the head of the church ([1:18](#)), the first to be resurrected ([1:18](#)), the fullness of deity in bodily form ([1:19](#); [2:9](#)) and the reconciler ([1:20–22](#)). Thus Christ is completely adequate. We “have been given fullness in Christ” ([2:10](#)). On the other hand, the Colossian heresy was altogether inadequate. It was a hollow and deceptive philosophy ([2:8](#)), lacking any ability to restrain the old sinful nature ([2:23](#)).

The theme of Colossians is the complete adequacy of Christ as contrasted with the emptiness of mere human philosophy.

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